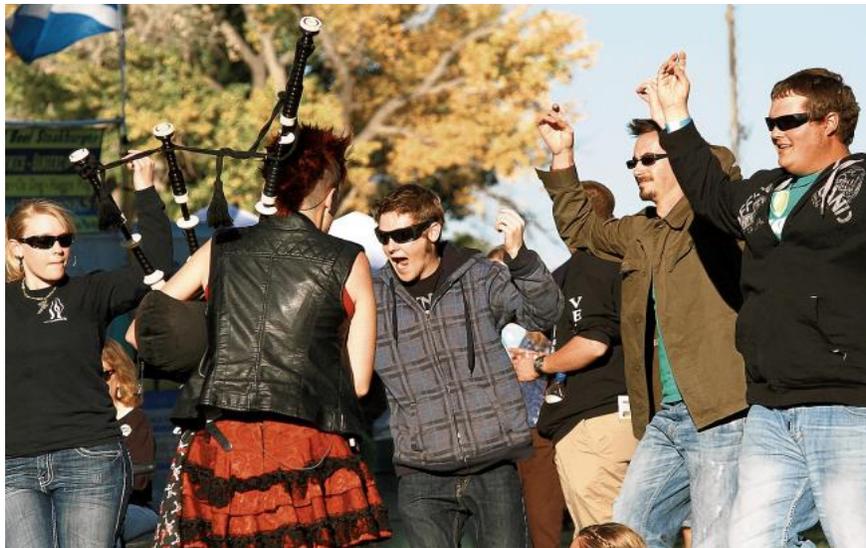


# THE **DAILY** **TIMES** FARMINGTON NEW MEXICO

*THE FOUR CORNERS INFORMATION LEADER*

## **A celebration of heritage: Author to tell Irish stories at the Aztec Highland Games and Celtic Festival**

By Hannah Grover The Daily Times



The Daily Times file photo From left, Becca Stotts, Justin Tornatore, Johnny Merilatt and Devin Sutton, dance to the music of Celtica, a bagpipe rock band, Saturday, Oct. 5, 2013, at Riverside Park in Aztec.

FARMINGTON — After visiting Ireland several times, David McDonnell was left with a couple of questions about his family and what brought them from the Emerald Isle to the United States of America.

"When you go to Ireland, you wonder why anybody would ever leave," he said.

He began to research the Donnell Clan and put this research into his book, "ClanDonnell: A Storied History of Ireland," which was published last year.

Since the book was published, he has been touring the United States and telling Irish stories at libraries and Celtic festivals.

McDonnell will present stories at the Aztec Highland Games on Oct. 4 and 5 at Riverside Park.

The Aztec Highland Games and Celtic Festival is an unusual event because there are only 1,500 highland games in the country each year, said Christa Rommé, one of the organizers.

Highland games consist of athletic competitions such as the caber toss. During the caber toss, athletes will throw a log as far as they can.

"It's just so different and it's really exciting, even if you're not a sports fan," Rommé said.

In addition to the athletics, the Aztec Highland Games features clan booths. Children can take their "clan passports" to the different booths and learn about their clan's history and Scotland.

Through the highland games, Rommé was able to learn her own Scottish heritage and now she proudly wears the Douglas tartan, a clan-specific pattern, to the games.

The games also feature music, highland dances and presentations by people like McDonnell.

McDonnell said he wrote a story especially for the Aztec Highland Games. He said he will tell funny, entertaining stories and legends from ancient Ireland.

One of the things he commonly speaks about when touring is the origin of surnames.

"People almost always took the name of their clan," he said.



The Daily Times file photo. A woman participates in the athletic events at Aztec Highland Games in 2011.

For example, his last name signifies that he is from the Donnell clan, which originated on the north east coast of Ireland and from part of Scotland. The name has multiple spellings including MacDonnell and O'Donnell. While there are multiple English spellings of the last name, McDonnell explained there is a single Gaelic spelling that was translated into English multiple times by people of varying literacy. Regional accents also resulted in different spellings of the name.

In addition to learning the history of his last name, he eventually discovered why his family left Ireland.

"Conditions were pretty bleak," he said.

The Irish land had been confiscated, pushing families onto small lots with just enough land to grow potatoes.

In the mid-1800s, the potato blight hit Ireland, causing about 1 million people to die of starvation and another 2 million to leave the country in search of a better life.

One of these 2 million emigrants was McDonnell's great-grandfather.

Despite having grown up in the United States, McDonnell feels a connection to his ancestral homeland and said it is important for people to learn about their ancestors because it gives them a connection to the past, both positive and negative, including knowing about relatives who suffered grievances like slavery.

"When you connect to your past you see the pluses and the minuses," he said.



Daily Times file photo. Jim Lynch performs with the Westwind Pipes and Drums at the Aztec Highland Games and Celtic Music Festival on Saturday, Oct. 6, 2012.

He said our ancestors can impact who we are today because of how our parents were raised and how they, in turn, raised their children. He said people are the way they are because others, including their ancestors, have made them that way.

"That tells us and reminds us what we do today shape the future," he said. "I just see connections between what we do and how it affects the future."

## IF YOU GO

What: Aztec Highland Games and Celtic Festival

Schedule:

Friday-Oct 3

5 to 7 p.m.: Meet the Celtic Athletes at Microtel Inn & Suites Courtyard. Listen to a bagpipe performance at 5 p.m. and concert by local duo Gypsyfire at 5:30 p.m. followed by storytelling by David McDonnell at 6:15 p.m. and more music by Gypsyfire at 6:30 p.m. A bagpipe performance will end the evening at 7:15 p.m.

Saturday – Oct 4

7 to 10 a.m.: Enjoy the Highland Games Breakfast at Aztec Senior/Community Center

7:30 to 8:30 a.m.: Athlete Registration and Check In at the Athletic Field at Riverside Park

9 a.m.: Gates and vendors open. The first ever 4 Corners Regional Championship Highland Games begin at the Athletic Field

10 a.m.: Listen to pipes and drums by "Order of the Thistle"

10:30 a.m.: David McDonnell will tell stories

11 a.m.: Watch highland dance performance

11:30 a.m.: See a Viking battle

11:30: The Kids Highland Games will begin at the Athletic Field when the athletic competitions break for lunch.

Noon: Opening ceremonies

12:30 p.m.: See a performance by Red Desert Muse Bellydance

12:45 p.m.: Wicked Tinkers will perform

1:15 p.m.: Listen to a pipes and drums performance by Westwind.

1:45 p.m.: See highland dances

2 p.m.: Local Celtic band Bigin's will perform

2:14 p.m.: Listen to traditional music by Maria Blair

3:30 p.m.: Kitchen Jam will perform

3:30 p.m.: David McDonnell will tell stories

4 p.m.: Order of the Thistle will play pipe and drum music

4:30 p.m.: See a performance by Red Desert Muse

5 p.m.: Patrick Crossing will perform

5 p.m.: David McDonnell will tell stories

5:30: Listen to a pipes and drums performance by Westwind.

5:30 p.m.: Awards Ceremony for Celtic Athletes  
6 p.m.: Watch highland dance performances  
6:30 p.m.: Bonnie Knees Contest  
6:30 p.m.: See a Viking battle  
7 p.m.: Wicked Tinkers will perform

Sunday – Oct 5

7:30 to 8:30 a.m.: Athlete Registration and Check In at the Athletic Field  
9 a.m.: Gates and Vendors Open  
9 a.m.: Highland Games begin  
10 a.m.: Listen to a pipes and drums performance by Westwind.  
10:30 a.m.: Watch highland dance performances  
11 a.m.: Order of the Thistle will play pipe and drum music  
11:30 a.m.: See a Viking battle  
Noon: Opening ceremonies  
12:45 p.m.: Storytelling by David McDonnell  
1 p.m.: Wicked Tinkers will perform  
1:15 p.m.: Listen to traditional music by Gypsyfire  
2 p.m.: Local Celtic band Mad Haggis will perform  
2:45 p.m.: Order of the Thistle will play pipe and drum music  
3:15 p.m.: Durango Irish Dance will perform  
3:30 p.m.: Wicked Tinkers will perform  
3:45 p.m.: Listen to a pipes and drums performance by Westwind.  
4:15 p.m.: Celtic Knot will perform traditional music  
5 p.m.: Awards Ceremony for Celtic Athletes  
5:30 p.m.: See a Viking battle

Where: Riverside Park at the end of Lightplant Road in Aztec

Cost: \$20 for a weekend pass, \$15 for a single day

More info: [aztechighlandgames.com](http://aztechighlandgames.com)

*Hannah Grover covers news, arts and religion for The Daily Times. She can be reached at 505-564-4652 and [hgrover@daily-times.com](mailto:hgrover@daily-times.com). Follow her [@hmgrover](https://twitter.com/hmgrover) on Twitter.*