

# Limerick heritage project to bring home the bacon

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LIMERICK'S long association with the bacon industry, which was a key employer in the city for more than 150 years, is the subject of a new heritage project launched by Limerick Museum and Archives, in partnership with Mary Immaculate College.

And in an effort to get local people to share their memories of the bacon factories and help the project team measure the industry's impact on the city and county, an open information evening will be held at City Hall on Thursday, December 3.

At the height of the bacon boom there were four major factories operating in the city – Matterson's on Roches Street; Shaws (later Clover Meats) on Mulgrave Street; O'Mara's on Roches Street and Denny's on William Street and Mulgrave Street.

Such was the fame of Limerick ham that English bacon curers recruited Limerick butchers and Limerick ham was sold at a premium. In the late nineteenth century, Limerick bacon curers were among the first to use ice, which allowed curing to continue in the summer months. By the 1890s, Shaws was using electricity for its cooling rooms and had its own lifts and telephones.

Ruth Guiry, who is lead researcher



**A worker at O' Mara's bacon factory, Limerick in the 1960's.**

Picture courtesy Joe Hayes and Tom McNamara.

with the project, said it brought people closer to the true character of Limerick with stories of nicknames, families and humour in a time when people counted themselves lucky to have a job.

"The factories were very much local communities and many of the employees were related. The work could be hard and unpleasant. Workers wore wooden platform shoes to work in the blood and gore. There were permanent workers such as the pork butchers while casual workers become known as 'Yanks'.

"The butchers had a saying 'nothing was wasted of the pig except the squeal' as the by-products were used to produce sausages and puddings, while even the bladders were used for footballs. Women were also employed in the industry and in Matterson's, women made sausages."

"It was a common sight to see pigs being driven through the streets of the city to O'Mara's or Matterson's. Many of the pig buyers lived in Athlunkard Street, the real heart of Pigtown.

"Our hope is that the Open Night will offer an opportunity to former workers to meet and share their memories. We are keen to capture the heritage of this industry which tells us so much about the history of Limerick as a hive of industrial activity," added Ms. Guiry.

Limerick Archivist Jacqui Hayes said that the factories were critical to the city's economy by the turn of the century and were Limerick's biggest employer.

"Shaws' success was phenomenal as it rose from modest circumstances to become the second largest bacon curer in the world. The factories also provided cheap food for the city's populace for many decades with pigs heads and crubeens essential elements of the Limerick diet. Many Limerick people kept pigs in their back yards."

"Clover Meats closed in 1978 after a series of strikes while O Mara's closed in 1988 as part of a national rationalization of the bacon industry. With it ended not just one of the city's major industries but also a way of life that helped to forge the city's identity", Ms. Hayes explained.

The open information night will be held at City Hall, Merchants Quay on Thursday, December 3 at 7pm. Further information from Limerick Museum and Archives on 061-407293.

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