

# O' Maras of Limerick And their overseas businesses

by Morgan McCloskey

**T**here was a time when two products spread the name of Limerick far and wide – Limerick lace and Limerick bacon and ham. One of the names associated with bacon curing in the city was that of O'Mara, whose processing plant or factory was located in Roches Street at the site now occupied by a multi-storey car park.

In her book about her father, James O'Mara, Patricia Lavelle gives an outline of the early family history starting with her great-grandfather, who was also named James. He came, she says, from Toomevara in Co. Tipperary and on the way to Limerick he spent 'a year or two' in Clonmel, long enough to find a wife who had been a miller's daughter and whom he married about the year 1840. The newly arrived couple lived in a house in Mungret Street and 'were in the wool trade for a while'.

This first James O'Mara, according to his great-granddaughter, commenced 'bacon curing in a casual manner in the basement of the house in Mungret Street'. Apparently this developed into a business because, to quote Patricia, 'when there was a rush of business her great-grandmother was not above enveloping herself in a big white apron and lending a hand'.

The couple had twelve children, the eldest of whom was called Stephen, who was Patricia's grandfather and who became involved from the age of fifteen in the newly established O'Mara's Bacon Factory in Roches Street, Limerick. It was this grandfather who was elected Mayor of Limerick and Member of Parliament for Upper Ossory as a member of Parnell's Home Rule Party.

By this time the O'Maras were living in Hartstonge House, which had stables and an enclosed courtyard attached. The house also contained a private chapel and a billiards room and is now occupied by the Saint Vincent de Paul Society. In the O'Maras time the house stood alone on Hartstonge Street facing Catherine Street.

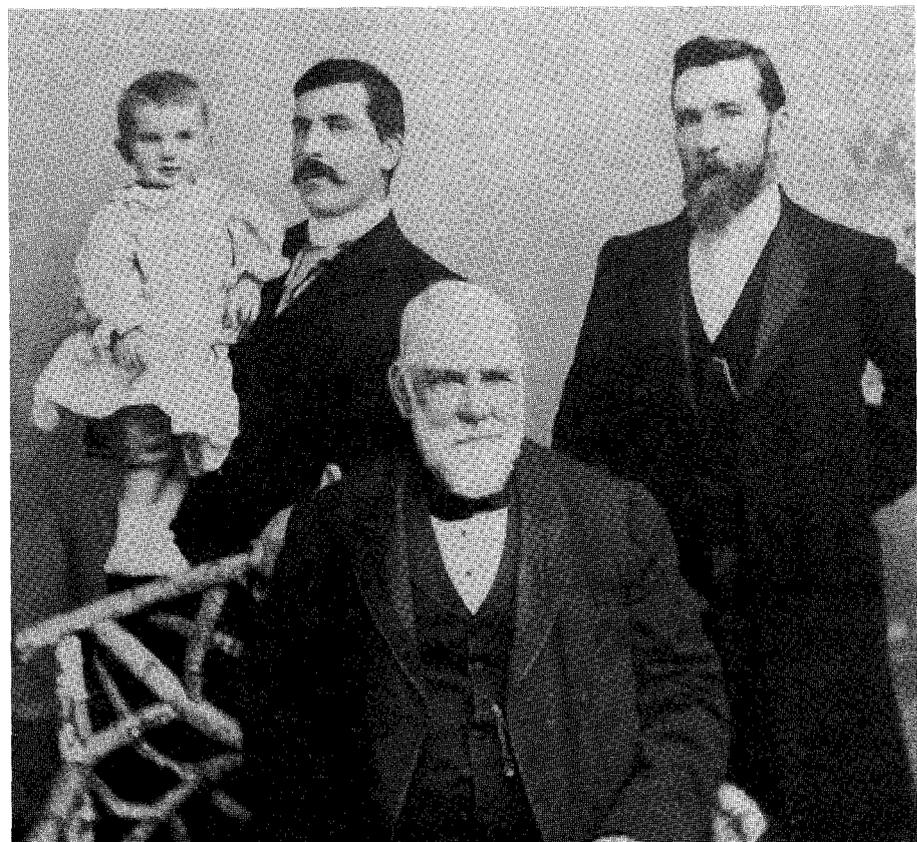
The duties of an M.P. involved Stephen O'Mara in regular journeys to London to attend the House of Commons and it was not long before he was undertaking longer journeys in search of outlets for the products of the bacon factory. His first trip to the U.S.A. in 1887 was followed by at least another fifteen visits. At home he was able to make use of the new railway

for his journeys to Dublin although, as Patricia Lavelle notes, he preferred to go by boat and she describes one such trip:

"Then the boat went through the heart of Ireland; and the country, with its hills and green fields, was spread before him in all its changing beauty for the best part of a couple of days. The steamer left Limerick and made its way up the Shannon, avoiding the rapids by various canals and locks. After Killaloe it reached the wide waters of Lough Derg. The passengers had the run of the boat and could get a snack meal if they wished. Once, when grandfather was travelling this way, terrible squalls sprang up and the lake was very rough, but usually they could stop for a moment at Holy Island and see the ancient ruins there, and pass on by the wooded heights of the Tipperary shore, past Dromineer to Portumna,

crossing and re-crossing the lake until they found anchorage in Shannon Harbour, as far north as Offaly. There was a big hotel there owned by the Grand Canal Company, where they all stayed for the night and got to know one another; and feasted on chicken and bacon and cabbage followed by apple pie, and then sat round huge turf fires swopping stories or playing cards. Next morning the canal boat awaited them, gay with its overhead canopy to protect passengers from the heat of the sun or from inclement weather. The passengers sat in two long rows, back to back, and gazed out across the fields as the paddle lazily churned up the turbid waters and the boat made leisurely progress along the canal. The monotony was broken once in a while by the excitement of passing through a lock."

By the year 1893 O'Maras had established a lucrative export trade. The volume of business with the English market called for a permanent agent in London and this function was undertaken



Four generations of the O'Mara family – Stephen C. O'Mara (child), held by his father, James, grandfather, Stephen (standing right) and great-grandfather, James (seated).

# The Munster News

AND

LIMERICK



AND CLARE

ADVOCATE

BE JUST AND FEAR NOT.

LIMERICK, SATURDAY, MAY 9, 1891

## THE RUSSIAN BACON COMPANY, LIMITED.

Messrs Herman, Lescher and Co, Chartered Accountants, of No 8 Clements Lane, Lombard street, E C, have upon instructions received from Mr James O'Mara, examined the accounts referring to the consignments of Bacon taken by Messrs Lalor and O'Mara, and sold on the London and Liverpool markets, and have given the following certificate:—

"29th February, 1891.

"We have examined the accounts relating to the Consignments of Bacon from Russia in February last, and find that the profits of the sale thereof amounts to 42 per cent upon the cost price after deducting cost of freight commission & incidental charges

HERMAN LESCHER & CO."

The price to be paid to the Vendor is £100,000—£25,000 in fully-paid shares, and the balance, £75,000, is to be paid in cash or shares as provided in the Purchase Contract. All expenses up to allotment, including brokerage, will be borne by the Vendor.

The following Contract has been entered into, viz:—An Agreement dated the 11th day of July, 1890, made between the Vendor, James Coke, on the one part, and Edward Jerrold Conlon, as Trustee for the Company, of the other part. This Contract, together with the Articles of Association, can be inspected at the Offices of the Company's Solicitors.

In addition to the above-mentioned Contract, the Vendor has entered into arrangements with various persons with reference to the promotion of the Company. As these may technically constitute contracts within the meaning of section 38 of the Companies Acts of 1887, applicants for shares must be deemed to have waived the insertion of dates and names of the parties to any such arrangements or contracts, and, in order to prevent any question, must accept the above statements as sufficient compliance with all statutory or other requirements, and applications will be received subject only to this provision.

Applications for shares should be made on the application form and sent with the deposit of 10s per share to the Company's bankers. Should no allotment be made to any applicant the deposit will be returned in full, and if the number of shares allotted be less than the number applied for, the balance of the deposit will be credited in full, and the further amount payable on the shares allotted.

Prospectuses and Forms of Application can be obtained from the Bankers, Brokers, Solicitors, and at the Company's Offices.

30th April, 1891.

May 9

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Notice in the Munster News & Limerick and Clare Advocate, 9 May 1891, re the purchase of the Russian Bacon Co. Ltd. by James O'Mara.



James O'Mara, Born 1873 – Died 1948.

by another of the O'Maras, a brother of the much travelled Stephen. Unfortunately Jim, as he was called, died suddenly in his late thirties and it was decided that Stephen's son James should replace him. This James was an ex-Clongowes boy who had decided to enter the family business and was thoroughly versed in every aspect of the bacon curing craft. Meanwhile he had continued his extramural studies and obtained a first honours Engineering degree from the Royal University of Ireland. In London the provision agency was known as Lawlor and O'Mara with an office at No. 45 Tooley Street, S.E.1 (near to London Bridge station) and imported bacon from Ireland and other countries.

In 1891 O'Maras had acquired the rights of the Russian Bacon Company which was a concession or lease granted by the Russian Government in 1889. James was given 1,750 shares in the company by his father and O'Maras worked the slaughter and curing house situated near the Grianza Kozlana Station on the Vovonega Rostov Railway in the department of Lipetsk, Government of Tamboff, for twenty one years. An attempt was made to set up a similar undertaking in South Africa in 1905 but came to

nothing. The company had a better experience in Canada, where a bacon factory in Palmerston, Ontario, was purchased and was managed for many years by one of the O'Mara family. In 1909 Stephen O'Mara and his wife went to Mexico City to see how one of his younger sons was doing as the manager of a bacon factory there. It must have been quite a wrench for them to leave their newly acquired home called Strand House on the Clare side of the River Shannon. Patricia Lavelle describes it as follows: This block of a house, standing well back on its own grounds on the Clare side of the river, seemed to us a noble and historical mansion. It was three storeys high, and every bedroom had a dressing room as big as an ordinary bedroom. There was also an enormous basement with a huge kitchen and an area that ran around the house like an ancient moat. It was a very comfortable house with masses of flowers arranged in great oriental bowls, and in the evening a profusion of lamps would be lit through the whole house. The light would fall on the bridge table from one lamp, and another circle of light would envelop grandmother and whoever chatted with her on the sofa by the fire.



O'Mara billhead, 1916.

(Limerick Museum).

The big standard lamp by the conservatory gave us children a chance of keeping away from our elders; but the thing that electric light killed, when it came, was the charm of the deep shadows that lay between and around us, and the sudden glint of silver when any little breeze stirred the folds of the lamp shades. There was a paddock of several acres between the house and the high boundary wall that cut out the road from the river. There was a kitchen garden with peach trees growing on a nine foot southern wall. There were glass houses with melons and grapes and plenty of stabling."

The London business of Lawlor and O'Mara had continued to prosper and a friend of James O'Mara's who was with the Liptons tea and provisions combine suggested that he should go to Romania to investigate the possibility of opening up further trade with that country for bacon. In September 1902 James went to Romania, having spoken to two Irishmen named Slattery and Little who had business connections with Belgrade. In his first letter home James tells of visiting 'Little's' factory the directors of which he describes as Servians. Liptons had put him in touch with a Dutch firm of importers named Bruckmann & Co. who had interests in a bacon factory at Turn-Severin in Romania which they wished to modernise and enlarge. His letter also mentions that salt was a state monopoly but that exporters got it at cost price. He also noticed that the Romanians were growing a lot of maize. He said that the time taken for rail freight from Romania to

London was from nine to fourteen days and that the workers in the factory started at four in the morning and that labour was cheap. He suggested that his father would find it worth while to visit the country and gave him the following directions:

"Travel by the Oriental Express leaving London (Charing Cross) on a Thursday morning at 10 a.m., arrive at Vienna the next morning at 6.25, Budapest at 11 a.m., Belgrade at six on Saturday morning - only 48 hours".

The actual owner of the Turn-Severin bacon factory was a man named M. Koer and he was very interested in exporting bacon to the English market. The Bruckmann Company of Amsterdam had appointed Stephen O'Mara their agent for English and Irish sales of Romanian bacon. In order that the bacon was cut and prepared suitable for these markets, M. Koer requested the services of Irish butchers who would teach his workers. Two men from O'Mara's Limerick factory were, accordingly, sent to the Turn-Severin factory. Unfortunately, only their first names, Thomas and John, are mentioned in the correspondence.

By January 1903 the factory was producing bacon suitable and in sufficient quantities for the English market when, suddenly, it was learned that the German government had imposed a ban on pig meat travelling through its territory. Somebody, described as 'a German bureaucrat' had discovered an order of 1898 banning such traffic due to an outbreak of swine fever in Romania. Although this had been satisfactorily dealt with, the German order had never been

rescinded. The two Limerick butchers were sent home and it was not until August of that year that the Germans allowed 40 wagons of Romanian bacon to travel via Passau to Ostend or Rotterdam. So Russian and Romanian bacon was being imported to England by the O'Maras until the outbreak of the first and then the second Balkan wars. Production appeared to be continuing because in 1908 Liptons again asked Stephen O'Mara to return to Romania but he was unable to go. He tried to persuade a friend to go instead but he, too, refused because the journey appeared hazardous.

Again, in 1913 another request came from Liptons, but by then the O'Maras were settled in Dublin and in view of subsequent events he was right to refuse the offer.

Years later Marshal Tito of Yugoslavia invited O'Maras to come to his country to advise on the process of bacon curing.

Stephen O'Mara met some Turkish people in what we now call Serbia and developed a sincere admiration for them. During the famine of 1849 the Turks sent three shiploads of food to Ireland.

So, as you park your car in the Roches Street multi-storey building have a thought for two ordinary Limerick men, Thomas and John, who went to Romania to show their butchers how we liked our bacon cut.

#### REFERENCES:

Patriacia Lavelle, *James O'Mara, A Staunch Sinn Feiner*, Dublin, 1961  
*The Munster News and Limerick & Clare Advocate* 9/5/1891.