

THE AMERICAN LETTER

Emigration to the New World, which began in the Famine Years of the 1840-1850 era, had not lost its momentum right into the Thirties of the present century. Transport conditions had vastly improved over the years but the parting was still harrowing and sorrowful. Gaps left in families were never filled and the pain of loss was very slow to heal.

In the first thirty years of this century employment opportunities for young people in Ireland were virtually non-existent. In Limerick the main sources of employment were domestic service for girls; messenger boy service and work for young men and women in places such as the toffee factory on the Mall; Cleeve's at Lansdowne; Stewarts in Bedford Row and Tait's Clothing Factory in Edward Street. Employment in those concerns provided opportunities for a mere minority of the ever increasing population. Dwindling trade, changes in production methods, cheap imports and a small limited domestic market aggravated the situation.

The only safety valve was emigration to America, the land of promise. Almost every family was directly or indirectly effected. The cost of the passage was scraped up from among members of the family or sent by a relative who had already started work in the 'States'.

Commonplace as the departures of emigrants were from the railway station to Queenstown (Cobh), they were preceded by an 'American Wake' - a farewell party on the previous night. The evening usually started off in a gay mood with lively chat and singing but as the night moved on there were the odd silences here and there and long-suppressed sobs became audible. The family had lit-

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tle sleep that night and the gloom prevailed long after the train had pulled out for the emigrant ship.

After the initial sense of loss had abated, life would begin to pick up again. But then there was the eager waiting for news from or about the emigrant. In these years there was no instant communication by transatlantic phone, no air-letters and surface mail from the 'States' was seldom more frequent than three weeks and usually monthly or longer. The postman for Wolfe Tone Street, Bowman Street, and St. Josephs Street was Jim Mack, who resided in the nook off Bowman Street. His knowledge of the area was profound. When the American mail came in he would call at each home in the area that had a relative in the 'States'. He would push open the door and shout into the kitchen that the mail had come in. That was enough. The reaction was somewhat similar in each home - the trek would start. Usually the mother of the house would begin the round of the friends' homes where a letter may have come.

The 'round' in one case involved visiting a family at the "back of the Courthouse", then on to Pennywell, followed by a call to a home on the hill of Park and, finally, on the return journey, a visit to a family living off Edward Street. There was always the hope that in one of these homes a letter would have come in which there might be a mention of one's own relative. Such a morsel would be brought home to the family with suitable elaborations



A turn of the century view of Nicholas Street.



A late nineteenth century picture of O'Connell Avenue.

for relatives around the tea-table. It would be twisted and turned and built-up to satisfy, in some degree, the ache in the family's hearts.

In like manner when a letter did eventually come to that home it would be pored over and then a call would be made to the homes of friends whose relatives were referred to in the letter. In this way families kept close to each other and to their relatives in the States. The letters from America were full of news and friend after friend was mentioned for the benefit of those at home.

Sad though the usual emigration scene was there occurred now and again a near-tragic event, due to the want of sense or consideration of youth. One such case was that of a schoolboy of about 15 years of age who went missing. There was a hue and cry and fruitless searching but no trace was found.

A few weeks later his schoolbooks were found hidden among planks of imported timber on the Docks. Hope was bright again and it was assumed that he had stowed away on a ship bound for Canada - the country of origin of the timber. "There is hope from the sea but none from the grave". A few months afterwards his widowed mother received a letter from him. He had indeed landed in Canada and had worked his way down to New York. He had avoided Ellis Island. Within six months he sent the passage fare for his elder brother who joined him without delay. They were loving sons and their mother received affection and dollars in every letter.

It was her custom to go to half-eight Mass in St. Joseph's Church each morning. On the way she would meet Jim Mack the postman. If he had a letter for her it would be put, unopened, in the capacious pocket of her snow-white apron and her shawl wrapped closely around it. After Mass she would call each morning to a neighbour's house for her first cup of tea of the day. Then the letter would be opened and the dollars tucked securely inside her blouse - that done, the letter would be read to her. Like most of her generation she was illiterate. After the second cup of tea, the letter was read again and then she would have it memorised word-perfect.

Later in the day, after cashing the dollars and refilling her snuff-box at Raleigh's tobacco shop, Patrick Street,

she would come back to the neighbour's house with notepaper, envelope and stamp. During the day she would have planned what she wished to say and then have the letter written to her liking. It would be read over to her and then, contented, she would go to post it herself.

Correspondence with emigrants was kept up as a sacred trust. The ties with home were very close. Accounts of the family were fully dealt with in the letters, and items of local interest were catered for by the weekend issue of the **Limerick Leader** which was posted religiously each week.

It was almost unheard of that an emigrant would come home on a visit - that privilege was reserved for the following generation. One local boy who had made good in the Prohibition era did come. He had done very well and celebrated generously. When things cooled down in the States he went back, bringing two of the younger members of the family with him. They started off much better in their new surroundings than the normal steerage emigrant.

It was considered that the most suitable age for emigrating was when one was still under thirty years. Older and more 'settled' people found it almost impossible to re-adjust to the new life. Two brothers from Dixon's Lane who also had done well in the Prohibition era decided to bring their widowed mother out and reward her for her long years of hard, poverty-stricken life in the slums of Limerick. The change was unbelievable - she found herself living in a 'brown stone front' in a most exclusive residential area of New York, with a coloured housemaid to attend to her every need. About a year after her arrival she happened to meet a neighbour's daughter from Boherbuoy. Over a cup of tea the widow poured out her lonely heart. Gladly and gratefully she would exchange all her luxury for her small house in Dixon's Lane and the comfort of her arms akimbo over the half-door, chatting with neighbour's, any of whom would have given "the loan of a pig's head to 'grase' the pot of cabbage and spuds". But her sons had had enough of the hard times and were blind to the yearnings of their mother for the days that were on the 'Yellow Road'.