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The first man ever to pay his men a day's wages in lieu of St. Patrick's Day was the late Stephen O'Mara, a Mayor of Limerick and proprietor of O'Mara's Bacon Factory, on the demand of this Society. This Society set an example which Limerick followed thirteen years later, when it was the first city ever to observe St. Patrick's Day as a National Holiday; thus setting an example to All-Ireland and to Irish all over the world on St. Patrick's Day observance

Limerick Porkbutchers' Society

BY GERRY RYAN.

IN this modern age many things have outlived their usefulness. Strato-cruisers may whizz unconcernedly over the winding Shannon and double-deckers may outdate the one time popular jaunting car, but, like the babbling brook, the bacon curing trade in Limerick has continued on its onward march and has stood the test of time. Yes, men may come and men may go; intervening wars may hazard trade and commerce, but Limerick's bacon curing industry has preserved its fame. It shall, assuredly, continue to do so so long after the sands of life have run their course for most of us.

The fame which Limerick bacon and products have gained the world over would not have materialised but for the pioneers of the Limerick Amalgamated Porkbutchers' Society. And, in turn, the improved conditions enjoyed by porkbutchers in Limerick would not have obtained but for the Society. It is with a sense of pride and independence that the Society's members can ponder the past and pay tribute to those who laid a solid foundation on which it has progressed. It is happy to relate that some of the pioneers are still living.

PIONEERS PAVED THE WAY.

In honour of the foundation members the Diamond Jubilee of the Society's establishment was commemorated in 1950. It is, therefore, only fitting to record an appreciation of the wonderful service that these pioneers have given to their Society and to the cause of paving the way for better conditions for those who followed in their footsteps.

It is sixty-seven years since the Society came within the official orbit. Hitherto, it had not been completely organised until the memorable strike took place in 1890, involving the dispute between the employers and the employees of the bacon trade. After the hand of friendship had gone out from the porkbutchers in Cork and Waterford it became established as the Amalgamated Porkbutchers' Society, Limerick. Even by that time Limerick's name had become renowned as a prominent centre of the bacon curing industry. When the impasse occurred on Friday, January 24th, 1890, it was given widespread publicity, and one wit wrote:—

"THE PERFECT CURE."

"Fair Limerick famed for her pigs and salmon,
Had stoutly determined to stand no cheap gammon
For with true Irish wit her employees have taken
A terrible oath against saving their bacon."

But, whether it was humour or pathos, the pioneers stood firmly together

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to maintain their rights, and this principle of brotherly friendship has helped to steer the Society at different stages through turbulent waters into the serene calm of righteousness and mutual understanding.

PEN PICTURE OF SOCIETY.

It is interesting to record a pen picture of the Society by a prominent member, Mr. William O'Dwyer. He says:—"In 1882, I joined the Victuallers' Society. At this time there were 350 members. In the winter time there were roughly 500 or 600 men working in the stores. The additional men were dockers and fishermen who were then unemployed. We had a band; we had two banners, which cost £100; we had 400 sashes and aprons and two meetings in the year were compulsory. These were held on St. Patrick's Day and on Allen, Larkin and O'Brien day. All labour bodies had their own guild and flags. Things went well then. The bell rang for work at six each morning, at nine o'clock for breakfast and at two p.m. for dinner. We never heard a bell in the afternoon."

"We had grievances," continues Mr. O'Dwyer, "so under the then President, the late Paddy O'Brien (Twenty), we sent in a claim for higher wages and better working hours. This was in the year 1885. In this year we had a strike and it lasted for six weeks. The merchants brought men from Portlaw, and few of our own men worked the strike. It was called 'Black-toe Strike,' named after a man who worked the strike. We were allowed 3/- per man, 2/- per boy, and the 'Head of Gangs' got a tradesman's wages of 32/- per week. After this, things worked out better. In 1885, Cork and Waterford and also Limerick men met at the 'Junction' every Sunday, and in the year 1889 we got amalgamated with them. This went great till 1890. In that year of 1890 the merchants got 6d. out of each pig, and we claimed 1d. per pig.

START OF STRIKE.

They turned us down, and so we struck work. This strike lasted 13 weeks. After two weeks, Messrs. Matterson and Messrs. Shaw, who had stores in Cork and Waterford, sent pigs there, but the Cork and Waterford men refused to handle them or kill them. So then these pigs were shipped to England. The Waterford and Cork men were locked out and they remained so 'till such time as our Limerick dispute was fixed. We had hard times in Limerick. There was often a house-to-house collection to keep the funds going. We had the assistance of the jarveys who used drive us to the country to collect monies. His Lordship, Bishop O'Dwyer, and the clergy were around doing all in their power to fix the strike. There were eight or nine small stores killing pigs. Messrs. O'Mara was one of those firms that had a small place, and Messrs. O'Mara's store worked night and day. In order to claim all these small stores and prevent more from opening, we changed our name to the 'Porkbutchers' Society.' We signed—with the assistance of his Lordship, Bishop O'Dwyer—papers to that effect."

"The strike ended," continues Mr. O'Dwyer, "and the late Bishop O'Dwyer was in at the fixing up of our grievances. He was a great man—God rest his soul—who always stood up for our Society. We started off under the Presidency of Mr. Michael Sheahan, who afterwards went to America. Everything went well for a short time. Then the merchants brought down the prices of pigs and threw all the blame on our men for losing their market in London. We had more hard times after this. We sent twenty men to America, and most of us went to Scotland to try and save the funds. Still, the Society held its own until the first World War came. This revived the trade, but it struck a bad blow to the Society, as it wiped out the berwick trade. Still, things went well. Then trouble again—we had a six weeks strike. This related to the fitters and engineers and we came out in sympathy with them. We continued to the present day, and the Society had its ups and downs."

AGREEMENT RATIFIED.

A six-clause agreement was drawn up on the 7th March, 1890, which ended the strike. It was accepted on behalf of the men by Most Rev. Dr. O'Dwyer, Bishop of Limerick.

Mr. Alec W. Shaw accepted the agreement on behalf of the merchants concerned—Messrs. Denny, Shaw and Matterson, Limerick. A supplementary clause agreed to was: That in future no strike or lock-out take place in either of these three establishments in Limerick until the point in dispute is submitted to arbitration.

It is interesting to note that the supplementary clause was put to the agreement after a further meeting between Bishop O'Dwyer and Mr. Alec W. Shaw. By virtue of the conditions, two Church holidays annually were declared: one on Lady Day (August 15th) and the other on the feast of the National Apostle, St. Patrick, on March 17th. The Porkbutchers pledged themselves never to work on the 15th August, and that has been observed ever since, while St. Patrick's Day was also observed up to the time that it was declared a National Holiday. The first to pay the men a day's wages in respect of St. Patrick's Day was Mr. Stephen O'Mara, and it was not long after when the other three city factories followed suit. After the strike, the merchants offered the men two Bank Holidays if they went to work on the 15th August. This offer, however, was turned down, and ever since the men observed the 15th August as a holiday.

Adverting to the settlement of the strike, we find that after Bishop O'Dwyer went to Mr. Alec W. Shaw to discuss further points relating to the agreement, the men decided by a large majority to return to work on the 7th March. The Bishop on the morning of the 7th March was seen standing outside the store of Messrs. Denny where he learned that some of the men had not returned to work, though the men at Shaw's and Matterson's had gone back. It was disclosed that Mr. Michael Sheahan and some other strikers objected to the way the negotiations had been made, and Mr. Sheahan held that the negotiations should rest with Mr. Michael Davitt as umpire. On the 5th April, 1890, Mr. Sheahan emigrated to America.

MEN LAID OFF.

When men were laid off in the city stores immediately after the strike, the Society came to their financial assistance. Some of these unemployed went to America, as Mr. Sheahan had done, while others emigrated to Britain. The Society, though then not strong in funds nevertheless paid the men's way. With the termination of the Limerick strike we find that normal work had also returned to Cork.

Peace reigned in the trade until some years later when threequarter time was offered to the men, but they turned it down. The men, however, were helped out by a levy of 1/8 per man on the Society's employed members and 10d. per boy.

Things went smoothly enough in the country up to 1913 when the "great lock out"—the Trade Union Strike, occurred in Dublin. This strike had the effect of the Limerick Porkbutchers' Society giving a helping hand to ease the financial burden of those out of work in the capital. The Limerick porkbutchers went around the city collecting for the Dublin strikers. They also gave a weekly contribution. Then ten years later Limerick renewed acquaintance itself with a strike, when the porkbutchers's wages were reduced. The strike lasted for eleven weeks and it ended satisfactorily for the workers. After this strike the men paid 10/- contribution each week in order to improve the financial position of the Society. In fact, efforts were made to raise a loan of £1,000. This was agreed upon at the general meeting in September, 1923, and at which a discussion took place about the placing of pig money at the Executive Meeting that all pig money be October, 1923, it was agreed at the Executive Meeting that all pig money be

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payable to the Society from the 1st January, 1924. At this meeting it was also agreed to provide benefit pensions for idle men and those interned at that time.

SOCIETY'S BENEFICENCE.

From these early days the Society has faced vicissitudes and has overcome them. The members have been kind and considerate and have shown their unstinted beneficence by the numerous subscriptions they have given towards the welfare of other organisations and clubs and to persons in dire need. This is testified by the minute books of the Society down through the years. Other societies in Limerick have benefited through the charitable disposition of those at the helm of affairs in the Amalgamated Porkbutchers' Society, Limerick. In fact, the Society did not let the cause for Irish freedom go unheeded. Rather were those members around 1916 imbued with the enthusiasm and love of country to ensure that the fight for freedom would be won. It is with pride that we record a contribution of £50 from the Society's funds towards the local fund raised to help the dependents of those who lost their lives in that heroic fight for Irish freedom. This subscription was not the only act of generosity shown by the Society. And when these contributions, as mentioned, were made, it behoved the members to dip in their pockets in order to pay a levy towards replenishing the Society's funds. Whether it was a club, society, or any other organisation or an appeal, it was always noted that the Society's members were ever ready to assist financially when they were asked to do so.

APPRECIATION OF BISHOP O'DWYER.

But, the Society has steered its course back to its solid foundation. When we say this we pause to pay tribute to the men of the pioneering days, and

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to their comrades who came after them and faithfully observed the principles on which the Society was established. We pause, too, to pay tribute to that illustrious ecclesiastic, Most Rev. Dr. Edward Thomas O'Dwyer, who devoted his attention to the upliftment of the porkbutcher away back in those days of his reign. In appreciation of his efforts, Bishop O'Dwyer was made a Honorary President of the Society, and the picture of himself— which he presented to the Society—hangs to the present day in the Society's rooms.

Another appreciation of "Edward Thomas's" worth was the resolution tabled at the meeting of the Committee of the Society on May 31st, 1916, at which Mr. Thomas Forristal, Chairman, presided, and the resolution as follows was moved by Mr. M. Barton: "That this Society, as a Labour body, congratulate his Lordship, Most Rev. Dr. O'Dwyer, for his outspoken reply to General Sir J. G. Maxwell, Commander-in-Chief of the British Forces in Ireland, who desired punishment inflicted on some of the clergy of the Diocese, because of their advice to their people of their own country. An Irishman's interest should be in his own country, and considering the length of English misrule in Ireland, and the spiritual and temporal work of our clergy, we believe that the action of his Lordship is one commendable to the Irish people the world over, and shall ever live in the memory of those who will keep on the fight for Faith and Fatherland."

Mr. T. Forrestal seconded this resolution, which was carried unanimously, and he added that it would be unworthy of them to allow the opportunity to pass without congratulating their Bishop, and enter a protest on behalf of their clergy.

1950 WAS HISTORIC.

As already mentioned, the year 1950 was an historic one. It was the Diamond Jubilee year of the Society's foundation. It was in accordance with the wishes of the present-day members that the 1890 occasion was commemorated in a fitting manner, and a Jubilee Dinner was held in the Savoy Restaurant on November 9th, 1950. The men at the helm of affairs in 1915 did not let the Silver Jubilee Anniversary pass without showing appreciation of the work of the pioneers. The Silver Jubilee was marked by the running of an excursion and a day's outing; and members of the Society received an advancement of 10/- each from the funds, so that they would enjoy themselves. But, the "tenbob" was refunded, subsequently, by these members and in a way that they could best afford.

The occasion in 1950 was hailed as one of great significance to the Amalgamated Porkbutchers' Society, Limerick. A number of the Society's "Diamond Jubilarians" joined in the celebration of the event. Prouder still were the members that the Diamond Jubilee fell in a memorable Holy Year.

On the occasion of the Jubilee Dinner, Most Rev. Dr. O'Neill, Hon. Vice-President, made a presentation, on behalf of the Society, to eight founder-members present saying: "I think that the real old Limerick spirit is embodied on the Porkbutchers' Society more so than in any other body. In their first great battle the Society's members had placed themselves under the guidance of the Mother of God. As thanksgiving for the successful outcome, they manifested their gratitude to Our Lady ever since."

The eight of the founder-members present, some of whom have since passed on to their eternal reward, were: Messrs. Edward McManus, William O'Dwyer, John Galvin, Dick Ryan, Pat McNamara, James Galvin and Tom Forrestal.

Always true to their "Lady Day" tradition, the Society in recent years donated £1,000 to his Lordship, Most Rev. Dr. P. O'Neill, Bishop of Limerick, for the renovation of Our Lady's Altar in St. John's Cathedral, which they cherish as their memorial to his Lordship, Most Rev. Dr. O'Dwyer. They also gave an additional £150. The Society has also shown its beneficence in other spheres, including a donation of £100 to the Redemptorist Retreat House fund.