

McNamara's band struck chords

IT is not generally known by the current generation that the musical composition McNamara's Band originated in Limerick

by Marie Hobbins

LIMERICK'S rich and diverse history every now and then yields some little unexpected

Plans to visit America in the 1920s and take part in the New York St Patrick's Day Parade, were scuttled because of the Anglo-Irish War and it took another 70 years for the dream to come true

ed, some 10 years after the end of the American Civil War, it was housed in the Yellow Driller on King's Island, progressing next to Nicholas Street and then on to

of the band were Paddy Salmon, Steve Collins, Patrick and Michael McNamara (two of the quartet of the famous McNamara's Band), Paddy (Halley) Kennedy, Jack Gogarty, John Lynch, Tom Forward, Jack McNamara, John Hayes, Jim Doyle, Gerry, Michael and Jimmy Frawley.

The band's musical prowess continued, with major prizes awarded in Limerick in 1927, 28 and 30, Cork in 1931, Limerick in 1947 and, in 1963, the band was again winner at Limerick and Waterford venues, in Dublin in '65, Waterford in 1975, when it won first place in all categories, as well as the prize for

for the dream to come true.

In 1992, the band's first US engagements were in New Haven and Meriden, Connecticut, where they participated in parades on March 15, followed by the fulfilment of their 70-year-old dream to play in the New York Patrick's Day Parade, "which they have recorded, described as an experience never to be forgotten."

During their American trip, they also visited a fellow band member, Michael Danford, who had emigrated from Ireland some years previously and established links with the Stony Creek Band in New Haven, established one year

(1886) after their own.

Another first for the band was the official opening in 1993, by the then Junior Minister for Justice, Willie O'Dea, of the Band Museum which features the numerous trophies and prizes won since 1996, and covering 120 years of music by St Mary's. The museum was named in honour of Patrick McNamara, who had inspired the building of their own band room and dance hall on Mary Street.

"Michael Burke, the band's honorary president up to the time of his death, was also honoured and remembered by having one of the display cabinets named after him.

Some of the legendary characters who have been associated with the band include Willie 'Whack' Gleeson, Joe, 'The Dane' Hayes, Paddy, 'Whacker' Casey, who is the longest serving member with over 60 years, and Colm McGrath, former vice president and current honorary secretary for the last 50 years.

Noted for honouring the custom of parading through the parish on New Year's Eve and thence to St Mary's Cathedral to ring the old year out and the new year in, since its foundation back in 1885, the band can justifiably be termed "a great Limerick musical institution".

nugget of local detail, which immediately adds technicolour to the overall scenario.

It's a fair bet that while not everyone throughout Ireland and beyond will have heard of St Mary's Fife and Drum Band, (which holds the unique distinction of continuous establishment since its foundation way back in 1885), millions of people will be familiar with the well know musical composition, McNamara's Band.

"But how many will know that this world-wide hit got its name from four Limerick brothers - Patrick, John, Michael and Thomas, all of whom were born in the latter part of the last century in Meat Market Place, Old Thomas Street, just off Athlunkard Street," the local military historian, Pat McNamara told the Limerick Post.

All four played in the band but it is said of Patrick, the musician and composer, that there were few who could claim to be his peer.

"Patrick was the bandmaster and when he emigrated to the United States in 1905, he carried with him this great musical tradition and his orchestra continued to be known as McNamara's Band. When he was reunited with his brother, Thomas, who had arrived in the States, the combination soon caught the imagination of a great songwriter and so the famous ballad was born.

"In latter years, the McNamara trio - Patrick on the violin, Thomas on the piccolo and Patrick's daughter, Eileen on the piano, cut many records for Voralion Records and the Aeolian Company cut other recordings in 1921, but with the death of Thomas in 1978, the world renowned saga of McNamara's Band ended," informs Pat McNamara, a lifelong member of St Mary's Fife and Drum Band, who has not, so far, succeeded in establishing any kinship with the famous McNamara brothers of yesteryear.

His intuition and other circumstances indicate that they were related.

When the band was found-

Barrington's Mall, Fish Lane and finally in 1922, to a new



Limerick military historian, musician and composer, Pat McNamara.

band room on Mary Street, which was the brainchild of Abbey fisherman, "Toddy" McNamara.

"The musical talent of the band must have been unique as at its first attempt in competition in September, 1885, it won the All Ireland Championship under the baton of maestro Steve Collins, and other championship successes followed in the years up to 1912.

There were no contests during World War 1 or the years during the Anglo-Irish and Civil War," details Pat McNamara.

Among the founding fathers

Best Conductor for the late George Tweedie.

In 1988, the band was again successful under the baton of John McNamara.

"There are now only three surviving members who won six Republic of Ireland championships with the band - Paddy 'Whacker' Casey, Jack McGrath and John McNamara, who is the present conductor," added Mr McNamara.

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