

Connie Sheehan, Ned Wallace, Jack Wallace, Bobbie O'Dwyer, Paddy Lillis, Pa Hogan, Steve Collins, Paddy Collins, Paddy Sexton, John Greaney and Tim Quane.

HE PLAYED LIMERICK'S FIRST SAXOPHONE

WHO was the first to play the saxophone in Limerick? The distinction is claimed by the oldest member of St. John's Brass and Reed Band, John Clarke, who at 75 marches just as erect and as sprightly in his new uniform as when he played with the Number 9 Band in the old Empire Palace Theatre, Dublin, away back in 1909.

Someone said one time that there is properly no history, only biography. And the biography of men like John Clarke is the story of St. John's Brass and Reed Band, men who marked with music Limerick's joyous occasions, public celebrations, religious processions and the varied events gay and grave which make up the life of a city. For over a century, since the days of the Victuallers' Band which it later succeeded, St. John's Band has played its part in that life.

John Clarke was only twelve years old when he learned his first notes in music from Bandmaster Cronin of the No. 9 Fife and Drum Band in Nicholas St. Some contemporaries were James Hanrahan (drummer), Johnny Connell (fife), Bill Lawler (big drum) and Johnny O'Mara (side drum). His first band contest was in the Empire Palace in 1909, and at the same venue that evening he watched Tommy Burns and Jim Roche fight for the World Boxing Championship. In 1910 he won

a competition in the Markets Field with the Boherbuoy Band, and the band was presented with a euphonium for their performance.

ST. JOHN'S

In the meantime, John had been studying music under Mr. Moane, who at that time was doing great work in the instructing of bands and orchestras. In 1910 he moved to the Boherbuoy Band under conductor Thomas O'Brien and then, with men like Jack Norgrove, Bill Lawlor, Peter Kelly and William Sheehan he helped to re-organise St. John's Band in 1911. One of the big events in which they played that year was a mass meeting of the Volunteers in Limerick: "I never saw anything of its magnitude before or since," he says.

St. John's was the successor of the famous Victuallers' Band, and two of the old members at the time of transition were Paddy Greeny (trombone) and

Jack Healy (drummer). There was a complete set of instruments in the old band house in St. John's Square, and in many of their outings the band would play into the dusk of the evening, reading the music with the aid of bicycle lamps.

ORCHESTRAL SOCIETY

They were great years in the musical life of Limerick. One of the city's most gifted musicians, W. P. Bellins, who was organist at the Redemptorist Church, was conducting the Limerick Orchestra Society in 1918, when John became a member. Another famous local musician, Paul Bernard, was leader, and the orchestra played in many memorable concerts in the old Athenaeum (now the Royal Cinema). John played the concert flute and senior to him was flautist Thomas O'Donovan. His first concert opened with the overture to the "Merry Wives of Windsor."

ENRICHING

Enriching Limerick's musical life, too, were the occasional visits of the world-renowned Joseph O'Mara Opera Company. O'Mara had a permanent orchestra of some thirty members, but this was augmented by local musicians, including John, with Frank Beatty on the drums and Gus Greene on the bass fiddle. The venue for O'Mara's productions was the Theatre Royal, and there were Gilbert and

Sullivan presentations, and, for silent pictures like "The Birth of a Nation," John would play the accompaniment.

"THE MINERVA"

In the early days there were no dance bands as we know them now, but on every Sunday night there was a dance in St. John's Square to the music of the piano, violin and concert flute.

In 1915, John founded the popular dance band combination, "The Minerva." The first members were Frank Beatty (drums), Miss Coogan (violin), William Fitzgerald (piano) and John Clarke (sax). "The Minerva" played in the old Courthouse, which, despite its austere and sometimes grim legal associations, was a venue for many of Limerick's fashionable balls. And from Limerick the band visited such places as Dublin, Cork, Tipperary, Clare—"We played all over Ireland, every inch of it," John says.

In his thirty years in the dance band business, John played in every ballroom in Limerick, too. After the Courthouse came the Lyric, and other popular venues were Geary's Hotel, Thomas Street, and Young Ireland's hurling club in Rutland Street.

THE FIRST SAX

John Clarke was the first musician to play the saxophone in Limerick. And the first hall in which he ever played it was

the Legion Club. It made a great and instant impact; I played it throughout the country afterwards and it was a winner everywhere it was heard. Previous to that, he had played the concert flute and piccolo.

What were they dancing to in those days? There was an occasional cello, waltzes, caldonians, lancers and military two-steps. A little later came "Maggie," "The Cuckoo Waltz" and then the "Charleston" had a long reign of popularity. And then jazz and the blues.

With his first saxophone, John played them all for eight years. From 1915 until he retired from the dance-band scene in 1946 he had only two saxophones; his second was an American Conn-saxophone, which gave him excellent service to the grand finale.

(Continued next Saturday).

Swedish singers to perform here

The Lund University Singers of Sweden will give their first concert in Ireland at the Members' Hall of the Royal Dublin Society on Wednesday next at 8 p.m.

The choir of 39 members conducted by Alex Milander, will also perform in Waterford, at the Cork Choral Festival next Friday and Saturday, in Galway, Wexford and Kilkenny, as well as making a recording for R.T.E.

