

Great Limerick Athletes

No. 68—WILLIAM P. CLIFFORD of Boher

(By SEAMUS O CEALLAIGH)

THIS gallery of famous Limerick sporting figures would not be complete without reference to some of the able administrators who served the cause so well, without hitting any high spots on the playing fields.

Things national were moving at a fast tempo in Limerick when, on St. Patrick's Day in the year 1920, at the annual County G.A.A. Convention, Denny Lanigan, Tim Humphries and Con Browner became officials of the County Board. Twelve months later, Fedamore-born William P. Clifford, stepped into the place vacated by another Fedamore Gael, veteran William Gleeson, and became Chairman of the Board—a position he occupied until his retirement in 1939. And when Charlie Holland became Treasurer in 1923 the grand alliance was complete, and a partnership formed that was to see Limerick G.A.A. through many glorious years.

The sterling qualities of the new Limerick Chairman were early recognised and we find at the Munster Convention, in Cork, on March 15th, 1924, the Southern delegates electing him to membership of the Central Council and nominating him for Chairmanship of that body.

With Dan McCarthy, T.D., in the chair, the 1924 All-Ireland Congress was a memorable one—and the vote for the Presidency a close thing—forty-four for Paddy Breen of Wexford; forty for Bill Clifford of Limerick.

HOW "BAN" MOTION FARED.

That was the first congress I attended and the big item on the agenda was the proposal to remove the "Ban." With the ex-Chairman, Dan McCarthy, and the new leader, Paddy Breen, favouring the change; W. P. Clifford led the southern Gaels in opposing, and when General Eoin O'Duffy added his powerful voice, ably backed by his Ulster colleague, Barney Fay of Cavan, the fate of the motion was sealed. The vote was 54 to 32, closest ever for the deletion of these much discussed rules.

The 1925 Congress was held in the Secretary's office, under the newly erected Hogan Stand in Croke Park, and the delegates were afterwards entertained to dinner in the refreshment rooms at the other end of the stand. The National Hurling and Football Leagues were established that day, and the rule allowing players to "declare" for their native county was adopted. Mr. P. D. Breen retained the Presidency by 56 votes to 45 for Mr. Clifford.

ELECTED A YEAR LATER.

Twelve months later, the position was reversed when W. P. Clifford was elected President of the G.A.A. by 68 votes to 55 for Mr. Breen. On the proposition of the new chairman, the term of office was limited to two years. The outstanding decision of this congress was the revival of the inter-Provincial championship ties for the Railway Cups.

Mr. Clifford was the third Limerickman to be honoured with the Presidency of the G.A.A., and of the seventeen Presidents to date it is interesting to record that three were Limerickmen, two each from Tipperary, Clare, Kilkenny and Wexford, with Galway, Dublin, Cork, Antrim, Roscommon and Waterford sharing the other six.

W. P. Clifford proved a great Chairman—methodical and expeditious. His powers of concentration and his ability to discard the irrelevant enabled him to get quickly to the essentials of a problem and, thereafter, his comments were shrewd and incisive, and his decisions positive.

A VINTAGE YEAR.

His first year of the Presidency proved a vintage G.A.A. one. The sun of success beamed benignly from every quarter; games were great, rivalry was keen, rigid punctuality was observed, public patronage was liberal and gate returns most flattering. It was the beginning of a great cycle in the history of the Association.

The season opened with a classic display at Leaside between Cork and Dublin in the first National Hurling League final, which Cork won. Laois won the Football League crown.

Tipperary hurlers, All-Ireland champions, toured the United States and made international hurling history. Their trip was a series of successes from New York to the Golden Gate—games were played in New York, Boston, Chicago, San Francisco and Buffalo and everywhere the Tipperary men

were received with over-whelming enthusiasm. This was the first occasion since 1888 and an Irish team toured the States.

THREE DOGGED GAMES.

Three dour, dogged games, as have always been the outcome when "Rebel Cork" and "Gallant Tipperary" test timber and temper for the Munster hurling crown, were necessary to decide the destination of Southern honours. They only hurled for twenty minutes the first day, at Cork, and Tipperary were leading 1-2 to nil, when the game had to be abandoned, as the pallings collapsed, through pressure by the huge crowd that came to see the game. The sides finished level at Thurles the following Sunday after one of the greatest finals ever played in Munster. Cork won on the third meeting, one of the most exciting encounters of its kind, which produced scenes of enthusiasm unparalleled in the history of the G.A.A. And then 45 special trains brought a record crowd to the All-Ireland final, between the classic rivals—Cork and Kilkenny.

INTEREST ROSE TO FEVER PITCH.

With Kerry and Kildare qualifying for the first time since 1905 for the All-Ireland football final interest rose to fever pitch. A game reminiscent of the palmiest days ended with scores level, and the re-play attracted the greatest crowd ever seen at Croke Park up to then. Fifty special trains—a new record, and the game staged amid a setting unrivalled, unapproached, unprecedented in the annals of Gaelic activity, and earmarked to go down in history as the greatest yet played.

Central Council receipts for 1926 were the best ever—£13,894, against £6,505 for 1925 and £6,246 for 1924. Forty-five new turnstiles were installed in Croke Park as well as seating accommodation for over 7,000 people. Clubs affiliated were 1,317 compared with 1,196 in 1925 and 1,051 in 1924.

In a typical speech at the 1927 Munster Convention in Thurles, Mr. Clifford vigorously condemned the statements of some ardent rugbyites who lately expressed the fear that the game was getting too popular and that Lansdowne Road would become "another Jones's Road." Mr. Clifford reminded the rugby advocates that Lansdowne Road was never visited by the Black and Tans, and he strongly objected to anybody belonging to the old ascendancy or ex-ascendancy referring to what they called the "conduct" at Jones's Road or Croke Park.

TRIPS TO UNITED STATES AND LONDON.

Kerry footballers toured the United States in 1927 and the annual Whit trip to London and Liverpool by two first-class Irish hurling county teams was inaugurated. In this year, too, it was decided to organise All-Ireland Championships in minor hurling and football, and Croke House was bought as offices for the Association and a residence for the Secretary.

The Interprovincial finals, revived after many years, were played on St. Patrick's Day—the hurling proving exceptionally brilliant—keen judges pronouncing it as the most classic exhibition of the game ever played.

In October, Mr. Clifford unveiled at Ballymackey, Nenagh, a Celtic Cross to the memory of Andy Harty who was President of the Handball Council, a well-known Gael, hurler, athlete and handicapper. "W. P." who was one of the Trustees of the Handball Council, presided at the meeting of the Central Handball Council, following Mr. Harty's death, when General Eoin O'Duffy was elected President.

Mr. Clifford retired from the Presidency of the Central Council on Easter Sunday, 1928, leaving a credit balance of £27,365 and 1,374 affiliated clubs. He was succeeded by Mr. Sean Ryan, solicitor, a Tipperaryman resident in Dublin, who is now legal adviser to the Association.

Mr. Clifford was elected Chairman of the Munster Council at a meeting in Limerick on April 30th, 1932, and represented the Council at the celebrations in connection with the Golden Jubilee year.

NOTABLE ACHIEVEMENTS.

It would be impossible in an article of this nature to cover the many notable achievements in Limerick during Mr. Clifford's tenure as County Chairman. I can only touch on the main features, and very briefly at that.

First milestone on the glory road was a really memorable one—the 1921 All-Ireland Senior Hurling Final, played at Croke Park in March, 1923, in which Limerick beat the holders, Dublin, 8-5 to 3-2. Mr. Joseph O'Mara, of the O'Mara Opera Company, threw in the ball, and the Limerick captain, Bob McConkey, was the first skipper of an All-Ireland side to receive the Liam McCarthy Cup, the storied trophy that now tells such a tale of great teams and great men—and wonder games.

I have vivid memories of Thurles, and the grand drawn tussle between Limerick and Tipperary, in the 1922 championship, and the Markets Field re-play before a record crowd—"gate," £1,370. Tipperary won after a terrific game, fought at lightning speed, with the casualty list heavy.

A WONDERFUL ERA.

I must pass lightly over the unforgettable hurling tussle with Dublin at storied Rathcroghan, and the surprise Galway victory in the 1923 All-Ireland final. Limerick inter-county greatness faded somewhat after this but club hurling reached unparalleled heights and for almost a decade the tussles for the Limerick Senior Championship were fit to rank with the best the Gaelic arena could offer. Young Ireland, Claughaun, Croom, Fedamore, Newcastle West, Pallasgreen, Cappamore, Kilkenny, Rathkeale—all share the glory of a wonderful era.

Public patronage was not lacking and attendance records were set in Limerick that held for many years. And when the leading clubs of Shannonside clashed with the great combinations of the other hurling counties—Blackrock, Redmonds and St. Finbarrs of Cork; Erin's Own (Waterford); the Tipperary trio—Toomevara, Boherlahan or Thurles Blues; Dicksboro, Mooncoin, or Tullaroan from Nore; or Newmarket-on-Fergus or Ennis Dalcassians from "across the river" or the big metropolitan "guns"—Faughs, Collegians, or Kickhams—the honours more often than not were gained by the Limerickmen.

LIMERICK GAELIC GROUNDS.

With the gradual rise of the G.A.A. in power and influence, and the expansion of activities as clubs and competitions increased, the absolute necessity of a ground of its own was soon apparent to all far-seeing Gaels. Limerick were not behind in this respect and, in 1926, proposals were put before the Munster Council and that body backed the project with a generous investment of £1,000. William P. Clifford was the big force behind the drive that, in 1928, gave Sarsfield's City a venue that now has few equals. And it was his insistence on absolute G.A.A. control that made the Limerick Grounds almost unique in this regard.

In 1927 the Chairman presented to the County Board a valuable silver cup for the senior hurling championship. Three times that year Fedamore and Young Ireland clashed in glorious, fast, vigorous struggles before the county lads won by the minimum margin and went on to secure the championship, defeating Croom in the final. Young Ireland were victors the following year—the first of three titles won in five seasons.

A NEW FORCE COMING TO THE FRONT.

Meanwhile a new force was coming to the front—the far-famed Ahane lads. A quintet of super champion sides—Young Ireland, Croom, Newcastle West, Claughaun and Fedamore—had made the twenties a vintage spell in club hurling. The next decade belongs to the inter-county arena. With the natural decline of the star teams of yesteryear, few were found to challenge Ahane supremacy at home so it was in the wider field that the real worth of the Castleconnell lads was demonstrated.

National League victories, five in a row, from 1933 to 1938; the Blue Riband in senior hurling in 1934, 1938 and 1940; Munster titles for 1933, 1934, 1935, 1936 and 1940, with the junior "All-Irelands" of 1935 and 1941, and the minor crown for 1940, plus victories galore in tournament and cup ties, demonstrate in bare outline the glory that was Limerick's in that wonder decade.

Add to that the triumphs on foreign soil—a few memorable tussles in the English Metropolis, and the ever to be remembered American Tour of 1935. We recall every incident of that unforget-

table spell with pride and gratification.

In the space at my disposal, I have endeavoured, however imperfectly, to recall the major events of Mr. Clifford's chairmanship. I have had to pass over many things that deserve mention, but cannot omit a reference to the great Aonach Kincora of 1931, and the Limerick Development Association games for the "Sweet Afton" Cup that same year. Both were milestones in the onward march of Gaeldom.

ADDRESSES AT CONVENTIONS.

W. P. Clifford's addresses from the chair to the various Conventions over which he presided were forceful and patriotic, and I have selected, at random, a few extracts from one—the County Convention of 1936:—"To-day, as in the past, the spirit of shoneenism and West Britonism was still rampant in the country, and for that reason the men of the G.A.A. should stand together for the common good of the race. He hoped the Association of theirs would continue to grow and increase until that spirit of shoneenism no longer existed inside the four shores of Ireland. The primary object of the G.A.A. was to make them Irish—kindly Irish, but Irish in spite of everything; to make every Irishman love the Motherland very dearly, and work and play together for the common good of the country."

In concluding this tribute to the memory of the late William P. Clifford, I am deeply conscious of the love and esteem in which he was held in the hearts of the members of the great G.A.A. For the majority of his generation, at least of the Association, his name will be ever revered and honoured as that of a great Irishman, a great chairman, a great organiser, and a great and loyal friend. He was at all times a man of unquestionable sincerity and honesty, and never at any time was he guilty of even the least infidelity to his trust.

A GAEL IN THE FULLEST SENSE.

A man of the people in the truest sense, he was, to paraphrase it, a Gael in the fullest sense, epitomising in himself, in his vigour and courage, in his loyalty and enthusiasm, in his deep unforgettable patriotism, all that the true Gael was and is.

His death, in 1949, removed a figure that cannot be replaced, depriving many of us of a genuine friend, while Ireland lost a sterling patriot.

No. 69—J. J. Collins of Elton.