

**WHEN TOM COSTELLO** heard of the Stardust fire on St. Valentine's Day in 1981, his first thought was for his daughter, who was in Dublin.

He had no reason to believe that she was anywhere near Artane, let alone be in the inferno, but Tom Costello has carried

a morbid fear of all fire since the day he almost lost his own life in the Dromcollogher cinema tragedy.

This week, now aged 81, Mr. Costello recalled with amazing clarity the harrowing events of Sunday, 5th September, 1926, which caused 48 deaths.

□ **PATRICK BRENNAN** owned a large shed on Church Street, Dromcollogher. The half of it was lofted, and it was in this loft that Tom Costello, then aged 21, had attended a number of travelling plays and concerts. He had also attended a number of film shows. Such shows, in those days, toured local halls, and projectionists, along with their equipment and films, would arrive for the performance.

Tom Costello recalls that the loft was reached by a narrow 2½-foot wooden stairway. Up this went about 250 people, he recalls.

An hour later, about a fifth of them would be dead. The toll was 48 — exactly the same as the Stardust.

A local man, William Forde, decided to hire the hall that night, and engaged Patrick Downing of Cork to arrange the performance. Downing arrived in Dromcollogher with his films in a bag. He had left the metal cases in Cork. That fact alone was crucial to the night's events.

## Audience

The room measured about 20 feet wide and more than twice that in length. The audience was mixed — children, parents, old and young.

The film show began shortly after nine. A man with an accordion sat beneath the screen, providing mood accompaniment. A short support film concluded, and the main feature commenced. The projectionist had a candle to assist him to see his equipment. The candle fell over, igniting the exposed celluloid.

Celluloid is almost explosively inflammable.

"Someone caught the film and threw it down to the bottom of the stairs. But by that time, the other films were on fire too," recalls Mr. Costello.

"Someone said not to panic and to go out slowly. But there was a blazing film at the bottom of the stairs, sending very hot flames 20 feet back up towards us. The flames were running along the dry ivy which were a relic of the

Christmas decorations of the previous year. There was panic."

The crowd surged at the door, and people cascaded down the wooden stairway. Tom Costello's clothes were badly singed as he passed the blazing projector table, and again as he jumped over the fiercely burning discarded film below.

## In a daze

"We stood around outside in a kind of daze. We just watched the fire develop. For

a minute or two nobody thought that there was anyone left inside. Then somebody shouted 'They're coming out the back!'"

High on the back wall were two small windows, barred from outside. John Gleeson, the local parish clerk, managed to prise the bars away from one window, and got his wife through. Mrs. Gleeson and Mr. Costello are the only two remaining survivors of the tragedy.

Six or seven people managed to get out through the window and landed on a pile of hay which, by luck, was located beneath.

Even this escape route was blocked as a large lady became wedged in the opening.

At the front of the building, one man who had escaped the blaze, dashed in to rescue his mother-in-law. Neither were seen again.

"They all died in one corner, huddled together. Two survived, but died later in hospital."

Mr. Costello, even after the passage of 60 years, is visibly moved as he recalls the horror of the night and the following day. There was not a house-

## By MARTIN BYRNES

hold in the village or area which was not affected by at least one death. One man lost his wife and two children. A man who had been confined to a wheelchair for years lost his wife and only daughter. He died shortly later of a broken heart.

## The graves

The bodies were unidentifiable. A few were guessed at by reason of height or other characteristics. The graves are grouped. Nobody is sure of who is where.

The following day too, word filtered out about the disaster.

A grand-uncle of this writer brought the news to Newcastle West, shocking our family with the report of the death of our cousin, Nora Hannigan.

A worldwide fund, administered by the State, was set up to help the families of the victims. John Duffy, the founder of the circus dynasty, contributed £100. In all, more than £15,000 was raised. Some people got lump sums, others, who had lost their breadwinners, got pensions.

Of course, it shouldn't have happened, but to what does Mr. Costello attribute the appalling loss of life?

"It was panic. Sheer panic. I can't understand how the melodeon player, with his instrument, who was at the very front of the hall, made it all the way back and out, while others, who were near the back, were burned."

They call it "the burning" in Dromcollogher. It had a profound and lasting affect on the people for generations.

## Lightning

Some years later, a film show was being held in a marquee outside the village. It was a stormy evening, and, as the film was about to start, a flash of lightning lit the sky outside. By the time the rumble of the thunderclap had died away, the tent was empty. Every one of the audience had dashed out under the canvass and away.

After the inferno inquests, the promoter and projectionist were arrested. The State withdrew the charges.

Tom Costello went on to be one of the mainstays in Dromcollogher G.A.A., becoming an administrator when his playing days were over. He was awarded the Hall of Fame by his club a few years ago. He raised a fine family and is remembered with fondness by the past pupils of the local vocational school, of which he was caretaker for many years.

But, although Tom Costello has forgotten much in his long life, the sprightly 81-year-old cannot forget the horror of the blackest night that the area had ever seen.

When he walks to village for a pint and a h/c cards with his friend C. Cregan, and passes 1066) of the tragedy, his still dwell on 1926

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