

Cinema in Limerick

JOE Coleman was brought up in Thomondgate and now lives in Meelick with his wife Adalean. Joe works as a supervisor with Bus Éireann in Limerick and trains staff. Though he has been involved in scriptwriting in the past, Joe says he only started writing seriously in 2004 after completing a creative writing course at Limerick Senior College. Further education is important to Joe, who has qualifications in human resources and sales and marketing and has received awards from various validating bodies. Published below is an extract from Joe's piece on cinema in Limerick focusing on the events surrounding the Dromcollogher cinema fire in 1926. Joe, along with Keith Whelan, are delivering a free lecture on Cinema in Limerick in the City Library at the Granary on Thursday, February 16 at 8pm. Besides the Dromcollogher tragedy, topics such as film-making in Limerick and the old picturehouses of the city will be covered.

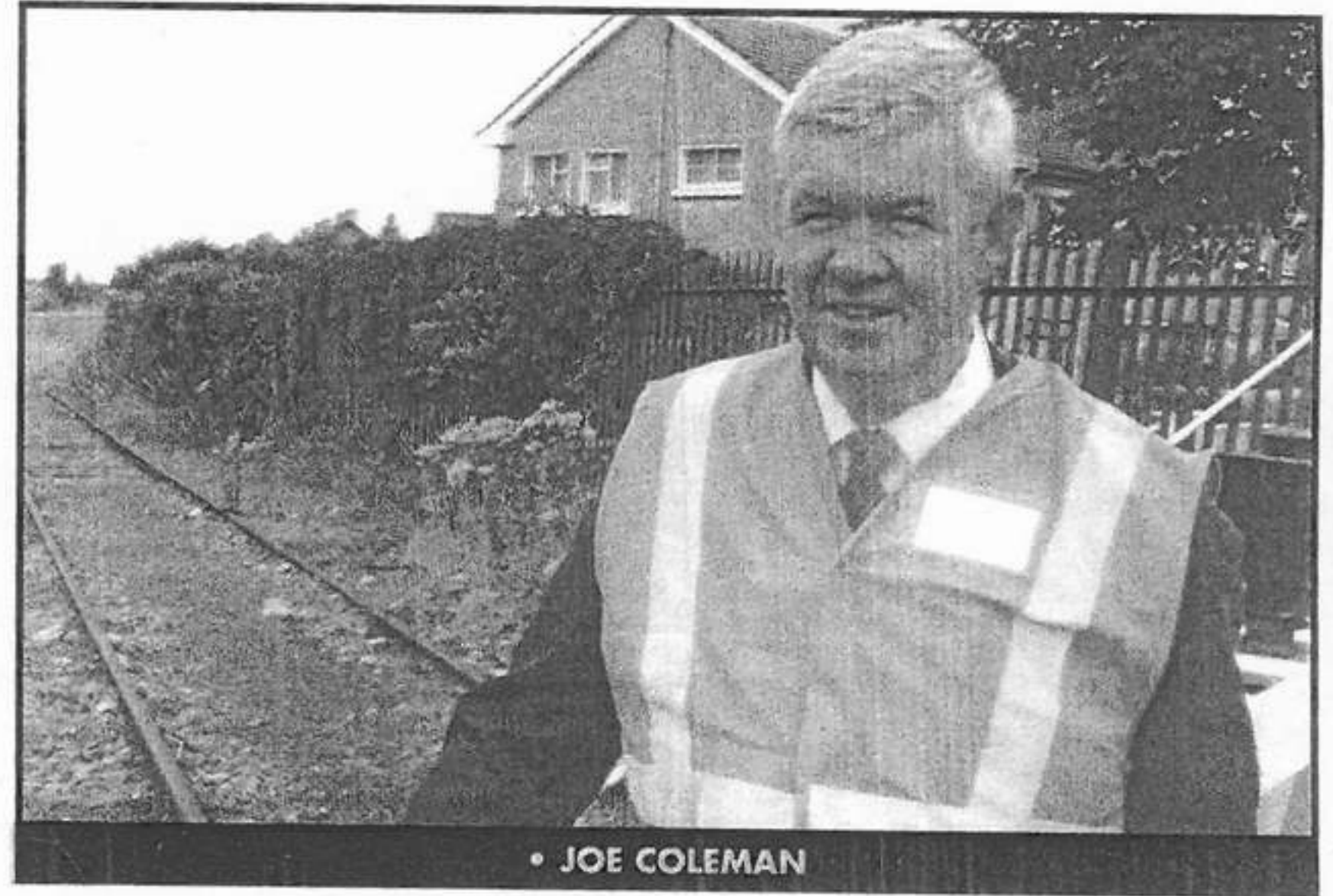
By JOE COLEMAN

A MAJOR tragedy is associated with cinema in Limerick, although this time in a part of the county, some 30 miles from the city itself. On Sunday September 5, 1926 a fire engulfed a small cinema in Dromcollogher, resulting in the deaths of 48 people including children.

The film show was a "once off" occasion, the screening was part of a travelling cinema, which was becoming popular around the country at the time, the building was used for other purposes as well on a daily basis. The cause of the fire was a result of a candle falling over onto the then commonly used, but highly flammable, nitrate film, which was left exposed on the table, it immediately caught fire and gutted the house over a very short period of time. The fire broke out at about 9.30pm. The main film had been on for about 10 minutes at the time. The rather high casualty rate was as a result of an escape hatch

becoming blocked upstairs where the screening was taking place, and a mix of timber and glass in storage underneath the "makeshift" cinema, which had only been rented for this occasion. There were approximately 150 people in the building at the time, the room measured 50 feet by 20. Most of those who perished were burned beyond recognition. Those who died were at the front near the screen, they became trapped in the panic that ensued. (It was nitrate film that gave the term; "Silver Screen" because of the sparkling image that it produced). It is believed that Cecil B DeMille's "silent" version of "The Ten Commandments" was been screened at the time, together with a two reel short comedy, which had finished shortly before the fire broke out.

Soon after this tragedy nitrate film was outlawed by the industry as a whole, and was replaced with safety film which is still used to this day, it does not burn in a fire, it shrivels instead resulting in damage to the film only.



• JOE COLEMAN

A plaque commemorates the site of the Dromcollogher fire in the village, which is now a library, and the names of all those who lost their lives are inscribed on a Celtic cross in the local churchyard, together with the names of those who are buried elsewhere. This was a tragedy of truly epic proportions and would be considered on the same scale as that of the "Titanic's" sinking some 14 years earlier in 1912. Communities like Dromcollogher are small and tightly knit, that terrible fire will never be forgotten in that small village, and

even today there is always someone, somewhere who is related somehow to one or more of the victims of that terrible tragedy almost 80 years ago.

The use of safety film is soon to be consigned to history, with the introduction of digital projection in all cinemas in this country. The high cost of producing copies of feature length films is a major contributing factor at around €2000 a print. Digital will completely revolutionise the whole projection process, and possibly in the near future automate what was once a very meticulous job.