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Drom will never forget

Dromcollogher marks the 90th anniversary of the cinema disaster which claimed 48 lives, writes **Norma Prendiville**

IT is known, still, in Dromcollogher, as The Burning, an event that lacerated the very heart of the community 90 years ago when 48 men, women and children died in an horrific fire.

The Limerick Leader at the time, described the cinema fire as a "holocaust of a grim and dreadful character" and an "appalling calamity unparalleled in the history of the country."

For several decades, it remained the single biggest disaster of the new Irish state, until it was matched in horror by the deaths, on St Valentine's Night, 1981 of 48 young people in the Stardust disco in Dublin.

The tragedy in Dromcollogher was first and foremost a tragedy for the families involved, and few families in the locality were left untouched. The population of Dromcollogher at the time was just 444.

Among the youngest victims on the night were seven-year-old John Kenny and his brother James, who was only 12. Fifteen children in all died and more than half the victims were under 25 years of age. Dozens more were in-

"The occasion also allows us the opportunity to thank and remember all those who contributed in the aftermaths."

John O'Dell, chairman of Dromcollogher Community Council

jured.

But The Burning also left an indelible mark on the community of Dromcollogher. In the years that followed that fateful Sunday night, September 5, 1926, many were unable to speak of it openly and freely, so deep ran the feeling of loss and trauma.

But those who died were never forgotten. A fine memorial cross stands in the church grounds over the mass grave in which 46 of the 48 victims lie. All 48 are named.

And in the 1940s, relatives of those who had died bought the site of the

makeshift cinema in which the disaster had taken place and made a gift of it to Limerick County Council. On May 16, 1953, the Memorial Library which was built in its place was officially opened in what was called, at the time, a noble act of remembrance.

Once again, on this, the 90th anniversary of The Burning, Dromcollogher will remember those taken from them in such terrifying circumstances. And the memorial ceremony has been devised with great sensitivity.

"Our memorial event gives us the chance to look back over the years since the event, and to reflect on how it has shaped us as individuals and as a community. Remembering the past can be an important part of understanding who we are and our heritage," John O'Dell, chairman of Dromcollogher Community Council said.

"The occasion also allows us the opportunity to thank and remember all those who contributed in the aftermath of one of the darkest nights in



The late Mary O'Flynn, pictured here in 2012, was the last survivor of the fire of 1926 which claimed her father. Her memories were recorded by RTE in 2009 PICTURE: PRESS 22

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Horror visited on quiet community

CONTINUES FROM PAGE 1

our town's history. But more importantly it provides us the opportunity to acknowledge the bravery of the people and families of those who suffered then and throughout their lives," he said.

The memorial ceremony begins with a memorial Mass during which 48 men, women and children, as closely matched as possible to the age of those who died, will bring a candle to the altar and light it. Afterwards, the candles will be placed on the mass grave outside the church before the congregation begins its slow funeral procession, down past the Memorial Library where a wreath will be laid. Local tradition dictates that when someone dies, their coffin is brought around the Square. But this did not happen in the traumatic aftermath of The Burning.



The cover of the Mass booklet marking the cinema fire

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died in the fire, will give a detailed talk on this defining and unforgettable event in the history of Dromcollogher.

One of the last survivors recalled the panic of the worst night of his long life

THIRTY years ago, to mark the 60th anniversary of The Burning, the late Tom Costello, then 81, spoke to the Limerick Leader about the event. He was 21 when the fire occurred and had already attended a number of plays and concerts as well as film shows in the "hall".

When the uncovered reels of film on the projectionists table caught fire, he said: "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."

"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

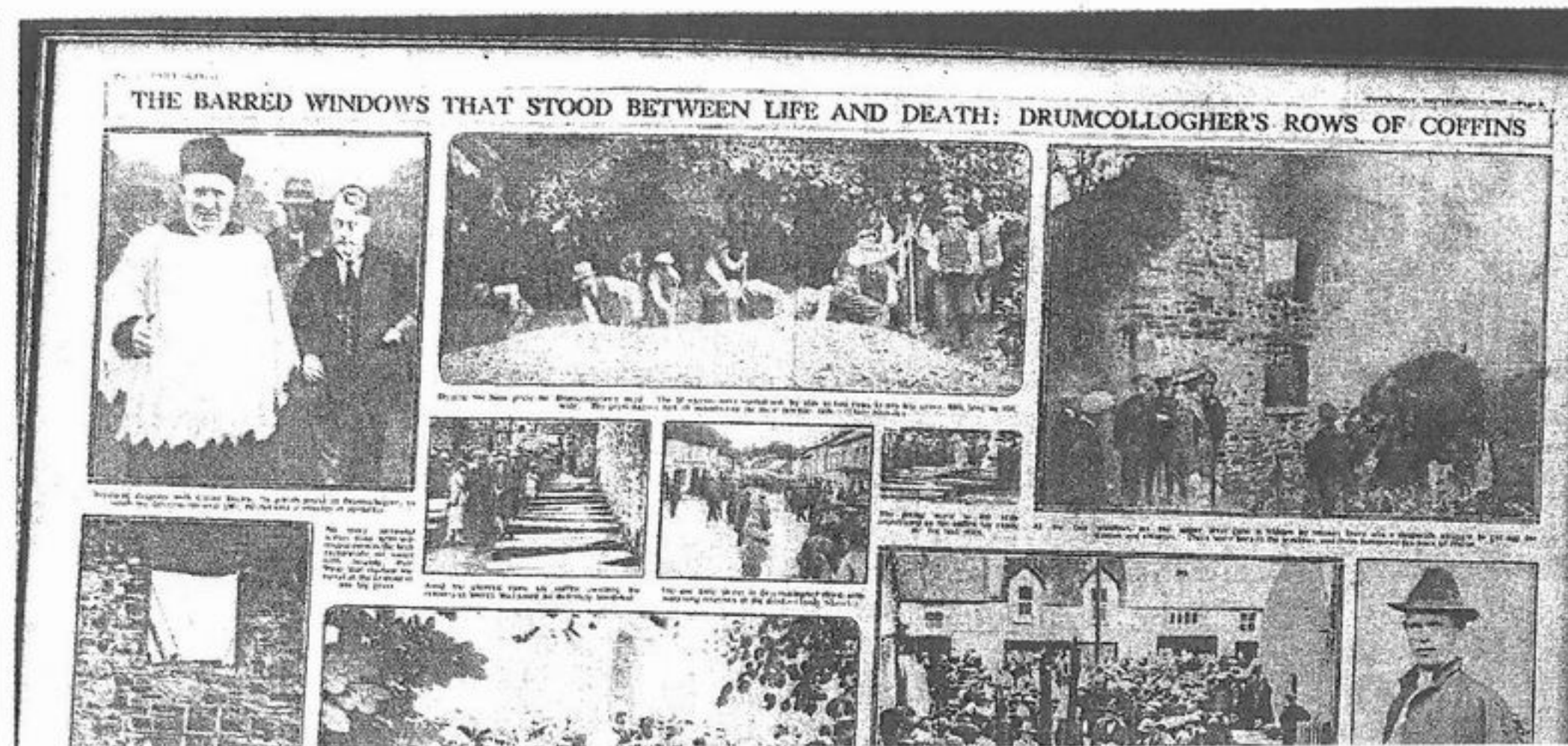


The late Tom Costello in 1986 as he recounted his story of survival

blazing projector table and again as he jumped over the fiercely burning discarded film below. "We stood around outside in a kind of daze. We just

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



A montage of photographs of The Burning which now hangs in the Memorial Library, Dromcollogher.

The unfolding of the disaster

NORMA PRENDIVILLE

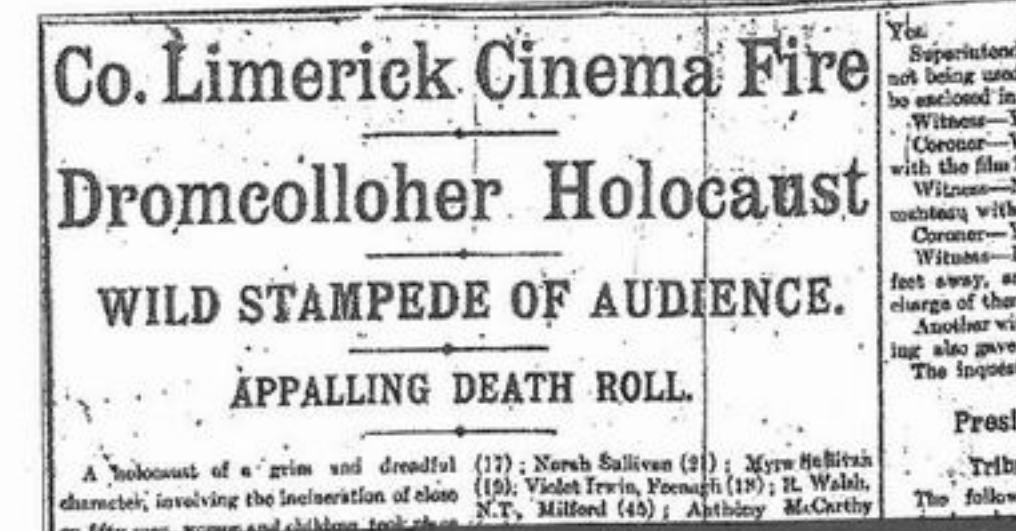
E: normap@limerickleader.ie

IN 1926, films were still a novelty in Ireland, and perhaps even more so, in rural Ireland. In any event, a local hackney driver, William Babe Forde hired the "hall" in Church St for Sunday, September 5 from its owner Patrick Brennan. And he engaged Patrick Downey, sometimes called Downing in reports, as a projectionist.

Downey arrived in Dromcollogher with the films in a bag, but having left their metal case covers in Cork. He set up on a table in the hall, a building used to store hardware and which was half-lofted. Access to the loft, where the film show was to take place, was via a narrow, wooden stairs attached to the wall.

After Benediction, the crowd began to arrive, a mixed audience of men, women and children, numbering up to 150 in all, according to most reports. A support film, of two reels, ran first with a man on an accordion providing mood music beneath the screen. Then about 9.45pm, the main film began.

But then a candle on the projectionist's table fell over igniting the exposed celluloid reels. The local sergeant, Sgt Long later told an inquest that as he was about to make a grab at the burning film, somebody



The headlines in the Limerick Chronicle on the Tuesday after the fire

films. William Forde also said he tried to quench the flame.

The sergeant kicked one of the blazing reels down the stairs.

Very quickly, however, the fire took hold. "Everything happened so quickly that it seemed as if it were but three minutes before the whole hall was a blaze," parish clerk, John Gleeson said afterwards.

He managed to prise the bars off one of two small windows high in the back wall and pushed his wife to safety on to a pile of hay beneath.

He and a number of others escaped through the window but this means of escape was cut off when a stout woman got stuck in the opening.

Those caught inside faced a gruesome death. "Struggling, screaming and suffering intense

erick Leader reported. "Heart-rending cries for help were raised...but none could be given. They had to be left helplessly to their doom."

The fire raged with terrific intensity, the report continued, and the roof fell in.

When the fire eventually burned out, the full extent of the tragedy was revealed: 46 dead, two seriously injured later to die and many more burnt and injured.

An inquest began the following day in Dromcollogher where Sgt Long described in dreadful detail the panicked reaction of the audience. He also revealed however that he had spoken to all three men, Brennan, Forde and Downey about safety issues under the Cinematograph Act prior to the

place. But, he said, these were not complied with.

The inquest found Downey negligent in leaving the films exposed on the table and found that Forde was careless in leaving a candle on the table.

The men were subsequently arrested and charged with manslaughter but Brennan was acquitted and charges against Downey and Forde were dropped.

The funeral of the victims took place on Tuesday, September 7. The coffins were lined up, side by side, in the church yard, some bearing names, others not. Not all could be identified. The digging of the mass grave continued until late in the day and 45 people were laid to rest there. James Kirwan, who died from his injuries was later interred there, joining his daughter Margaret who was also a victim. Two children, Violet Irwin and Thomas Noonan were buried in family plots. The President, William T Cosgrave attended the funeral along with hundreds upon hundreds more.

The extent of the tragedy made it both a national and international news item. A worldwide fund was set up to help the relatives of the dead and injured and over £16,700 was raised. Lump sums were given to some while others got staggered payments.

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A harrowing death for 48 men, woman and children

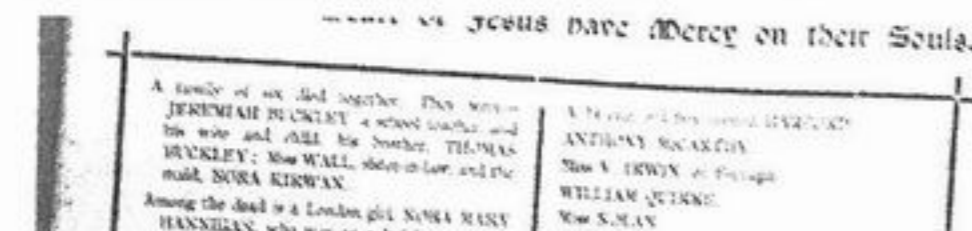
The following text on The Victims is taken, with permission, from a short pamphlet on The Burning written in 2006 by Liam Irwin, former head of history in Mary I

MORE than half of the victims were aged under twenty-five, nineteen were less than twenty years old and fifteen were children.

The two youngest victims were both just seven years of age, Thomas Noonan and John Kenny. The Kenny family of Carraward also lost a second son, John's twelve year old brother, James. The oldest to die was

sixty eight year old Mary Turner from Gardenfield. Jeremiah Buckley, a fifty-two-year-old national teacher, his wife, Ellen (47), daughter Bridie (10), sister-in-law Kate Wall (45) and their maid, Nora Kirwan (18) all perished so that this entire household on the Square was wiped out. The family terrier was to be seen whining at the door next day and Bridie would have celeb-

rated her eleventh birthday on the following Thursday. Thomas Buckley (62), Woodfield, Jeremiah's brother, also died. The Buckleys were the only married couple among the victims. Margaret Collins (60) and Kate Collins (58) died along with Kate's daughter (22) and two nieces from Sheshive, Nora (22) and Myra O'Sullivan (21). There were two sad cases of the death



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blazing projector table and again as he jumped over the fiercely burning discarded film below. "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 in-

side. Then somebody shouted 'They're coming out the back'. "They all died in one corner, huddled together. Two survived but died later in hospital." In 2009, RTE interviewed the last survivor Mary O'Flynn for a series on disasters.

The unfolding of the disaster

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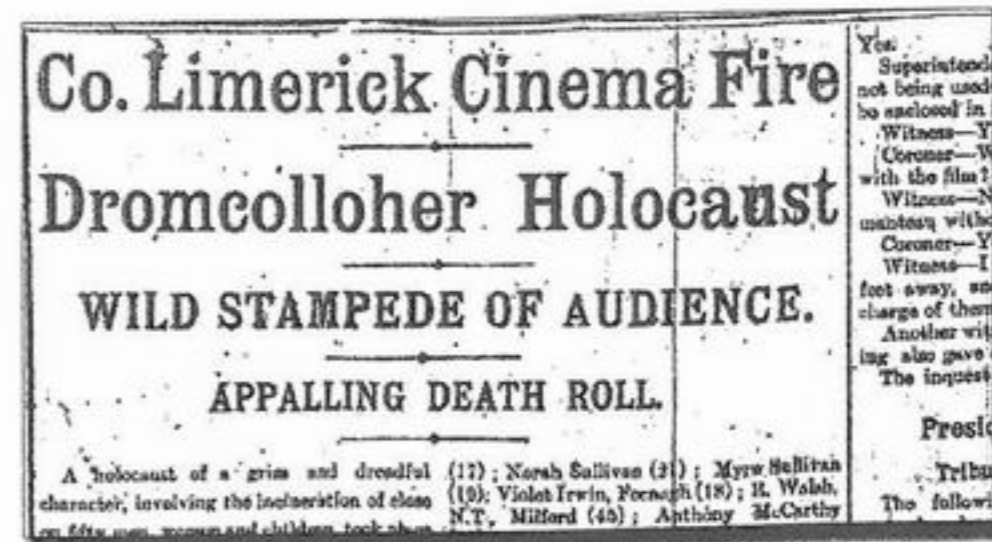
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Those caught inside faced a gruesome death. "Struggling, screaming and suffering intense anguish, they were overcome by the flames and dense smoke and were burned to death," the Lim-

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The money undoubtedly was a help. But the trauma and the loss were much harder to assuage.



The headstone marking the mass grave of fire victims in Dromcollogher

resident, who was visiting relatives in the town and Violet Irwin (15) from the nearby village of Feenagh. Edward Stack (22), a

farm labourer working for the Sullivan family in Mondellihy, was from Duagh, Co. Kerry and John J. Walsh was a national

teacher in Milford, while all the other victims were from the parish of Dromcollogher. Most of these lived in the village itself and ten were from Pike St..

One of the victims had not even been at the show, William Savage, a 56-year-old butcher and farmer, who lived across the road, was incorrectly told that his two sons were trapped and he rushed into the burning building from which he never emerged.

Robert Aherne, a 31-year-old publican, also living in Church St., who had only been married for five months, having escaped with his wife Nora, who was expecting their first child, returned to try to rescue his mother-in-law, Mary Anne O'Callaghan -and perished along with her.

Thomas Buckley a 62-year-old retired school teacher and Jim Quaid, a 39-year-old farmer stayed in the building helping others to escape, thereby losing their own lives.