

Limerick's worst tragedy: the night 48 people died in a cinema fire

One entire family died

MAL KEAVENEY

MONDAY of this week marked the 90th anniversary of Limerick's worst ever single tragedy when 48 people lost their lives at a temporary cinema in Dromcollogher.

A dignified parade and Mass were held in the parish to mark the occasion.

On Sunday night, September 5, 1926, a fire broke out in a hall which was used as a makeshift cinema in the centre of the village while a film (William Garland's 'The Decoy') was in progress. The tragedy – often referred to as 'The Burning' – claimed the lives of 48 people, representing 10% of the village's entire population. More than half of the victims were aged under 25; 19 were under the age of 20 and



Detail black and white of fire victims recovering in hospital.

15 were children. The oldest victim was 68, and the youngest were 7.

One entire family were wiped out that night.

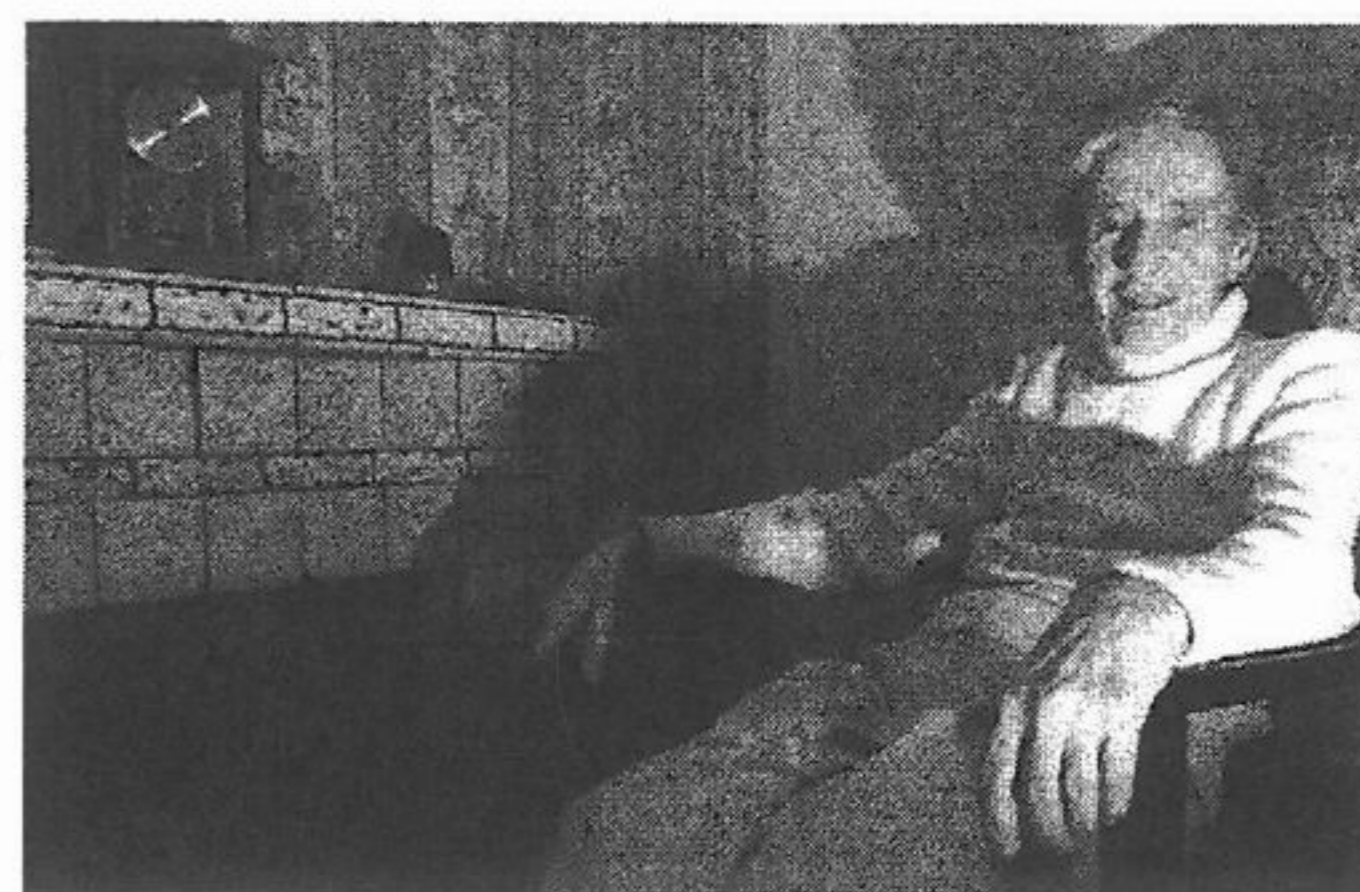
Many of those who perished in the blaze were people who went into the hall in an attempt to rescue those trapped inside.

The fire was caused after a candle, needed to give light to the projectionist, fell onto one of the exposed film reels alongside causing an immediate conflagration. Within minutes, the

building became a raging inferno and the flames had spread out of control. At the time, local wells and rivers were practically dry and the fire unit from Limerick was more than an hour away.

Within ten minutes, the roof and upstairs of the 'cinema' had caved in.

After a concelebrated mass, including Bishop of Limerick Dr. David Keane and upwards on 50 other priests, the majority of the deceased



Mary O'Flynn, the last survivor of the tragedy, she died in 2008; aged 89.

were buried in a communal plot in the grounds of the local church (St. Bartholemew). A large Celtic style cross marks the communal grave, on it inscribed all the names of those who died in such awful circumstances 90 years ago.

Messages of sympathy came from all over the world.

Many of those bereaved wore black for the rest of their days, never speaking again of this most terrible of tragedies.

A subsequent national relief fund was established – reaching the figure of around £20,000 – and this was distributed to dependents and survivors up until the 1950s. Among the contributors were US entertainer Will Rogers, Duffy's Circus, Independent Newspapers, Jameson Distillers and Arthur Guinness Company.

A group in Limerick city raised £645.

Three people were later charged

with offences in relation to the fire, but none ever served time. Patrick Brennan was acquitted on the more serious charges of manslaughter.

It remained the worst fire disaster in Ireland until the Betelgeuse incident in 1979 and the Stardust disaster in 1981, which caused the deaths of 50 and 48 people respectively.

Mary O'Flynn – who was seven at the time of the fire – was the last survivor and she died in 2008, aged 89.

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