

Great Limerick Athletes

No. 79—BILL GLEESON of Fedamore

(By SEAMUS O CEALLAIGH)

FEDAMORE, one of the oldest clubs in the Association, has played a noble part in hurling history ever since the G.A.A. was in swaddling clothes. There is a grand record—one that any club might feel proud of, with the names of many sterling Gaels linking the golden years together.

Fedamore had its hurling club in 1885, a few months after the Gaelic Athletic Association first saw the light. The club colours in those far-off days were purple and gold, being changed in 1894 to green and white, the present colours. In the thick of the championship fight all down the years, and although winners of numerous other trophies, it is a strange fact that Fedamore had to wait until 1912 before they put their name on the championship roll of honour. The same season they won the Band Cup, which, with the Ozanam Cup, is still to be seen in the home of our subject of this week—Bill Gleeson.

The Captain of the 1912 team was the famous Con Scanlan, the unassuming star seventy yards man, and this renowned Fedamore side embraced seven other inter-county men—"Egan" Clancy, later known in American Gaelic circles as the "winged wielder of the crooked ash"; Mick Harrington, the unbeatable Ned Treacy "o' the pluck"; Mick Bourke, Stevie Gleeson, Tom and Martin Hayes.

A GREAT RECORD.

Fedamore were runners up for the premier crown in 1911, 1915, 1919 and 1924—the last mentioned occasion to Croom, who beat them rather unexpectedly after a thrilling game at the Markets Field. In 1926 the Fedamore juniors were successful in winning the secondary title, and this victory gave a new lease of life to the famed club, and 1927 proved their greatest year. They started off well by winning the St. Michael's Church Tournament medals. Then they figured in three memorable games with Young Ireland for the East final, that will ever stand out in Limerick hurling history. Croom was the venue for all three—Mick Neville the referee. The first day it was a draw—3-1 each; a month later the issue was still undecided at 3-2 apiece; the third meeting saw a record attendance that braved sleet and rain to witness another great game, which Fedamore won by the narrowest of margins—narrower even than the score, 3-2 to 2-4, can indicate for the gallant Young Ireland lads were sending over the equaliser as the long whistle sounded—a split second giving Fedamore one of their sweetest victories ever, and the opportunity of revenging the 1924 verdict over Croom, whom they beat in the County Final, 5-4 to 1-1. Well known players that figured through that grand campaign included Bill, Dick, and Stevie Gleeson; Andy, Paddy, Jack and Dave Clohessy; Chris Ryan, Ger O'Donnell, Tom Shinney, Tommy Conway, Micky Condon, Lar Moloney and Bill Flavin.

HECTIC GAMES.

I can recall the majority of the games in which Fedamore have figured during the past quarter of a century but two meetings of theirs with Young Ireland stand out in bold relief. Maybe the three games in 1927 Championship captured the public imagination most of all, but the ones I remember best are a day away back in 1924, at Cappamore, when Fedamore gave a great trouncing to a Young Ireland side that included such prominent hurling stars as Denny Lanigan, Paddy McInerney, Bob McConkey, Jack Keane and Paddy Hartigan. I can trace the principal games of that Championship very vividly still. Cappamore and Cloughaun played a hectic game at Kilmallock, in which Cloughaun proved victors. Both sets of followers travelled home in the same train that evening and the fireworks started all over again. Fedamore later met Cloughaun at Athkeale and it was only recently Anny Clohessy told me it was the harest game he ever played. With a veritable storm blowing there were two dozen players inside the Fedamore "twenty-one" all that second half. It was hectic hurling with twenty men oftentimes under a falling ball and although the city lads were then in their heyday Fedamore had a brilliant win that made them firm favourites for their County final clash with Croom. That was played in mid March, 1925, and to the surprise of us all the Western men won.

ANOTHER REMARKABLE CLASH.

Seven or eight years later Fedamore and Young Ireland had ano-

ther remarkable clash. This occasion it was not a championship that was at stake—just the final of the local tournament at Hospital. Rivalry between the pair had reached a high pitch following a hectic clash for the 1928 Championship, won by the city lads. Fedamore were bent on revenge—hurling fans knew there was little between the teams, so a great muster gathered at Hospital. Feeling ran so high that an "outside" referee had to be found—the late Joe Murphy, of Mitchelstown, being the choice.

I would write down that game as one of the fiercest hurling encounters that I have witnessed. From start to stop no quarter was given or sought in a full-blooded contest that must take rank with the toughest struggles of the Gaelic arena. There was little room for spectacular hurling as men stood shoulder to shoulder and "drew" on everything. Personal courage was never less in question, and Young Ireland surely earned their laurels that evening. The intrinsic value of the trophy was very little indeed, but it was played for with an abandon that I have rarely seen even in contests for Gaelic's highest prize.

Young Ireland and Fedamore were hurling's greatest rivals in those hectic days, and it is a real tribute to their sporting spirit that, despite all the spills and thrills of the active arena, friendships were never sundered, and to this day they are firm friends—these lads that made the welkin ring twenty and five golden years ago.

A VERITABLE MOONDHARRIG.

Fedamore surely the "hurlers' home," a veritable Moondharrig, has given many stalwart players to the Gaelic Athletic Association, including such noted hurling exponents as the old captain, Con Scanlan, great writer and Gael, "Egan" Clancy, brother of the martyred Mayor of Limerick at the hands of British butchers in 1920; Mick Harrington, another grand hurler and soldier of Ireland; Stephen Gleeson, Tom and Martin Hayes, Dave Murnane, with a few of the younger generation—star defender of Limerick's golden hurling era, Paddy Clohessy, one of the great centre backs of Irish hurling; Tom Shinney and Tommy Conway, to name but a trio of the men who made the welkin ring in Fedamore's last years of senior hurling glory.

Of all that grand galaxy none was more skilled in ashcraft or ball play than that darling of Irish mid-fielders, Willie Gleeson. A stylist if ever there was one, this prince of centre-field had all-round ability and could man any position on the field of play with equal facility.

OF GRAND GAELIC STOCK.

Willie came of grand Gaelic stock, his late lamented father being a fine hurler and handballer, and was chairman of the County Board during stirring days in Irish history. An uncle was trustee of the Central Council in early G.A.A. days, besides figuring with the old St. Michael's Hurling Club in many great games and being mainly responsible for the erection of the old Rutland Street Ballcourt—the scene of many memorable handball games in the past. Willie and his brothers kept up the old family traditions, adding a chapter that any clan in the land could be proud to own.

At eighteen years of age, while yet a student in St. Munchin's College, Willie was figuring "with the men" and his first season, in the company of the great Gaels of that era saw him figuring in a county final success, when the Fedamore lads won the title from Ballingarry in a memorable decider.

ONE OF LIMERICK'S SUPER HURLING MEN.

The county selectors saw Willie and appreciated his worth, so the next two seasons he was in action with the Limerick juniors. In 1915 he joined the senior string and opened a career as brilliant as any that ever graced the county colours. And well may it be written that Willie served Limerick faithfully. He opened his account with Carrvowen just two score years ago. His speed, unselfishness and deadly accuracy made him one of Limerick's super men, and I believe that it can truthfully be said of him that he never played a bad game. His name became a household word in hurling circles, where his clean and clever tactics endeared him to all.

Willie Gleeson figured in stirring hurling days and clashed with many famed caman wielders, including Johnny Leahy, Jim Collison,

Mick D'Arcy and Hugh Spellacy of Tipperary; Sim Walton, Dan Kennedy, Dick Grace and John Roberts of Kilkenny; Tommy Finlay and Paddy Campion of Laois; Amby Power, Rob Doherty, Tom McGrath and the Considines of Clare; Bob Mockler, Sean Hyde and Dr. John Ryan of the Metropolis; Sean O'Kennedy, Paddy Mackey and Tom Mernagh of Wexford; Mick King, Mick Gill and Bobby Gibbs of Galway, and the Corkmen—Tim Nagle, Sean Oge Murphy, Jim Hurley, Eudie Coughlan and Danix King. It's almost the litany of hurling's greatest exponents and Willie held his own with the best of them.

FIGURED IN THREE ALL-IRELAND FINALS.

In stirring days, during the national fight for Independence, the Fedamore man figured in three All-Ireland finals, winning two—the 1918 title against Wexford, and the 1921 from Dublin. In 1923 Galway beat the Limerick lads in a sensational game that sent the only hurling title ever to Connacht.

In the home arena, Willie, as already mentioned, won the 1912 senior hurling title with Fedamore, and again in 1927, following the great series of three in a row with Young Ireland. Fedamore won that unforgettable "rubber" but their gallant opponents came back to turn the tables in another history-making game for the 1928 crown.

Thirty-five years ago, when the Fedamore Club had a dispute with the then County Board and left the G.A.A., Willie Gleeson remained true to the ideals of Croke and Cusack, and some other members of his club joined Young Irelands, with whom he won county honours in 1920 and 1922. Helping the Blue and Gold to victory against Cappamore in the Murphy Cup final he met with a rather serious injury and lay in hospital still dressed in his jersey, which it was found impossible to remove. Playing against Young Ireland in 1928, he met with another unfortunate mishap and spent several weeks in bed with a fractured leg. This was before the days of the Accident Fund, but such reverses could not damp the hurling ardour of that great Gael; his own interests were placed second to those of the game he loved, and whether in victory or defeat he always wore a smile.

IN THE TAILTEANN GAMES.

When the Tailteann Games were revived in 1924 under the Directorship of another great Gael, the late Mr. J. J. Walsh, Willie Gleeson was selected as a member of the Irish team that played Scotland on the opening day in a shinty exhibition, and later figured against America, England, Scotland, Wales, South Africa and the Argentine for the International hurling title. In passing, it can hardly be out of place to express regret that the Tailteann Games have been allowed lapse. They brought countless visitors to our shores and we have it on good authority that nothing ever approached the enthusiasm and self-sacrifice evinced in their highly intricate organisation. Truly racy of the soil, it was a festival of immense benefit to Ireland and of particular service to the cause of Irish athletics, which benefitted immeasurably through the presence in 1924 of over a hundred competitors fresh from the Olympic Games at Paris.

In 1927, when the Railway Cup clashes were revived Willie Gleeson was picked for the Munster team starred in a memorable hurling final won by Leinster, 1-11 to 2-6, and pronounced by many great judges as the most classic exhibition of the game ever played. Willie also wore the Royal Blue of Munster the following year, and with his fellow county men, Tom Shinney, Micky Fitzgibbon, Tom Conway and Micky Cross, helped to master Leinster, 2-2 to 1-2.

PLAYED THE GAME FOR ITS OWN SAKE.

It will be noted that Willie Gleeson has won the highest honours of the hurling arena, but honours and glory mattered little to him. He played the game solely for its own sake, and never through any desire for fame. Actually, he was far happier when engaged on some pioneering hurling work, and I well remember the pleasure he got from a Thursday afternoon visit to Tralee when a Young Ireland selection travelled to assist a promising Kerry fifteen, preparing for a Munster Junior Championship bid.

When he retired from the active arena, Willie became one of our most sought after referees and handled many famous games. For over twenty years he represented Limerick on the Munster Council, and no more popular Gael ever sat there.

Like other members of his family, Willie was also a grand exponent of the handball code, and he was for a number of years Chairman of the Munster Handball Council and of the County Limerick Handball Board.

A keen follower of the "long tails," Willie officiates as judge at many coursing meetings and at the Limerick Greyhound Track. Still, thank God, hale and hearty, fresh and vigorous, he represents for the majority of his generation the acme of hurling perfection.

No 80 — James Kefferan, of Dromkeen.