

No. 116—STEPHEN J. GLEESON of Fedamore

By SEAMUS O'CEALLAIGH

WE return to the hill of Fedamore this week for our subject, and pick All-Ireland handballer and hurler, Stephen J. Gleeson, another of a great Gaelic family that claims connection with the G.A.A. since its foundation and is just now offering a third generation to uphold the proud record of the past.

The story of the Gleeson family can be traced back the seventy years stretch of the G.A.A.'s life, and the first ever Limerick Co. senior football final saw it well represented by two brothers—Richard and William—who opened with the G.A.A. itself an association that has gained lustre with the years.

The brothers were members of the St. Michael's Hurling and Football Club, two great combinations of the twenty-one-a-side days, then affiliated from the St. Michael's Temperance Society, who can claim a grand connection with the G.A.A. in pioneer times, that unfortunately is long since broken—and more's the pity!

St. Michael's played in that first-ever Limerick senior football final and were definitely most unlucky to lose to Commercials, who afterwards won All-Ireland honours—bringing the G.A.A.'s first senior football crown to Shannonside.

PROMINENT PART IN UPRISE OF G.A.A.

Richard Gleeson, who was a member of the Limerick Corporation, played a prominent part in the uprising of the G.A.A., being honoured by the Gaels of Ireland and elected Trustee of the Central Council. A keen advocate of handball, he did much to propagate the game, his outstanding achievement being the erection of the famous old Limerick Ballcourt in Rutland Street that was the scene of many memorable contests in after years, and inside the four walls of which mostly all the great ballplayers of a grand era played.

His brother, William, was also keenly interested in the handball code and played the game extensively. At his home in Fedamore he erected a ballcourt which was, for many years, the centre of some exciting play and the meeting place of as grand a lot of sportsmen as could be found anywhere.

COUNTY BOARD CHAIRMAN IN STIRRING YEARS

William maintained a close connection with the G.A.A. all through life and was Chairman of the Limerick County Board during the stirring years of the War of Independence—when it surely took a man of resolution and courage to assume the grave responsibilities attached to office in an organisation so openly hostile to the British occupation and so closely allied to the fighting men of Ireland at the time.

Meantime, another generation had come into the picture—the sons of William—John, Stephen, Willie and Dick, all of whom made their mark on the Gaelic stage as administrators or players, oftentimes both.

I have already in this series dealt with Willie's grand record in the hurling arena, which rather over-shadowed the fact that he was a splendid handballer too, a referee of note, and a legislator who represented Limerick for many years on the Munster G.A.A. Council besides rendering sterling service to handball as Chairman of both the Limerick County Board and the Munster Handball Council.

Willie was the first of the family to bring an All-Ireland hurling medal to Fedamore, but Stephen must be regarded as very unlucky not to have done so seven years earlier, on the occasion of the abortive final with Kilkenny for the 1911 All-Ireland crown.

AN ILLICIT EARLY MORNING CONTEST

Early prominence was manifest when Stephen captained the first Gaelic football team for St. Munchin's College in 1905. His interest in handball was also very noticeable at that time, and it is on record that he was one of a quartette that stole out of their beds one June morning that year—the week of the Intermediate "exams"—and at 4 a.m. donned togs and played a hectic handball challenge that lasted until nearly six o'clock, when all four got back to their beds as quietly as they had left them—after what must have been one of the strangest handball games in history.

Stephen fast came into hurling prominence from the time he first lined out with Fedamore in early 1909. The grand hurling parish had a splendid team at the time and included such stalwarts as M.

and J. Clifford, M. Harrington, M. Bourke, T. and M. Hayes, T. and P. Keane, R. and M. O'Donnell, Ned Treacy, Cón Scáinán, Egan Clancy, J. Whelan, M. Collins and P. Power.

FIRST SUCCESS IN FEDAMORE COLOURS

His first success in Fedamore colours was the winning of the Lyons Memorial medals. The following year they won the storied Murphy Cup, defeating South Liberties in the final, played at the Markets Field on October 30th, 1910.

In the quarter final of the Co. Senior Hurling Championship they beat Lough Gur by a big margin, but were unfortunate to get the knock-out blow on an objection.

They were back again the following year, to overcome the brilliance of great teams then lining out for Castleconnell and Young Ireland, and the County finalists of that year—Ballingarry and Fedamore—richly earned the honour. Played at the Markets Field on September 29th, 1912, Ballingarry took their only senior crown, when they scored 4-2 to the 1-2 that Fedamore mustered in reply.

But the lads from Skule Bog were back again twelve months later and at the same venue on November 9th, 1913, they won their first County senior hurling title, defeating their conquerors of the previous year, 4-4 to 2-2.

Another great success that year was the winning of the Band Cup, a trophy that is still to be seen in Fedamore, with the Infirmary and Ozanam Cups there to keep it company.

BIG DISAPPOINTMENT

The County Infirmary Cup was secured in 1915, following a great tussle with Castleconnell in the final. But a big disappointment awaited Fedamore later that season. They qualified for the County final once more and Cloughaun—the holders—were pitted against them for the title. The game was fixed for the Markets Field but Fedamore were not agreeable to this, holding that they should not be asked to play in a city venue against a city team. The County Board, however, refused to change the venue and Fedamore did not play at the Markets Field, Cloughaun getting a bloodless victory.

It was 1919 before Fedamore reached another County final and in this, the lowest scoring decider since South Liberties beat Kilfinane 0-1 to nil for the 1890 title, they lost to Croom, 1-1 to 1-0.

Croom were again their opponents when next they essayed senior honours in 1924, and it was indeed a big surprise when the West men triumphed, 6-3 to 2-1.

The Sweeney Medals, however, were won that year as a kind of "consolation" prize and, in 1926 the uprising of a new generation was signalled in the winning of the County junior hurling crown, Newcastle West being overcome in the final, 1-4 to 1-0.

THEIR GREATEST HURLING YEAR

Personally, I believe 1927 will stand out as the greatest year in the history of hurling in the parish. They opened it well by winning the St. Michael's Church Tournament Medals and afterwards won the East Limerick title after three unforgettable games with their greatest of rivals—the famed Young Ireland fifteen, then in the heyday of a grand hurling career.

Those days in Croom made Limerick hurling history and the only regret one can have in recalling the glories of the great past is the fact that all three who played such a noble part in that epic episode are missing now. We recall the Fedamore-Young Ireland clashes with something akin to hurling reverence and allied with them must ever be the great pitch on which they played at Croom—gone too, now, like the old clubs that gave us such pleasure then.

TRADITION AND OLD HURLING FLAME

We often talk of tradition and the part it plays in hurling lore—and then we think of Fedamore, Young Irelands and Croom—Kilfinane, too, and many more as well, and we wonder! There must be a spark of the old hurling flame in these areas, and surely some one can be found to fan it to glorious life once more. We want them all back so badly!

Bridging the golden years from 1912 to 1927 were a few Fedamore stalwarts, including Stephen and Willie Gleeson, the former with a record of service in the familiar jersey going back eighteen summers, when he lined out in the great clash with the lads from the city that was to make hurling

story. The first day they met the scores finished level: Fedamore, 3-1; Young Ireland, 3-1. Nine months later they were again together at full time—3-2 apiece. The third time, Fedamore won in a photo finish: Fedamore, 3-2; Young Ireland, 2-4. And they exacted long hoped for revenge in the County final when they beat Croom at that!

Many still hold that the Croom games between Fedamore and Young Ireland were the fiercest ever fought on the hurling field. They certainly could not qualify for the kid-glove category. With all friendships were formed in those games that have stood the test of years—a lasting tribute to the binding influence of the G.A.A. and to great sportsmen who knew that defeat was as sweet as victory when one had given his all in its pursuit. And surely the thirty lads that battled those three red letter games put the last ounce they had in the effort to gain the laurel crown. Fedamore won, but Young Ireland came back, twelve months later, to reap the reward they so narrowly missed in historic 'twenty-seven.

HIS LAST GAME WITH FEDAMORE

Stephen Gleeson played his last games with Fedamore in 1928 when they won the Ozanam Cup and medals. He had announced his retirement before Fedamore lined out against Newcastle West at Bruree late that season, and travelled to the game as a spectator. However, with ten minutes to go Fedamore were five points behind and one of their best players got injured. Stephen was asked to fill the gap—he took off his coat, laid his pipe on it and into the fray. The first ball he met he planted in the net, and immediately afterwards he repeated the dose to wipe out the deficit and give his side victory—a spectacular finish up surely to a great hurling career.

In the inter-County arena, too, Stephen figured with distinction and his achievements included a few worth while displays against the incomparable Jack Rochford, of Kilkenny, one of the greatest hurling defenders the game has ever known.

HIS HANDBALL CAREER

Stephen's handball career was every bit as spectacular as his hurling one and he figured with distinction in ballcourts all over the country; was "in" at the foundation of the Irish Amateur Handball Association; played in the first Tailteann Games handball competitions, and crowned a grand record by partnering the late John J. Bowles to win for Limerick the first All-Ireland Championship in senior handball doubles under G.A.A. rules. In this championship the then veterans, John J. Bowles and Stephen Gleeson, overcame some great opposition in Munster before qualifying for the All-Ireland final, in which they defeated Kilkenny, represented by J. Lucas and M. Dalton, the final portion being played in Kilkenny, in November, 1926.

Like many other great Gaelic families, the Gleesons were keenly interested in coursing and closely identified with the Irish Cup meetings at Clouhanna for long years. Stephen was owner of the famous Kilcaskin Rattler, who won the Bixnaw Cup and was favourite for the Derby at Clonmel when an injury forced his withdrawal.

THE USUAL MODE OF TRAVEL

Stephen told me that the usual mode of travel to matches in his early days was by the long car supplied by Peter Moloney of Bruff, whilst for the inter-County engagements a cycle to Limerick the night before was the general order. Whilst going to school at St. Munchin's, he used run half the distance from Fedamore, then get up on a horse and trap for the balance of the journey. In preparing in after years for a match he would stop all smoking and walk four miles around the road in the evening. The week previous to the 1911 All-Ireland final against Kilkenny, it rained constantly but he put in what training he could on Fedamore Hill. It was a big disappointment then when the game was called off and a bigger one still when Limerick were afterwards disqualified for refusing to fulfil the re-fixture at Thurles.

Stephen Gleeson is still a great follower of Gaelic games, whilst his son and namesake is one of our best referees now. Another son, Willie, is Secretary of the Limerick Men's Association in London and organised the great welcome the Limerick hurlers received on their visit last year to the English capital.