

# Growing Up In Limerick's Pig Market

by Anne O'Mahoney

**I** grew up in the heyday of Limerick's markets and in the very centre of their locations. My grandparents, George and Mary Lyddy, were caretakers of the Limerick Pig Market. A railway branch line ran from Shaw's bacon factory, through the market and on to Denny's. Pigs arriving at the market by rail would be put into the styes by my grandfather. Next morning, they would be sent to the bacon factories.

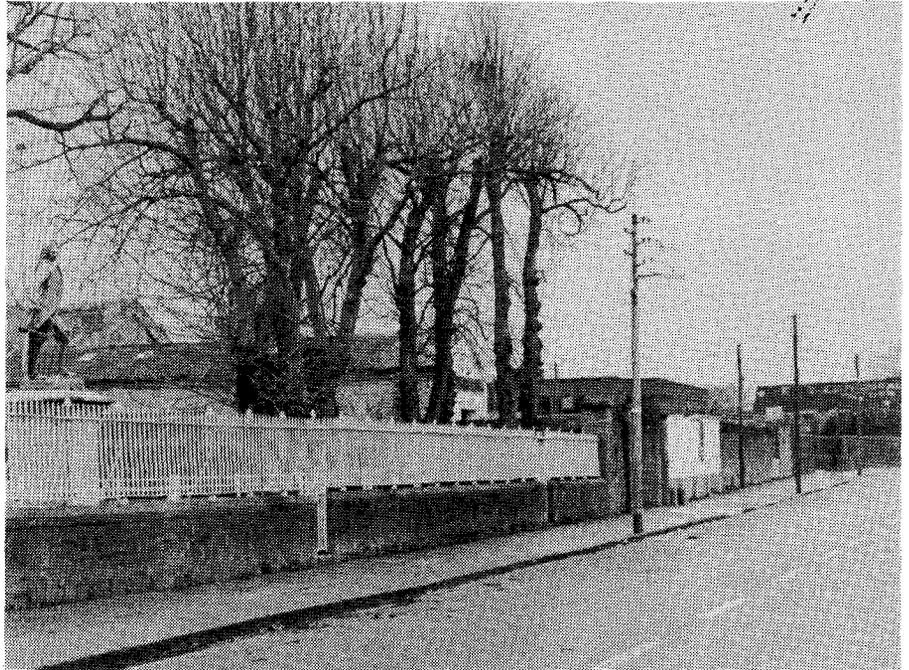
The main entrance to the market was in Mulgrave Street, where tolls were collected. There was another gate at Cathedral Place. Inside the market was a long kitchen called the 'Penny Dinners': here soup and bread were served to poor people. The kitchen was run by charitable people who gave freely of their time. Tuesday morning was bonham morning. 'Bonifs', as we called them, were little pigs. The farmers came in with their carts, or treels, loaded with the little animals and paid a toll of sixpence on each animal. Next door was the hay market where tolls were also paid.

The markets opened at 7a.m. Saturday morning was calf morning. Farmers from all surrounding areas would bring in their calves. Any calves that were not sold were left in the styes. After the sale, the farmers would go down town for a few drinks. Occasionally, a few bedraggled men would return to retrieve their unsold animals, on which they had to pay extra tolls.

On Tuesday mornings my grandfather would go over to the Potato Market, beside the courthouse in Merchants' Quay. The farmers would come in with their bags of potatoes to be weighed and sold. My grandfather served as tollmaster there. All the markets were owned and managed by the Limerick Market Trustees.

When I came from America at six weeks old, my mother was so ill that she could not care for me, so it was home to Ireland and my grandfather's in the Pig Market, which she had left not too long before. She was only to live another four months, leaving me orphaned, but in the loving hands of her parents.

My grandfather was paid two pounds a week, and he had a free house, but that was all that went with it. When he died, my first cousin, Willie O'Sullivan, who was only twelve years old, took over my grandfather's job in order that we could stay on in the house. I remember my grandmother putting long pants on him so



Cathedral Place, gateway to the Pig Market.

that he could get the job. Willie's mother and father were dead, so my grandmother had six orphans, including me, in the market.

At weekends we were even a bigger family. Sundays, when the markets were closed, were always great and the Pig Market became our playground. The Whelans' of Carey's Road, including Joseph (later Bishop), the Powers and the Lyddys came along. In all, the grandchildren totalled 17 of us. The styes were our playhouses. We would chase the chickens and ducks and when my grandmother would let the pigs out for a run, we would gallop them all over the market.

During the Black and Tans troubles in Limerick, my grandfather knew that some men would be hiding out in the pig-styes at night. He would go out with cans of tea to them. One night the Black and Tans came into the market when we had curfew at seven o'clock. (Curfew meant that the occupants of each house had to have a list of occupants posted inside the front door so that the military could check to see that everybody was in for the night). When the Tans arrived, I was in bed. My grandfather had the United States flag hanging out and he said: 'You can't touch her she's a daughter of Uncle Sam'. He would not let them make me get out of the bed. My grandfather repeated: 'You can't touch her. She's an American'.

On Saturday mornings, up at the other end of the Hay Market, the Butter Market

opened for business. The farmers came in with the butter on big plates and kept it cool with big cabbage leaves over it. The butter retained its temperature by standing it in a little water, with some salt sprinkled over it. People would buy it by the box. You soon got to know the farmer who had the best butter. Eggs were also sold there. Our routine on Saturday mornings was to go up to the Butter Market, on to the Calf Market, and then to the other end where the cows were sold.

The cows had to be relieved all day long, and some of their milk would be yellow in colour. My grandfather would turn buckets of this milk upside-down, as it was called 'beastings' milk', and you couldn't drink it. But there was plenty of good milk. We didn't have refrigeration, so it had to be used up or dumped. My grandmother would call in the neighbours and they would each get a 'caddy' of milk.

On week nights my grandfather would usually be busy with the pig-drivers who would bring in the pigs which the pig-buyers had left at the railway station, after having bought them from all over Ireland. Picking them up at the station, the pig-drivers would drive the pigs down the road and my grandfather would have to come out with a lantern, usually in the rain, to guide them into the styes. The drivers had to spend the night at the Market. My grandfather worked six days a week. He had to clean out all the markets, muck out the styes, and open and close the gates at early morning and late at night.



Summer Street, off Cathedral Place, almost directly across the roadway from the Pig Market, pictured by Fr. Frank Browne in the 1930s.

Our house only consisted of two bedrooms, a loft upstairs, a kitchen and an outhouse. There was no running water inside. Heat was from the fireplace in the kitchen but I never remember being cold as a child. We never complained. Compared to today, I would say we had a happier childhood than most children.

On Saturday nights during the summer, Bartley's public house, across the street, would close at eleven o'clock. The patrons loved to sing operatic arias. They would all come out and stand over against the market wall, and we had a free concert from eleven o'clock until two as they sang. "Even Bravest Hearts", "The Heart Bowed Down", "The West's Awake", "My Dark Rosaleen" and some operatic songs.

Limerick people are fond of music. I can recall the priests in St. John's Cathedral, after they heard confessions, would come out to the gate of the priest's house and listen to the men singing. I remember Fr. Connolly, Fr. McNamara and, later, Fr. Rice. There was never much serious disturbance, and I have only fond memories of these men and their songs.

We would sit by the market gate and somebody would start to tell stories about ghosts, the banshee and the headless coach. I remember the night when somebody came up along the side of St. John's Cathedral covered with a white sheet and we all ran home in terror.

My grandmother's nephew, Jack Sheehan, had the nickname, "Cull". He was a beautiful singer, as was his brother Paddy, who was called Ireland's sweetest tenor. On Saturday nights, before going

home, Jack would come into the market, step over the wicket, and my grandmother would say, "Here comes Cull".

At weekends I would have to go up to the Christian Brothers School in Sexton Street, knock at the door, and ask for four pennies worth of rhubarb which the Brothers raised in their garden. I remember coming down with the rhubarb and the big green leaves at the end of it. When my grandmother baked the rhubarb pie on Sunday she always put an egg-cup on top of the rhubarb to keep the crust up and so that she could get more rhubarb into it.

The Limerick Pig Market was famous throughout Ireland, as was the Limerick bacon. In my time there was Matterson's, O'Mara's, Shaw's and Denny's bacon factories. On Saturday mornings people would go to shops in the Irishtown and Parnell Street to buy black puddings, sausages, back-bones, with their big long pigs' tails, eye-bones and pigs' heads. Pigs' feet were sold in different shops throughout the city. At night you could go to a store for these pigs' toes. They were wrapped up in newspaper, and you came home with them steaming hot. The pigs' toes cost twopence each and we ate them with bread. People would want to know where the best pigs' toes were - it was like people eating pizza in America. It was *the* thing to have pigs' toes. On the way home from the pictures, the boys, after parting with their girlfriends, would go back and bring home two or three pigs' toes. People would sit up at night eating the toes - a Saturday night treat.

The old days in the market were very happy days for poor people because nobody knew you were poor, just as nobody knew if you were rich, and they cared less.

One Sunday afternoon, in the company of Jenny Jacques, Maisie Sheehy and Susie Power, my cousin, we went into St. John's Cathedral. The tower door was open, so we girls ran up the winding stairs which were full of straw because there were eight windows on top of the tower without glass, so birds would bring in the straw and make their nests there. We were up there laughing and having fun when Mr. Quigley, the verger, heard us. He locked the door and we were trapped up there all afternoon until six o'clock, when he came back to ring the Angelus. As we came sneaking down, each of us got a bump in the head and a kick, and we ran like heck out of the church.

There was a dancehall near the Pig Market and on Sundays there would be a dance in the afternoon and another at night. For us children it was a fascinating glimpse of the social world of adults. It was always old-time waltzing in those days and the music sounded exciting and romantic.

At lunchtime the workers from Shaw's Bacon Factory would take a short-cut through the market. The doctors from the County Infirmary in Mulgrave Street on their way down to St. John's Hospital, would make this short-cut. And it was also a pathway for many people going about their daily business. At five o'clock, my grandfather would lock the gate, and the



**The Fowl Market in Cornmarket Row, in the early 1900s (Limerick Museum).**

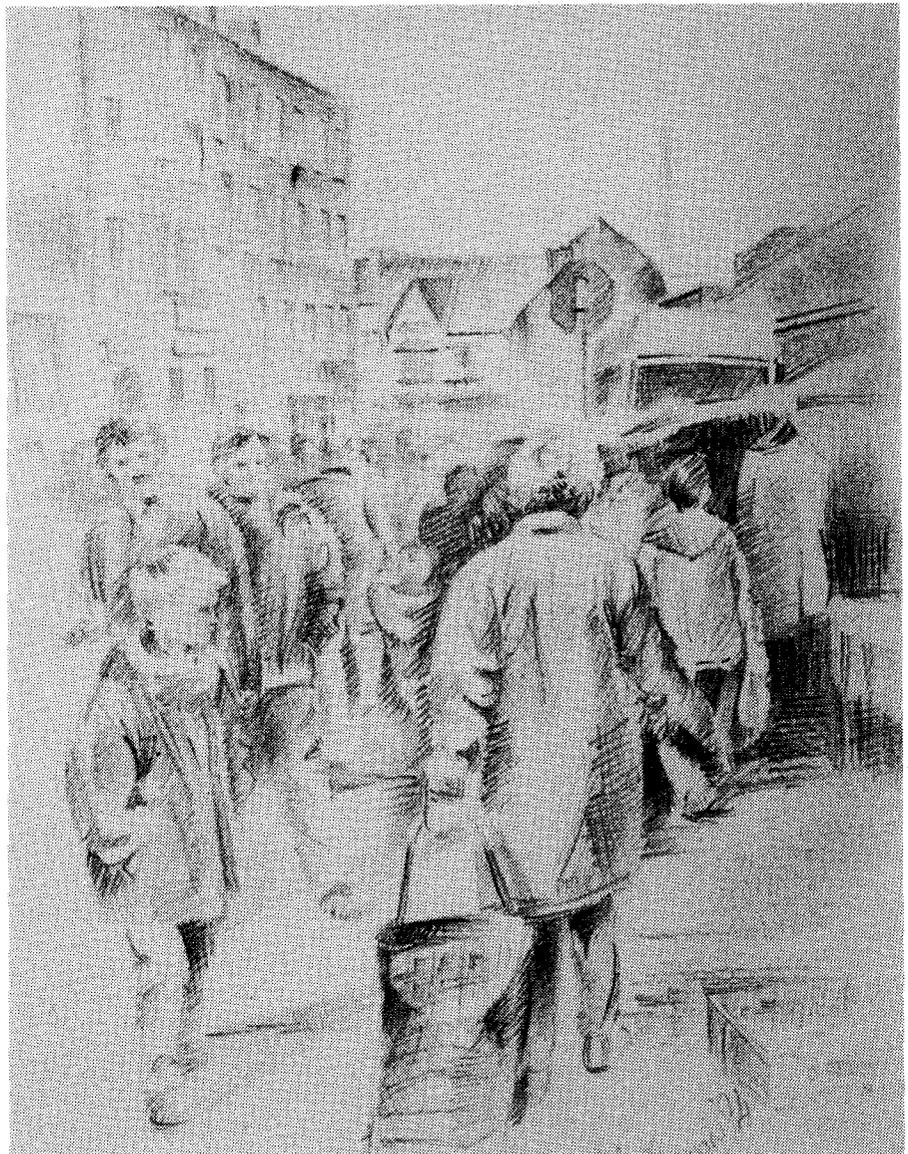
people would have to walk down Cathedral Place, past McCarthy's wool store and the beautiful statue of Patrick Sarsfield.

There were movies, or pictures, as we called them in the cinemas in Limerick. In these following-up movies, or serials, were Pearl White, Ruth Rollen, Tom Mix, and Eddy Polo, and it cost twopence to get in. We would go every Monday night to see whether the train ran over the heroine or not.

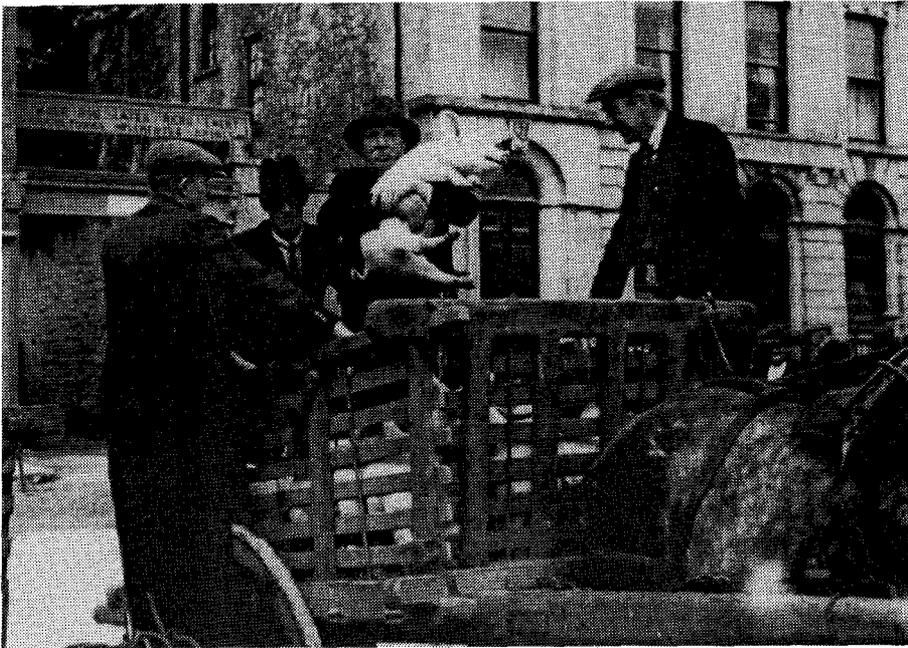
They didn't sell snacks at the movies, so we had to go to a shop in Irishtown called O'Dwyer's, where they used to sell a type of plum pudding known as plum duff. The Irishtown started from the top of St. John's Hospital and ran all the way down as far as Mary Street. The Irishtown, for us, was where Patrick Sarsfield kept the English back. But in our time it was where we would get a penny or ha' worth of plum duff.

We went to St. John's School, just down the street from the Pig Market, a big stone building with a big wooden closed gate, behind the Cathedral and the priests' house. The nuns who taught there were the Sisters of Mercy from St. Mary's Convent.

We had a retreat in the month of May. For one week a Redemptorist father would come and we would have to get up at six o'clock in the morning, go to mass fasting, then come back at eight o'clock. The day ended with evening devotions. We had what were called sections, consisting of four benches, with a prefect and a sub-prefect, and if you missed a Tuesday night, the prefect would write that down in a book and you had to give a reason for your absence. On Sunday, when the retreat was finishing, we had to have our candles, and of course, everybody got a new hat and new coat for the retreat.



**Market scene in Cornmarket Row by Clare Hartigan.**



**A County Limerick farmer holds up a pig for inspection by prospective pigbuyers.**

St. John's Hospital, at the end of Cathedral Place, had a rather crude dentistry treatment in those days. You just went in and said you had a toothache. They'd set you down in a chair and, with what seemed to me like pinchers, they just yanked the tooth out. There was no pain-killer. In order that you wouldn't move, they'd tie your hands behind your back. When the tooth was pulled out, you were told not to spit out on the floor in case you were bleeding. You came out with your hands up to your mouth. They didn't even stop you from bleeding but gave you instructions to rinse your mouth with salt and water. That was the cure.

My grandmother would never go to a wake. When a neighbour died, she would go and wash the corpse. They used to call her the Sister of Mercy. At that time, wakes often lasted all night and into the next day. Corpses were laid out at home. The bed was covered with white sheets and the four posts of the bed were tied with black ribbon and laurel leaves. At the side of the bed were two or three big candles and a box of snuff. When the neighbours came in, they would kneel down, take a pinch of snuff and then would say the Rosary. The next night the corpse would be taken out and kept all night in the dead house in the Cathedral. The next day the funeral took place after mass. The priest and the people would walk - there were usually only two carriages, one for the family and one to bring the priests home. The priests walked in front of the hearse. They wore big white sashes over their suits. If you were rich, you had three priests and, if you were richer, you had more priests, because each priest had to get two pounds. That was a lot of money at that time.

On Sundays, in the summer, we would walk to Plassey, which was about three miles away. We'd walk up, build a fire, make tea, boil the eggs in the tea-water - the eggs got brown but they tasted the same way. We had bread, sometimes hard

boiled eggs and whatever else we had. We'd swim in Plassey in our bloomers and a top. We went behind the bushes and changed our clothes. Everybody would walk home, singing their weary way along the riverside. Those were the best outings we ever had.

Sometimes we'd go to Kilkee for the

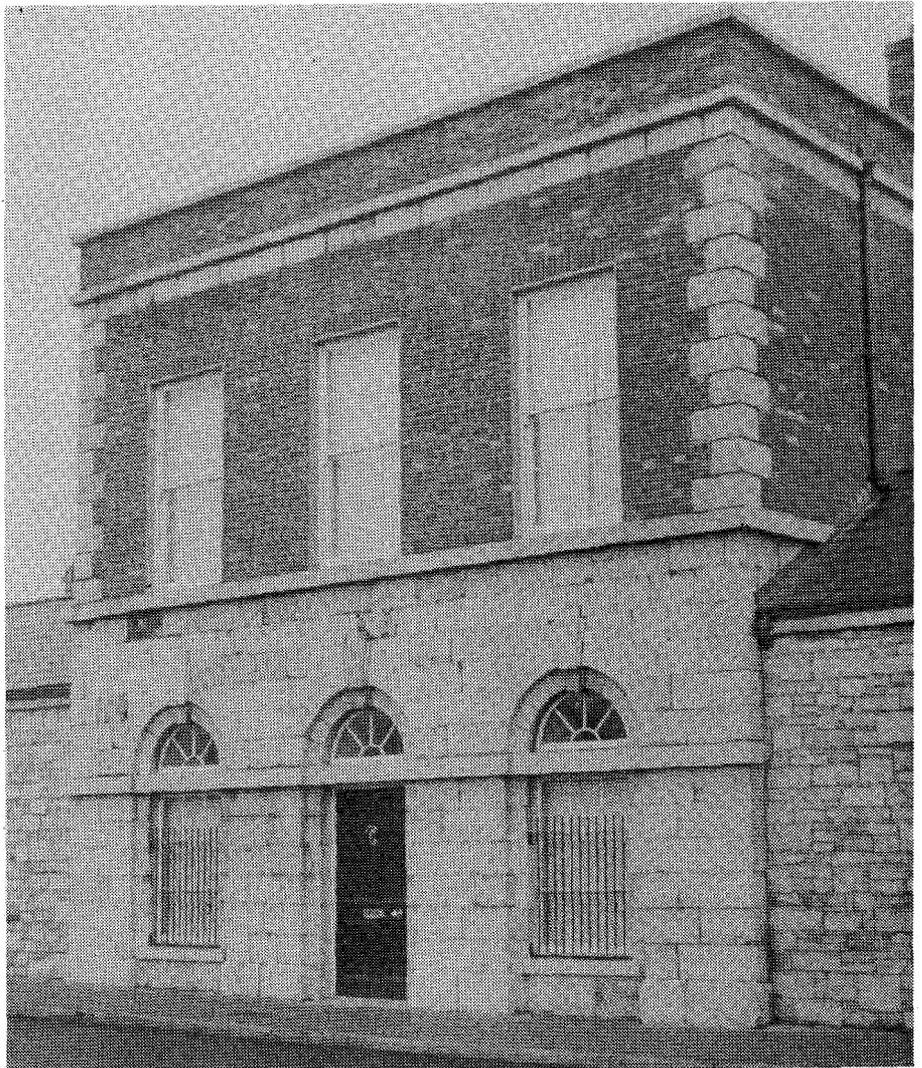
day, when we'd take the train and come back at night. Only people who had money would stay over. We also took a few trips by train to Castleconnell.

One summer night, as we were sitting on the steps of the fountain in front of the Cathedral, we were startled to hear, coming through the door of the church, cries of "Let me out, let me out". We rushed off to where the verger lived. He came back with the keys and opened the door. As he opened the door a woman wearing a black shawl rushed out. She must have fallen asleep inside and the verger had not seen her in the shadows as he locked the Cathedral.

I remember the excitement when Lindberg flew over Limerick. We were all out in the streets looking up. I don't think I had ever seen an airplane before, we waved and shouted.

After my grandmother died, the Pig Market and my life in Limerick changed. Before I was 18 years of age I had been told by the American Consul that because of the circumstances in which I was taken out of the United States when I was six-weeks old, I had the choice of going back and the US authorities would pay my way. And so they did. Not only did I take that second trip across the Atlantic free but I was to cross the ocean eight more times.

My Pig Market is gone now, but not my memories.



**The restored Market House in Mungret Street.**