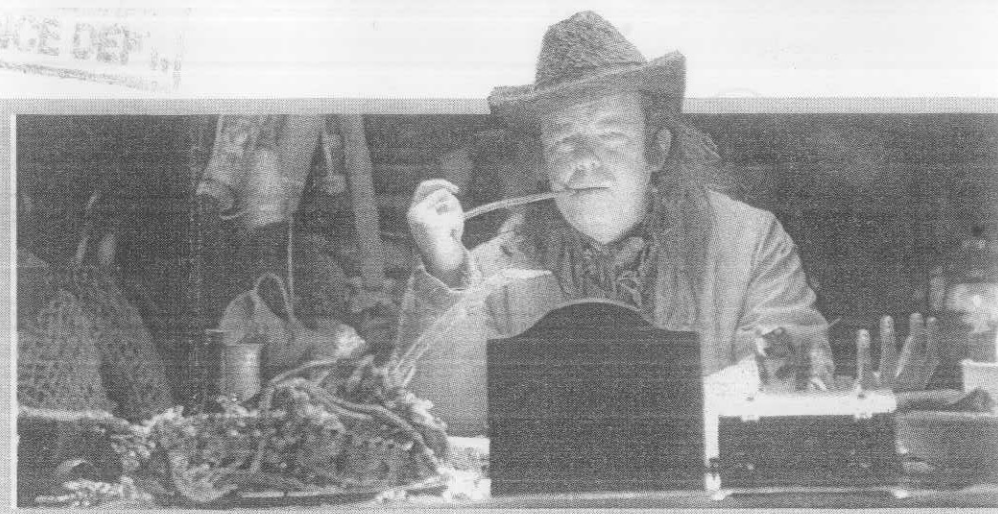




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27 OCTOBER 2007

## Ferenka closure to be recalled

■ Staff to hold reunion 30 years after factory shut

By **SAMANTHA NOVIK**

**WORKERS** from Annacotty's Ferenka manufacturing plant will mark the 30th anniversary of the plant's closure with a staff reunion next month.

The factory was one of the region's largest employers at the time, and approximately 1,400 workers lost their jobs in November 1977 when the factory suddenly closed after only six years.

"Working there was a great experience for me as a young man, and we all had some great times," said John O'Brien, who had been hired by the plant in 1971 as an apprentice fitter.

"It was one of the better jobs out there, and many of the workers became very close. That's why we're hoping everyone can get together to share memories and a few laughs," he said.

Ferenka was a subsidiary of the Dutch

multinational group AKZO International, which had its headquarters in Arnhem, Holland. The Limerick factory produced brass-plated steel cord which was used in radial tyres for the automotive industry.

"When we got word of the closure, it really came as a bit of a shock," Mr. O'Brien said, "especially because of the size of the factory and there was so much money invested in it. It was not exactly the best time for many of us who were in our early twenties and just getting married and settling down."

More than 4,000 people had been employed by the plant during its six years in business. The suddenness of the closure forced many employees to scatter across the Mid-West, and many lost touch as a result, said Dermot Waters, another apprentice at the factory.

"Hearing that the plant was closing was devastating," Mr. Waters said. "It was absolutely massive—the equivalent of Dell closing today."

Mr. Waters said that the plant did endure a few setbacks and industrial

problems during its life, but, overall, it was a great place to begin work as a 16-year-old.

"We had a fantastic time there, and a lot of us who started with the company just kind of grew up together," he said. "There was a great mix of city and county lads and we all got on brilliant."

Problems finding enough skilled employees, inter-union disputes and a strike all led to the plant's closure. Another setback was the IRA kidnapping of factory chief Dr. Tiede Herrema on his way to work in October 1975.

For several days it was feared Dr. Herrema had been murdered, and thousands marched through Limerick in outrage at the abduction. The kidnappers had wanted a number of IRA prisoners released in exchange for Mr. Herrema, who was finally let go after a house siege and 36 days in captivity.

The factory site was surrounded with the superstitions. When building the factory, workmen had refused to

remove a fairy fort on the site. The company was forced to hire men from another area to raze the fort and build the plant, but some employees believed it to be a bad omen. When the factory closed, many people, including Maeve Hillery, the wife of then President Patrick Hillery, blamed this for the company's misfortunes.

Mr. O'Brien and Mr. Waters were two of 30 men hired as apprentices before the plant opened. Part of a group of 26 fitters and four electricians, these men stayed together and trained with the factory for a five-year period. The factory apprentices have kept in touch throughout the years, but are hoping that they will be able to meet more of their colleagues at the reunion.

Anyone who was associated with the Ferenka plant is urged to attend and bring along any memorabilia from their time there to share with others. The event will be held in the main bar of the Best Western Pery's Hotel, Glentworth Street, Limerick, on November 16 at 8.30pm.



■ The first group of apprentices to be taken on in 1971 who had recently qualified pictured with chief engineer, Dirk de Mink



■ Ferenka workers at a reunion last year

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