

Great Limerick Athletes

No. 101—DENIS ("SPENCER") LYONS of Croom

(By SEAMUS O'CEALLAIGH)

IN dedicating this article to the memory of the late Denis "Spencer" Lyons of Croom, I am deeply conscious of the love and esteem in which he was held in the hearts of all members of the G.A.A. in the years preceding his untimely death, during which he performed such noble work in the cause of the G.A.A.

Although he died before many of us were born, it is no exaggeration to say that he made such an impression on the G.A.A. of his day as to ensure that his memory would be revered and honoured by the men of his generation as that of a great Gael, a great organiser and a great and loyal friend.

He marked what might be termed the second era in the story of the Gaelic organisation in Co. Limerick. The first lies roughly from the actual foundation to the time of the unfortunate Parnell "Split," which was a serious blow to the seven years old child that was the G.A.A. in 1891.

In the intense political excitement of the time, and from which members of the G.A.A. were by no means free, the awful conflict which divided the closest friends resulted in the breaking up of clubs all over the country. In Limerick, clubs dwindled from seventy-nine at the peak period to thirty in 1890, sixteen in 1891 and nine the following year.

CONGRESS RESOLUTION.

At the 1891 All-Ireland Congress a resolution was unanimously adopted favouring Parnell's leadership, and this action had the effect of alienating the support of others who were not in favour of the "uncrowned King," who was, incidentally, one of the G.A.A.'s earliest patrons; retaining his position as leader of the Irish Party, which he had created.

In Parnell's funeral to Glasnevin, on October 11th, 1891, two thousand Gaels, each carrying a caman draped in black, led the huge procession and presented a very striking appearance. A body guard of Gaels had also received the remains a few days earlier on their arrival from England.

For long after the great man's death the political issues in connection with his leadership were being discussed at fever heat all over the country, which was in the throes of one of the most bitterly contested general elections that Ireland has ever known. The Central Council did all in its power to keep controversial political questions outside the scope of the Association's work, but owing to the national character of the organisation this was found impossible in very many instances. Men who vigorously opposed each other in the terrible political struggle could not be easily induced to meet as friends under the banner of the G.A.A.

WORKING TO HEAL THE WOUNDS.

Men like Denis "Spencer" Lyons, however, were working strenuously to heal the wounds; and as happened after the disastrous Civil War of later times, the effects of which could have crippled us for a generation, the G.A.A. eventually became a major agency for ending the disunion that followed that first great national crisis in its history, when a great movement broke down to be followed by a period of heart-rending dissensions.

No county championships were organised in Limerick in 1892, and the county did not compete in the Inter-county hurling and football All-Ireland championships. Only three counties—Dublin, Cork and

Kerry—sent delegates to the annual convention of the Association, held at Thurles on April 16th, 1893.

But "Spencer" and a few other earnest Gaels, including Frank Dinneen of Ballylanders, then Vice-President of the Central Council; Very Rev. Eugene Sheehy, P.P., Bruree, and Larry Roche, of Dromin, were at work in Limerick and were mainly responsible for getting a senior hurling competition going. Although the entries were small, the championship was carried to a successful conclusion—the county final being decided at Croom on October 29th, 1893, and resulted in the South Limerick Hurling Club, headquarters Bruree, defeating St. Michael's by 8-1 to 0-1. Denis Lyons was the referee on that important occasion—the first real step in the revival movement. It was a great day at Croom and the local band attended and rendered a choice selection of national airs during the interval. Very Rev. E. Sheehy, P.P., Bruree, and Rev. Fr. Carroll, C.C., Croom, saw to it that despite the absence of anything in the line of a paling around the pitch the big crowd kept perfect order.

RE-ORGANISATION WORK.

The work of re-organisation continued all through the early months of 1894 and Denis Lyons played a prominent part in inducing the re-forming of clubs all over the county, encouraged the playing of challenge games everywhere and helped as referee and otherwise in smoothing the way for the re-establishment of the County Board, which had not functioned for some few years. He organised a monster football cup tournament in Croom, the final of which was played on September 30th, 1894, and which he refereed. The result was a win for Commercials, by 2-4 to 0-2 for their opponents, Newcastle West.

Following correspondence in the *Limerick Leader*, Denis "Spencer" Lyons wrote requesting Messrs. John Sheehan and P. J. Hayes to summon the representatives of the various Gaelic clubs to a Convention for the formation of a County Board "as the previous Board had long since lapsed and the organisation was in a poor state in the county." These gentlemen responded nobly to the appeal, and on the 11th November, 1894, the Convention was held in the Town Hall, Limerick, with Denis Lyons presiding. On the proposition of Mr. Lyons, seconded by Mr. Casey, of Caherline, it was decided to form a County Board, Officers elected were:—Chairman, Denis "Spencer" Lyons, Croom Castle; Secretary, John Sheehan, 4 Cathedral Place, Limerick; Treasurer, W. H. Trounshell; members, J. Murphy, R. A. Gleeson, T.C.; T. Hickey, G. Dillon, T. Leo, P. Hayes, M. McNamara, and P. Carey, Messrs. J. J. Murphy, Brewers, Cork, per Mr. M. D. Carr, Limerick Agent, presented two silver cups, value £60 each, for competition amongst hurling and football clubs, and Mr. P. B. Ryan presented a set of silver medals for a juvenile hurling competition.

BIG ENTRIES.

Big entries were received for the 1895 championships, and a great crowd at Corkanree on the opening day—Sunday, April 7th, demonstrated the public support for the games. On that

occasion Commercials beat St. John's in senior football and South Liberties got the verdict over Croom Aboos in the senior hurling championships. At Ballylanders, the locals drew with Hospital in the football championship.

"Spencer" Lyons refereed both county finals—Commercials beating Deel Rangers, Castlemahon, 1-7 to nil, in the football at Croom on June 30th and St. Michael's gaining a 2-3 to 0-1 victory over Boher Nationals at Corkanree in hurling on August 18th.

When the championships were completed the Murphy Cup contests were got under way and proved a splendid success—big entries, and some great games establishing these competitions in a firm place in the Gaelic calendar. In the hurling final played at Caherline, Kilmallock created a big surprise when they beat the County champions, St. Michael's, by a substantial score, but Commercials achieved the "double" by beating St. Patrick's 2-6 to 1-2 at Limerick.

Denis Lyons was re-elected Chairman of the County Board at the annual convention held at the premises of the Sarsfield Branch of the Irish National League on 11th November, 1895. The other officers elected were:—Treasurer, William Trounshell; Secretary, P. J. Hayes (Commercials).

LIMERICK'S DOUBLE SUCCESS.

Limerick had a double success in the inter-county championship games played at Mallow on 30th November. In hurling, St. Michael's beat Kilmoiley (Kerry) 1-2 to 0-1, and Commercials Footballers beat Ballymacelligott (Kerry) 5-6 to 1-1. The Limerick players were: Hurling—Thomas Reals (captain), E. O'Dwyer, M. McKnight, W. Sheehan, Denis Murphy, Thomas Murphy, J. O'Driscoll, C. O'Donoghue, J. Sullivan, W. O'Connor, J. Heath, T. Hogan, T. McMahon, J. Ryan, J. Lene, E. O'Connell, T. Markham. Football—C. Fitzgerald, W. Quain, W. McNamara, L. Roche, J. Campion, M. Ryan, T. Donoghue, W. Riordan, William Murphy, J. Murphy, D. Birrane, M. Culhane, J. Wilmott, J. Ryall, W. Guiry, J. Griffin, J. Ryall.

Commercials secured their second All-Ireland crown on the 6th February, 1898, at Jones's Road, Dublin, when they defeated the Young Irelands (Dublin) 1-5 to 0-7. The Limerick players were: Con Fitzgerald (Captain), D. Birrane (goal), W. Guiry, John O'Riordan, M. Ryan, L. Roche, James O'Riordan, Larry Sheehan, P. Roche, A. Quillinan, J. Buttiner, Tom Campion, James Dalton, W. Murphy, W. McNamara, John Murphy and J. Nash. When the victors returned to Limerick they were received by the St. Mary's Band, accompanied by a huge crowd, and the utmost enthusiasm was displayed.

Denis Lyons resigned from the County chair at a meeting of the County Board held on November 14th, 1900, owing to pressure of private business and was replaced by Mr. C. C. O'Rourke of Abbeyfeale.

IN THE THICK OF AFFAIRS AGAIN.

"D.S." resumed his connection with the County Board on February 4th, 1903, when he became Limerick representative on the Central Council, and at the annual Convention held on March 28th he again accepted the position of Co. Board Chairman. Soon he was in the thick of affairs once more and on

May 31st we find him refereeing the Senior Hurling County final at the Markets Field in which Young Irelands beat Monegay 2-9 to 0-5. Immediately afterwards, he took charge of the football semi-final in which Commercials beat Knockane 2-2 to 1-4.

Limerick Gaeldom suffered an irreparable blow by the death of Denis "Spencer" Lyons on November 9th, 1904, and I conclude this review with an extract from the obituary notice: "His passing came as a painful shock to Munster Gaelic circles, where he was a prominent figure, while his influence was paramount on the Board over which he was Chairman for so long. His magnificent figure was certain of admiration even amidst the flower of southern manhood. His imposing presence was a familiar one on Gaelic fields, and his work was ever on behalf of the native games, with whose progress his keenest interests were bound up."