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52. LIMERICK CHRONICLE, TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 5, 1991.



An outing by the staff in the 1950's of staff of the Crescent clothing Factory. The picture may have been taken in the "markets" area of Mulgrave Street.

The Limerick markets

THE earliest markets in Limerick were situated outside the wall "not far from John's Gate"; this would be in the area now known as "Sarsfield Avenue." They were afterwards moved inside the wall to an area near the junction of Mungret Street, John Street and Broad Street. This market was also the site of the hiring fair, and long after the market was moved the hiring fair continued up to the late twenties, when it was moved to Baal's Bridge.

This was the place where farmers hired suitable hands, principally at ploughing and harvest time. These poor fellows, with the tools of their trade, spades, forks, scythes, etc., their only possessions, represented the large section of the peasantry that emerged from the turmoil of the land war with none of the laurels. They were still subjugated by a tyranny no less oppressive than that which they endured under the landlord system. By and large the Irish farmer regarded the day labourer as a 'man of straw', and the social cleavage that existed between both was no less marked or unjust than that which obtained between negro and white man in the United States.

Hirers rarely took on a hand who was unknown to them. Usually the labourers were specialists in a particular branch of agriculture and were employed to perform tasks at which they were most proficient.

The hiring fair died from a condition that, happily, left the labourer less dependent on the farmer and the farmer less dependent on the labourer.

The fair is gone forever and the memory of it only recalls the sad condition of many fine young men who laboured for pence in the greenery of their native country, a yard of which they could never call their own.

Up to the early years of the present century the wide street off John Street known as the "Cabbage Market" was alive with the bustle and banter of market day, especially on Wednesdays and Saturdays, when the Park market gardeners with their carts laden down with fine vegetables surrounded by eager housewives gave the place such atmosphere and animation that contrasts so drastically with the dead silence of today. Afterwards the market moved to Broad Street, where it was squeezed out by modern traffic conditions.

After the corn market had been removed from its old site at Mungret Gate, and set up in the fine open space on the west side of the Cathedral, the whole area smelt of new-mown hay the whole year round.

This was much appreciated by the local people, who were thus enabled to tolerate the less prepossessing odours from the pig market a little further up the street.

These markets have long ceased operations, but there are many who remember the hay carts, which were an unforgettable feature of the place. Only the heads of the poor overburdened beasts could

be seen as they drew the heavy and cumbersome loads to the market. Straw was brought in and sold in the same manner.

The corn trade was all but wiped out at the time of the transfer of the market to Cathedral Place, but the hay and straw trade continued to prosper for many years. These commodities were purchased in great quantities by the hundreds of horse and donkey owners in and about the city, and also by the very poor, who could afford no better than straw bedding. A number of "Hay and Straw" stores served as retail outlets.

The adjoining butter market was also a busy and colourful place. Butter was sold in the "lump," or in firkins — small wooden hooped casks — and was brought to market on carts of every description from the surrounding countryside. It was judged by taste and consistency of colour; and the numerous cow hairs, and other flotsam that often showed up against the bright creamy background were accepted as if the adulteration was unavoidable.

A Mrs. Burke, who kept a public house cum grocery store opposite St. John's presbytery gate was known as 'Taste Me Butter,' from her custom of inviting prospective buyers to sample her wares. This colourful name has stuck to the old pub even up to the present time. In those days butter was not a uniform standard quality, but varied greatly according to the expertise of the maker.

On the roadside outside the market stood Molly Gleeson's pump, a celebrated meeting place for the people of the district before the fountain was erected in the Cathedral Square. There were many such pumps around the parish, some of which survived up to a few years ago. The one at Black Boy Pike was in constant use up to the fifties.

A carnival atmosphere pervaded the adjoining pig market on market days. On arrival, horses and



Throwing snowballs, on Bengal Terrace, in the 1940's.

donkeys were untacked and allowed to rest after their journeys; while the owners stood by their creels until the grunting and squealing occupants found new owners. Groups of schoolboys, on their way home from the nearby Christian Brothers School, were often to be seen enjoying the lively jargon of the buyers and sellers, as they excitedly waited for the dramatic clinching of the bargain with the traditional spit and slap on the palm.

The pig buyers

The local professional pig buyers had little time for this ancient Celtic bargaining system, and usually enjoyed the benefits of a buyers market. They were a small, but relatively comfortable fraternity who merely acted as middlemen between producer and bacon factory. They were always deemed respectable, if for no other reason than the obviously lucrative nature of their avocation, which also excited the envy of those who had to work hard for a bare existence.

It can be said, too, that they were the special envy of school teachers, bank clerks and

other such white collar workers whose educational qualifications had to be of a high standard, but whose earnings fell far short of those of the pig-buyers.

On the whole they were decent respectable fellows, though the independence and arrogance of some of their members is still highlighted in the course of conversations about "old times." Who has not heard the story of the pig buyer who demanded that the wheels be taken from a farmers cart so that the animals in the creel could be more easily examined?

Alas! the pig buyers have gone the way of the coopers and the sandmen, and even the pigs are rarely seen on the "crubben."

The maintenance and administration of the market at Mungret Gate, known as the fowl market, and formerly, the milk market and corn market, has long been a disgrace to the city. Market has been conducted here for 150 years under primitive conditions — primitive because the management thought it unnecessary to provide toilet facilities. The place has been closed for the past two years to allow the Market Trustees to modernise it, but alas! there is to be no modernisation, it is to be

opened again, much in the same state of dereliction as when it was closed.

The potato market in Merchant's Quay, lately completely renovated by the Limerick Civic Trust, is a splendid venue for any kind of market, but the public, buyers and sellers, seem to be very slow to give it their blessing, they still prefer to shoulder their way through the teeming masses that congregate in the narrow

streets around the old market place.

In 1824 the new Athlunkard Street cut through the site of the old meat market, remembered today in Sheep Street and Meat Market Lane. Afterwards this market removed to Ellen Street, and became 'New Town Meat Market.' John O'Donovan, while engaged in the Ordnance Survey in 1840 observed a number of butcher stalls in the ruin of St. Nicholas's.

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