

Great Limerick Athletes

No. 82—LAURENCE McNAMARA of Mount Pleasant

(By SEAMUS O CEALLAIGH)

A SMALL, quiet, fertile district, lying just north of the main-Limerick-Foynes road, and about two miles from Askeaton, with the tidal waters of the lordly Shannon washing its picturesque shore—that is Mount Pleasant.

It is indeed a pretty spot, with many historical landmarks dotting its low lying landscape; a sandy and rugged shore, with a few small quays here and there, quays now long deserted, but spots of great importance one time, where many boats were berthed, and nets with other tackle spread on the nearby cliffs to dry. At that time the majority of the Mount Pleasant men made their living by fishing, cutting seaweed, or trading between neighbouring County Limerick villages and villages across the water, in Clare.

These were indeed industries in themselves and, needless to say, unemployment was almost unknown in the district then. In some of the local houses dances were frequently organised, and at two spots close to the shore open-air dancing and picnics were held. At that time Mount Pleasant housed a nest of boatmen and musicians that few parishes in Ireland have produced, and the district is still sometimes referred to as "Mount Pleasant of the boatmen."

HURLERS AND ATHLETES.

However, it's Mount Pleasant of the hurlers and athletes also. After the founding of the G.A.A. a gallant bunch of hurlers and athletes, as good as ever came out of any parish, sprang up in the district. A team was soon formed, a far-famed combination which flourished at the end of the 'eighties and in the beginning of the 'nineties. Around this period they had a glorious session.

About a mile from Askeaton, on the road to Foynes, a by-way branches off to the right, and just a stone-throw onwards one reaches the hill marking the boundary between Askeaton parish and Mount Pleasant. Some two hundred yards westwards a field is passed where in the early days of the G.A.A. the caman was wielded with great skill and craft by a small gathering of neighbouring men.

Soon a team was going in the locality, and it was named the "Liberators" in honour of the great Daniel O'Connell. Just at the eastern end of this field stands the ruins of the little church of Mount Pleasant, around which are buried many generations of local people, including the mortal remains of a few of the afore-mentioned hurling stars. Not far east of this church, running parallel with the Mount Pleasant-Askeaton boundary, is a narrow winding road which leads to the snug and pretty homestead of Laurence McNamara, skipper of the Mount Pleasant Liberators.

GREAT GALAXY OF CAMAN WIELDERS.

Around the period when this team was at its peak, Limerick City boasted some slashing sides, particularly Shamrocks, St. Michael's and South Liberties, whilst best of the Eastern combinations were Murroe and Kilfinane Emmets. Hurling was also practised freely at this time in the Western area of the county, other noted teams besides the "Liberators" including Foynes Shannon Sweepers (later known as Foynes Father Murphy's), Monegay William O'Brien's, Faugh-a-Ballagh (Kildimo) and Rathkeale William Abrahams. Hurling teams also flourished then in Stonehall, Askeaton, Shanagolden and Curragh Chase.

Amongst this great galaxy of Western caman wielders the Mount Pleasant men proved their worth in no uncertain fashion. Indeed, it was said at the time that had they trained sufficiently there is no doubt that they would have made a strong bid for the highest hurling honours. During their brief but colourful existence,

they had wins with pretty wide margins over all the grand Western sides, and only met their match when they encountered the South Liberties, who won after a very tough struggle.

Whenever people of the older generation speak of the great days of Mount Pleasant hurling, three names are sure to be mentioned—Larry McNamara, Pat Fitzsimons and Paddy O'Connell. No one can deny that those three great souls were the pillars and mainstay of the team, and a trio of the best hurlers to be found in any parish. Pat Fitzsimons was the most spectacular player of the three, but for skill and strength Larry McNamara excelled. Paddy O'Connell took more kindly to athletics, though he was every bit as good on the hurling field as were his two above mentioned colleagues.

A FARMER AND A SEAMAN.

Larry McNamara was born in 1860 at Mount Pleasant. The youngest of a family of five brothers, all boatmen in their youth, who later emigrated, Larry was a farmer and seaman as well. He long owned two smacks, "The Gypsy" and "The Bee," on which he worked for almost sixty years, using Foynes harbour as his anchorage. Often referred to as "the best boatman on the Shannon," good judges say he really deserved the title. Besides his great skill as a wielder of the caman and a helmsman he was also held in high regard as a handyman, it being said of him that he could "fasten anything from a horse shoe to a house." A first-class exponent with the spade and scythe, he could also do all kinds of mason work, carpentry, and even thatch houses.

Larry was noted too for his deadly marksmanship with a gun. Much of his leisure was devoted to dog and gun, a natural preference, as that stretch of picturesque countryside along the Shannon bed between Askeaton and Foynes has always abounded in game, both of land and water.

When he retired from his career as a seaman, Larry took up boating as his hobby and pastime. Always a brilliant oarsman, he was never without a cot or a canoe, and was for many years patron and starter at the Foynes regatta during its best days.

GREAT OARSMEN.

Great oarsmen of this period were the Corbetts of Askeaton, a district that has never lacked brilliant oarsmen. And as we honour the rugged oarsmen of Askeaton, who learned their rowing in the Deel estuary, we must not forget Jim McMahon, who can pull a boat as good as ever at seventy-three, and honest Dan Collins, who has studied the art of rowing so well, and who was in his earlier years a prominent member of the Askeaton rugby team. Before leaving those rugged sons of the sea, I would like to have the name of Henry Blackwell honoured, who was also a useful hurler and a good rugby player, and then the youthful Roger Moran, who is a very promising oarsman.

Larry McNamara stood 5ft. 9ins. and weighed eleven and a half stone. For a man of such small proportions, he had the strength and courage of a lion. He could work as good as ever, use a gun, row a boat and ride a bicycle until he was eighty years of age; truly wonderful actions for a man of his years. In private life, he was a quiet, interesting character, deeply religious, and held in high esteem by all grades of society, from the roadworker to the doctor and biggest merchant.

Just ten years ago his health began to fail, and on the 1st October, 1944, this great hurler and boatman passed away at his old home in Mount Pleasant, at the ripe old age of eighty-four. His mortal remains were laid to rest within the ruins of Mount Pleasant church, right before the altar, a privilege enjoyed only by the highly

esteemed McNamara family and a few others in the locality. The funeral was one of the biggest ever at that cemetery, for he died as he lived, a decent honest man, and a sterling Gael to his finger tips.

EXTRACTS FROM AN APPRECIATION.

Some extracts from an appreciation which appeared on the "Limerick Leader" following his death, will be read with interest: "Larry Mack, as he was affectionately called, used Foynes Harbour as his anchorage for over sixty years. During that long period he was a familiar and popular figure in Foynes, and a highly interesting character to those who knew him intimately. So many stories of his boating career are recalled that a worth-while book could be written to relate them all. His passing removes one of the last famous Mount Pleasant boatmen, one of whom some witness once remarked that he 'could sail a boat on a morning dew.'"

PROUD HURLING CAREER.

Larry McNamara had certainly a proud hurling career. He skippered the best of the early West Limerick combinations, and on his team he had some outstanding hurlers and athletes. As a five-foot nine man he led a galaxy of stalwart figures, such as Vice-Captain Pat Fitzsimons, the athletic Paddy O'Connell, the mighty Tom Stack, the tall, lanky Tom Frost, the stocky Paddy O'Brien and Ned Dundon, of the cannon shot; all six-footers. Many sound critics assert that Pat Fitzsimons was one of the best hurling exponents Limerick produced. Another useful player on the side was Charlie Cullinan, a next door neighbour of Larry's. They were reckoned as two giants, although Charlie never scaled more than twelve and a half stone, while Larry was a stone less. Some people assert that Larry McNamara, Pat Fitzsimons, Ned Dundon, Tom Stack, Charlie Cullinan, Jim Fitzgerald, Jim Mangan and Paddy O'Connell were as good a bunch of hurlers as any parish gave to the G.A.A.

Unfortunately, no records exist giving the names of the Mount Pleasant team, and the games in which they figured. However, we do know that they beat all the great West Limerick teams of their day, and were only conquered by the "Liberties," then a great combination. Though the exact Mount Pleasant twenty-one is not known it has been confirmed that the following were members: Larry McNamara (Captain), Pat Fitzsimons (Vice Captain), Charlie Cullinan, Tom Kelly, Jim Fitzsimons, Tom Stack, Jim Fitzgerald, John Wall, Jim Mangan, Ned Dundon, Bill Dundon, John Dundon, Mick Conway, Tom Frost, Bill Enright, Paddy O'Connell, Ned Farrell, John Farrell, Tom Sheehy (goal-keeper), Jim Sheehy, John Sheehy, Paddy Kennedy, Paddy O'Brien, Bill Kirwan, Jim O'Brien and the Ahern brothers.

MANY EMIGRATED.

Many of the above players afterwards left their native land. Jim Fitzsimons spent some years in Australia before returning home again; John Dundon left for England, while Tom Sheehy, Jim Fitzgerald, Tom Stack, Jim O'Brien, Bill Enright and Tom Kelly all went to America. The "Liberators" had no officials. The Captain and Vice-Captain just looked after the affairs of the team. Mount Pleasant often played two matches the same day, and if there was a third they would be the first on the field. On a few occasions they annexed two victories the same day.

Vice-captain Pat Fitzsimons was immensely popular, and was for many years a member of the Rathkeale Board of Guardians and later of the Limerick County Council. He composed two songs in praise of the team. It was no bother to Pat to drive a ball from goal to goal, a feat he performed on many occasions.

Offentimes both Ned Dundon and Tom Stack drove balls at distances ranging from ninety to a hundred and twenty yards, and we must not forget that the ball used in those days was much heavier than the one in use now. Tradition has it that Ned Dundon had a shot with the force of a cannon, and that whenever he took a drive at goal the ball just could not be stopped.

Charlie Cullinan was also a member of Rathkeale Board of Guardians for a fairly long spell, as was Mike Ranahan, Ballysteen, a very staunch supporter of the G.A.A., which he introduced to his parish. Mike was one of the very first pioneers of the G.A.A. in County Limerick to answer the clarion call of Michael Cusack. He died just two years ago at the advanced age of ninety-four.

ONLY ONE SURVIVOR.

It is sad, indeed, to relate that of those gallant band of Mount Pleasant hurlers only one, Paddy O'Connell, is now alive. All the rest have passed on, may God be with them all. The ten stone Mick Conway, and the smallest man of that great bunch, died in 1946. He died at a ripe old age. In his youth he was active in the Land League movement and later played a prominent part in Sinn Fein.

Other great hurlers from West Limerick centres who figured prominently during the Mount Pleasant Liberators' supremacy were: Dan McNamara, Bill Marshall and Bill Cussen, of Askeaton; Mike Kirwan and the Savage brothers, of Foynes; Jim Sheehy, of Kildimo; Paddy Horgan, of Curragh Chase; Joe Sheehy, of Rathkeale; Willie Hough, Dan McEnery, John O'Connell, Dan Kennedy, the Begley trio, Dore, Nash, the Anglins and McCarthys, all of Monegay.

We must leave the gallant hurlers of Mount Pleasant now. This district contributed its share to the athletic arena, too, for it has also produced some useful athletes, whose careers and feats I hope to narrate on a future occasion.

No. 83—Tommy O'Brien, of Herbertstown