

Memories of

DENMARK STREET

by *Michael Kenevane*

Denmark Street was like a city within a city to us boys who lived in it. We had a church (St. Michael's), a pub (Tobin's, run by a Mrs. Hennessy), two sweet shops — Griffin's and Bourke's.

Maggie Grimes was the general factotum in Patsy Bourke's shop, and one would only enter there to spend one's "make" or "clod" — slang for a halfpenny and a penny — when Maggie was serving. If you had the bad luck to be served by Patsy, you could have a sweet cut in half, so that you did not get more than the exact measure! Gob stoppers were our favourites, they lasted for ever! Money balls were preferred by the gambling element among us, as you not only got your sweet but also your "make" back, if you picked a lucky one with a halfpenny inside. These sweets were made by the Ryan family who also lived in the street.

We had a barber's shop, run by Frank Shortt, the father of two of our best known boys, Eddie and Frankie. They were our leaders and protectors when we wandered far off from our own neighbourhood to places like Cleeves Bank.

In that barber's shop, all the world's problems of the day were put to right by the eminent "philosophers" that frequented the building.

There was a tailor's shop (O'Halloran's), a greengrocer's (Logan's), which also sold fish, and a newspaper shop (Locke's), which supplied our comics. Annie Rice's fruit stall supplied the delicious delicacy we called "dilisk".

There were two shoe repairers O'Dwyer's and Heaney's, where we could have our boots mended. There was Flannery's "Eating House" for the hungry country visitors.

In those exciting days of the roaring 'twenties we certainly seemed self-sufficient and almost an independent little republic. To our young minds the thought of supplies of goods and services from the outside world did not matter to us. We all went off on Wednesdays to the Fathers; our section in the Confraternity was St. Gerard's. We broke the record there for being the best section for attending on Wednesdays, regardless of wet or any other bad weather.

Swimming in the Shannon was another of our delights in the summer seasons. Eddie and Frankie Shortt, the Grimes — Vicky, Tommy and Jimmy. — Josey and Christy O'Halloran, Christy Murphy, Christy Bourke and his brother Josie, Joe Laycock (who later became a G.P.), John Morrissey — best known as Johnny McMahon for his musical prowess, Martin Browne, whose real name was Leonard, also your scribe, Mikey Kilavan, whose real name was Kenevane, and my brother, Christy.

We had our own school, St. Michael's, where we were all disciples of Miss Waldron. We took over territories for games, such as Pillar Lane, Todd's Bow and Upper Denmark Street. Clune's factory wall provided us with a ready-made handball court.

During the years 1920, 1921 and 1922 we had the "War of Independence". To us it was happening in the outside world. Some incidents came close to us, as William Street Police Barracks was at the top of Todd's Bow.

During the Civil War, we saw the big gun used in the shelling of the Strand Barracks.

The going currency among our boys was spent bullet cases, 303s were swapped for 45s, and some boys became rich with the quantity they acquired.

About this time most of us were entering our teens and going on to the Christian Brothers School at Sexton Street, learning to become useful citizens. Some went into medicine, some into the law, some became clerks and some drapers. Some of us sadly emigrated like yours truly.

We had terrific excitement in 1921, when Limerick became the G.A.A. All Ireland Hurling Champions. We had a rugby club — Presentation — that won the City Cup one year!! Most of the rugby games were played at the Markets' Field, and small boys like us would be taken in by any adult who happened to be paying to go in at the moment in time that we presented ourselves at the entrance. The senior boys of the street proudly turned out for Presentation in the black and white rigouts.

A word about the duplicate names for my companions — the reason for the double names was that the boys were better known by their mothers' maiden names. In my own case it was simply due to mispronunciation. Several of the gang had nicknames, of course. Such a habit seems to have been a peculiarity of Limerick. It is said that the Black and Tans got their name from a Limerick hunt.

Going to the "Pictures" was another of our favourite pastimes. On Saturday mornings there would be a "penny rush" to the Abbey Cinema or the Tivoli; both these cinemas were on opposite sides of the Abbey River, one on Barringtons Mall, the other on Geary's side of the river. At the Abbey Cinema there was a Major Domo who kept strict order during the Saturday matinees; his name was Mackessy, and if you fell foul of him you were ejected from the cinema.

Sport in all its forms occupied much of our time. Many were the arguments about the outcome of hurling, football, boxing and even racing contests. The big names were Steve Donoghue, Gene Tunney and Jack Dempsey. And we had an expert tipster, none other than Eddie Short. He always said: "Margerine was a certainty for the Lodger's Plate!"

The street now consists of a row of neat two-storey houses and urban decay in the rest of the old street — demolished and neglected — where in their time, stood high buildings. No development of the street by building on the vacant sites has taken place to date. It is all of twelve years since the old properties were taken down. It is said that the authorities are unable to trace the land owners, but surely it should be possible to make a compulsory purchase of the derelict properties throughout the city and thus have Limerick take its place among the leading cities of Ireland.