The decade before the second World War, before vandalism became rife, when people were poor and front doors were more often open than closed, a few boys banged their noisy way up and down the narrow roads of Thomondgate and into Limerick's musical history. There was no television then; not even talk of it, as if the idea was too difficult to understand or too far-fetched to appreciate. Instead, there was the Tivoli Cinema where magic images from the silver world of Hollywood provided a weekly deluxe entertainment. There was also music and singing and the occasional cross-roads dancing and, for the most part, people made their own entertainment, telling stories, playing cards, or conducting word games around the kitchen fire on cold winter nights.

Boys often left the "tig" and "Jackie-Show-Light" games to take part in something more exciting. Thus one evening in the early 'Thirties, when I was about eleven years of age, a group of Thomondgate lads picked up some tin cans and sticks and set off on a long and colourful musical journey. The story of that journey, like so many others, was to be moulded into the realisation that we were part of the real world of Hollywood provided a magical place to me. Doors were the narrow roads of Thomondgate and into Limerick's musical history. There was no television then; not even talk of it, as if the idea was too difficult to understand or too far-fetched to appreciate. Instead, there was the Tivoli Cinema where magic images from the silver world of Hollywood provided a weekly deluxe entertainment. There was also music and singing and the occasional cross-roads dancing and, for the most part, people made their own entertainment, telling stories, playing cards, or conducting word games around the kitchen fire on cold winter nights.

As the only tune known to the instrumentalist was "Clare's Dragoons" soon the people of Thomondgate put their own words to the music and often I heard the refrain wafting out on to the moonlit New Road from the crowded pubs:

"Only two more flutes ... for Mikey Raleigh's band ... and that's all we want ..."

When collecting if I got sixpence after my night's work I was a king. But as the necessary finance was being raised Mikey Raleigh was teaching us to play the instruments. I played piccolo and flute, while men like Sean Carroll, Jack Clancy, Jim Costello, and "Tipper" Guerin were on drums. When we were adjudged worthy of public display, Mikey Raleigh had another problem - uniforms.

We wore short black pants and white blouses. A jaunty touch was the headgear - green tams. These were acquired by rather dubious means - Raleigh's sisters; a crack unit of the band who managed to "come across" the tams. More than a few girls in Limerick missed their tams in the days before the band was launched.

So we hit the road. A group of kids from Thomondgate and the Parish making music of a rather mixed quality and bearing the name of a man who had lived for the day. It is my recollection that Mikey Raleigh and his wife did not have children. He had been invalidated out of the first World War and I think he lived on a disability pension because of losing the leg. He had fought with the British and probably got his love of music from their military bands. He had put so much time and effort into teaching us that I suppose we were an extended family to him.

He had an "ear" for the music and a "knack" for teaching it.

It always amazed me how he kept up with the band, marching at brisk pace through the streets of Limerick. The Thomondgate of that time was a magical place to me. Doors were always open during the daytime, and we were piled with a plentiful supply of bread and butter. You could leave your bike outside any house and no one touched it. I went to the Crossroads' school during my time in the band. The men were mostly dockers or worked in Cleeve's or as labourers on the roads. Some families supplemented their incomes by keeping pigs fed on waste from the Distillery.

The people talked a lot about films in the Tivoli such as the "Perils of Pauline" and the "Clutching Hand", which was a weekly "flick" called "Whisperer".

Saturday night we were washed and bathed. There was an air of soap and freshness around the small house. We cooked on a gas stove. There was an
outside toilet, as in most of the other houses. Black men from India come around selling colourful ties. They were called “Dolly men” by the grown-ups.

We usually received a penny from our parents on Friday night and a second one on Sunday. Sometimes we collected, washed and sold jam jars to Feathery Bourke, at his shop near the Market, for pocket money to buy sweets or to go to the pictures.

One haunting recollection I have of my early years in Thomondgate was the excavation work for the Kileely houses. Hundreds of Famine skeletons were uncovered. Decades later I was to read in a book on the Bard of Thomond how Michael Hogan had witnessed the mass burials in Kileely’s unmarked graves.

But even in Thomondgate, children had to grow into people. At 14 I left school and got a job as a messenger for T.C. Carroll, O’Connell Street, for five and a half days, and seven shillings and six pence per week.

Then came the Army at 17, in time for the “Emergency”, and I became a driver during those dreary war years. We seemed to slip into life. I later moved to William Todd and Company; others emigrated to England; more went off to the war, and so the band was broken, with memoers gone and music silent in a changing Limerick.

Then came marriage, a tenement room in Patrick Street, two young children to feed in the early ‘Fifties and the beginning of a decade of despair for the city.

One night I came home and sad lonely notes of a fragile flute floated up to our room. I went out and traced the music to a small shack down Francis Lane, where a young lad practiced, watched by a few more, and all under the encouraging gaze of the man who limped around on the fringe.

Yes ... he was Mikey Raleigh ... ever-devouring to recapture old glory of former marching days. He said he was re-organising the band - Mikey Raleigh’s Band - to march again through the city to mould music from another generation of Limerick boys.

“You could always teach the youngsters”, he said to me.

But by then the close-knit fabric of the life of the community was beginning to break up. The movement of younger married people to newly-built houses in Ballynanty marked the end of the old Thomondgate we knew so well.

That night I left Francis Lane and returned by Polly Carr’s shop to our cramped room ... with nostalgic memories of pots and pans ... of girl’s tams ... of “Clare’s Dragoons” ... of clear New Road moons ... of flutes and drums ... of young boys’ dreams ... of marching music ... salute and stand ... of being a boy once again in Mikey Raleigh’s Band ...