

MIKEY RALEIGH'S BAND

By Bob
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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 other stories of the lives of ordinary Limerick people, has never been written.

But if one knew that these young tin-pot players were to be moulded into music-makers by a one-legged man who had fought in First World War trenches, then surely some fitting record would have been kept. We started out on an unsure, uncharted road together, but the pieces fell into place without conscious design, nor indeed, the realisation that we were part of

anything special.

For on that night when we caused bedlam and headaches in Thomondgate, one man listened to the jarring symphony of sound, and an idea formed in his mind. He was Mickey Raleigh, and we were to be his band.

My home was 29, New Road, Thomondgate. We were three brothers and one sister. My mother was a McInerney from the city; my father a Hamilton from the North, via Pallaskerry in County Limerick. He was, seemingly, an only child and had been a surveyor, but preferred nature, so instead became a gardener. The family settled in Thomondgate and my father worked out in Parteen. The Thomondgate of that time was almost a rural community, pushed outside the walls of an expanding city, yet nestling close to green fields and golden hay under the Clare hills.

Three New Road bars provided ample convivial meeting places for the menfolk; in Martin O'Halloran's there was a discreet snug with a small sliding window (for orders) which opened on to the counter. Porter came from large wooden casks, tapped with a thick wooden mallet. Very often the drink was taken home in enamel jugs under cover of black shawls. Small iron tables and a warm fire gave the pub a homely atmosphere. An advertisement for the Thomond Distillery depicting the O'Dwyer Villas plant hung proudly on the wall. An old grandfather clock ticked time away ponderously, as if time hung heavily on its tired hands.

Within a few days Mikey Raleigh had us across at his house, near Villiers Square, in the shadow of King John's Castle and the St. Munchin Churchyard. After a while, he secured a meeting and practice place, an old shed near the Water Passage on the front Island Road.

At first our time was spent in fund-raising. Some unusual but effective techniques were brought to the task. A talented member of the band accompanied the collector. The instrumentalist launched into an enthusiastic recital whenever a door was knocked upon or a person approached, and asked for a donation for Mikey Raleigh's Band.

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 aiders; 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 plied 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 "follier upper".

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



Mikey Raleigh's Band.

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 members 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 ... en-

deavouring 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 ...