

Dancing in the Stella, and the light of other days

THE place was "The Rink" in Bedford Row, the mecca of Limerick's young socialites. It was in the 1940's and the dance had just come to end. There was a lot of banter and bonhomie, and someone had offered to buy a lemonade for Geraldine Shute.

"But I couldn't take it. I was Receiving next day. It was five minutes past midnight, and that time you had to fast from midnight before taking Communion next day. I know I sound as if I was a real Holy Mary, but that's the way it was."

"Anyhow when someone else, I won't say his name, heard why I couldn't drink the lemonade, he looked at me aghast and said, 'You're receiving in the morning? You shouldn't be here at all.'"

Geraldine Lyons, as she later became, had been dancing since 7.30 that evening, first at the legendary Stella ballroom, and when that ended, she and the rest had repaired as usual to "The Rink"

"It was Gerdy Mack who taught us all to dance at the Stella. There were some brilliant dancers there, like Bridie Breen and Claire Frost. They were out first on the floor every night, and I would be left on the shelf for a long time because I couldn't dance quite as well as they did."

Geraldine, who lives today in Raheen grew up in Henry Street in the heart of the city. She has nothing but the fondest memories of the street and the characters who lived there. Her childhood was peopled by families like the Hodkinsons, Joe Lynch and the publican, Maurice Counihan, who

brought her a rosary beads every year from Lourdes.

"In a word, it was a community. Everyone knew everyone else and people looked after each other. In retrospect, I suppose we were privileged. We were aware of the poverty in



the lanes around, but I remember always being exhorted to respect people. When someone was down in his luck, my grandmother would tell me that he came from a very decent family. Of others she would say, 'they were respectable people in their day.'

"I remember people coming from the lanes looking for 'skins' to feed the pigs they kept. But this was all part of life then in the city centre.

"Every New year's Eve, we'd all come out to the hall doors and wish each other a happy new year. We'd have a statue of St Joseph in our hands and we'd walk back into the hall holding St Joseph in front of us."

Geraldine went to school in Laurel Hill. "They were strict. You daren't even take off your hat or gloves. My father was called to the school once to answer a complaint about me. On the way in he met Kathleen Gabbett coming out, and she told him not to put any heed in the nun. She tried to cheer him up by telling him that the nun had been left at the altar.

"The complaint? Oh yes. The nun told him that I didn't know my lessons, but I knew the name of

every film star in Hollywood.

"We loved going to the pictures. The admission was 1/6, The balcony was

half a crown. I had to have the half crown, in case I couldn't get in at all. I loved Barbara Stanwich, Liz Taylor and Catherine

Grayson. I was told I looked like Catherin Grayson and I believed it. Jack Glazier in Cannocks, used to say when I came up to the door, "Here comes Catherine Grayson."

"There were cinemas everywhere - the Savoy, the Carlton, the Grand, the Lyric, the Royal, the Colliseum. There were a few others we called 'bug houses' but if we missed a Shirley Temple we'd have to go there and risk the fleas.

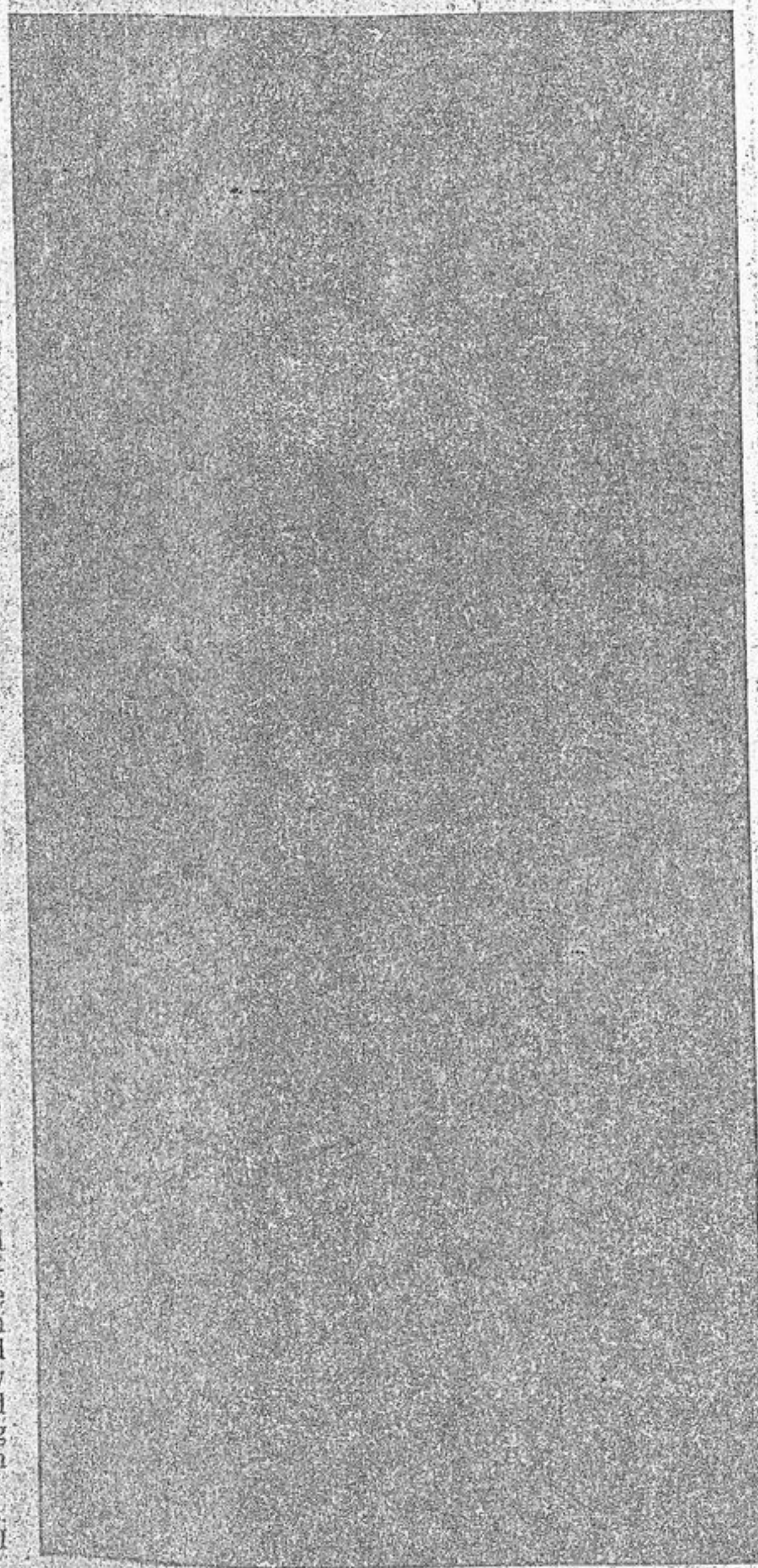
Away from Henry Street, some of Geraldine's best memories are of Kilkee. "I have been going to Kilkee since I was nine months old and I still go there. We used to stay at Ketts Brighton House when I was young. They were lovely times."

Geraldine has been a widow for 30 years. Her late husband, Jim died of leukaemia, and they have three sons, all successful business men, Ken, Jim and Gearoid, and one daughter Sandra.

But Geraldine is a real survivor. Like a lot of her privileged contemporaries, she didn't have to work for a living when she was young, but later she did take a job, as a debt collector. "I gave it up when I was run out of a farmyard by a farmer with a pitchfork".

Full of good humour, and a real people person, she is now in her seventies, but lives a most active life. She is very artistic and paints a lot "Its better than just going up to bed". She also reads widely and does voluntary work.

She has taken up computer classes with the Limerick active retirement group and is learning French and Irish, and every day in the summer, she goes for a swim in Kilkee.



● Geraldine as a young girl in Henry Street