

Bell tolls for Bruff's dance hall

■ End of an era as Morning Star venue is demolished; the music lives on in heart and soul of locals

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IF there is one positive thing that has come from the current Covid-19 crisis it is a deeper appreciation of the simpler things in life.

As the days and weeks limp along, with each passing hour we are realising more and more the importance of conversation, social outings and good company.

With the pubs in darkness and nightclubs silent, many of us are recalling memories of the good old times before freedom was curtailed and the human touch was put on the long finger.

For Frances O'Donovan from Bruff her nostalgic side takes her back to Main Street, Bruff and the house she grew up in.

Frances' home was no ordinary home as behind it her parents Bernard and Nancy, both now deceased, ran a popular dance hall in the centre of the town. And now, more than ever, with the demolition of the hall just four weeks ago, she realises the magic it held.

Frances' grandfather William Bernard O'Donovan previously set sail for the United States of America. However, he arrived home after a few short years, bringing with him many of the up-to-date ideas from the New World.

Some time around the year 1922 the idea of a hall took shape on the site of an old workshop which William had at the back of his dwelling house beside where Nagle's EuroSpar stands today. The hall was small at first, but gradually expanded.

It was known as The Morning Star Ballroom Bruff, named after the local river, but it was also referred to as O'Donovan's Dance Hall.

"It was a dancehall and a cinema as well - the silent movies were held there initially and there were rooms off it for billiards," Frances recalled this week.

The "roaring '20s" saw the hall in full swing.

Frances' father Bernard wrote in a local publication in Bruff, The Dawn, that it was "the age of



Gracie O'Donovan, Bernard's sister, pictured on her bike in the yard outside the Morning Star Dance Hall in Bruff

the silent motion pictures, big band sounds and the travelling shows".

William O'Donovan was the pioneer of the silent pictures in Bruff. In those days a piano player or violinist entertained the audience while William gave running commentaries throughout the show. In his own versatile way he had given "voice" to the films and the forerunner of the "talkies".

"He had the great misfortune to be rendered totally blind in the prime of life, through the bursting of gas cylinders," his son Bernard wrote in The Dawn. "He was well versed in topical affairs. He had encyclopedias and dictionaries for the benefit of

the billiard room patrons as well as myself. I had often to refer to them for my own curiosity, but Dad was always right and that from a man blind, physically, but mentally rich in the retention of all he had seen, read and listened to on the "wireless".

Dance bands were few in those days. William formed his own outfit and became well known throughout Limerick. He started weekly dances every Wednesday and Sunday nights. These were called practice dances.

The times of dances varied from the practice dance between 7.30pm and 10pm to the Cinderellas from 8pm to 12 midnight to long dances from 10pm



The O'Donovan family band



Bernard and Nancy O'Donovan, proprietors of the dance hall

to 7am. Admission prices varied too. Practice dances were: ladies, eight pence; gents, 10 pence; couples, one shilling. Cinderellas were one and sixpence and long dances, a half-crown to three and sixpence depending on the duration of dance.

"Bruff, indeed, was alive to the sound of music," Bernard wrote.

The activities of the local dramatic classes also played out on the Morning Star stage. Drama classes came every Lent from around the area and many of those had outstanding productions notably: Knockainey, Dromin, Kilfinane, Caherconlish and of course the Knocklong



Frances O'Donovan in 1990 going into the family home at the hall

Pantomime group. Long before the age of television, videos and discos, the weekly visit to the hall was a must for many patrons. Laurel and Hardy and the Three Stooges were popular comedies. The Quiet Man was shown. In 1952, Sean O'Riada performed his first public performance in the hall. Frances' uncle, Bernard's brother Pakie, accompanied him. "There is a plaque at the front of our house to mark that," Frances pointed out.

The years passed quickly and every decade brought changes in the entertainment scene. "The hall was booming in those years of the second world war," Bernard wrote, "I refer, of

course, to the famous fourpenny hops. It was great value - first-class floor and band of eight performers with full amplification - first hall in the area to have it - all for fourpence."

All roads led to Bruff Hall. They came in their droves, walking, cycling and even on house drawn carts (petrol rationing curtailed the use of motorcars). This was its finest hour.

The '50s rolled into the '60s and '70s and each decade left its own stamp in the style and pace of life. Bernard had taken over the running of the hall, with his wife Nancy Kinane from Upperchurch, Thurles by his side. They had seven children, Willie, Valerie, Joe, Frances, Jacinta, Gerard and Pat.

"Our hall in the '50s brought very big bands," Frances recalls. "I remember my father telling me we had a maple wood floor dance hall which was one of the best dance floors around. They would have been doing waltzes, two steps, jiving, and then you had the slow dances and you would have three songs to a set. And then you would sit down after the set, unless you were asked to stay on. If the dance hall opened just after nine o'clock the women came in at that time and they would dance with each other and then after that the men would pour in. Now some men did come in early but a lot of them came in from the pubs around 11 o'clock. I suppose they were getting up the Dutch courage."

The men would line one side of the hall and the women would sit on the other side.

"Some men would go down the line with their hand out and they could be refused the whole way down the line. It was not a nice experience for a lot. And, likewise, for the women. Sometimes you were left there and everybody else was up."

Many a relationship blossomed in Bruff's ballroom of romance. "You'd hear a lot of people say, 'Oh, O'Donovan's Dance Hall, that's where we met'. Weddings came out of there over all the decades right

up to the '70s. And I'm sure there were lots of hearts broken there as well," said Frances.

The Vantones who are still going strong made their debut in Bruff in the late '50s. In the mid '50s to the late '60s the show-band era arrived. Brendan Bowyer and The Royal Showband and his famous Hucklebuck number was the rage of the '60s. "I loved going to sleep at night to the sound of the beat of that music," Frances recalls. "I was so used to that."

While Frances didn't take too much notice of the unusual home life, she does remember friends and various people saying to her, 'how lucky were you that you could be there when the bands were playing?'

"Anyone our age wasn't allowed to go out to the dances at that time. Even at school, you would come in on a Monday morning and they would all want to know what was going on with the bands and the dances. I had a job to do which was selling in the mineral bar with my brother Joe and it was brilliant as it gave me an excuse to stay up late and watch everything."

Frances was aged 12 at the time. "All it sold was bottles of lemonade, Fanta and 7-Up and two types of cigarettes and they came in 10s, Carolls and Major. There was no alcohol at all. No dance halls had alcohol licences back in those days and of course we sold Club Milks as well. I mustn't forget that," she smiled.

Many reasons led to the slow decline of the dance hall - shorter appearances by bands with high fees as well as the popularity of pub entertainment. After the dances finished for good, Frances' sister Jacinta ran a hairdressing salon where the mineral bar used to be and the hall was rented out as a second hand furniture shop for a number of years. In later years sadly, it became derelict.

And while the dust has now settled on the demolished dance hall in Bruff, the beat of the music that once filled the street lives on in the history books and in the hearts and souls of those it sung to for over half a century.