

No. 118—JOHN O'CONNOR of Foynes

By SEAMUS O'CEALLAIGH

GAELIC history was originally made in Foynes by its hurlers, and it is on record that challenge matches between Foynes and Shanagolden were played before the G.A.A. was formed. Those were the days before any recognised rules were formulated, and as many men as you liked could participate whilst the "limits" of the playing field often extended the whole length of a parish.

Tradition tells us that the earliest hurling in the district was called *Duscha* (side your own), and the rule was that players must strike from the right. The sticks then in use were known as "spocks," a type of crooked bush reputed very effective in wing work, then called "whip."

Later years saw the introduction of the "grafan" or bent stick with a rounded "boss" whilst the ball in use was known by the name "scud" and was made of a material rather like rubber. The "grafan" was still in fairly general use when the first regular hurling club under G.A.A. rules—the "Father Murphys"—was formed in Foynes about the year 1887. The "boss" hurley, however, was coming into favour and the purchase of a set of twenty-one, to replace the old "grafan" is on record amongst the early annals of the club, at the very reasonable price of ten shillings and sixpence, or sixpence a stick. It is interesting to compare this with the present price of a good hurley.

THREE MATCHES ONE DAY FOR CUP.

In the summer of 1891, the "Father Murphys" under the captaincy of Mike Kirwan, who had started the club a few years before, played three matches on the same day at Curragh to win outright a silver cup. Shortly afterwards they won a second cup which was put up for competition at Shanagolden. Both trophies are still preserved in Foynes, historic reminders of the old hurling prowess of the parish.

The members of the team will be recalled with interest: Mike Kirwin (founder and captain), Ned Jackson, Ned Barron, Dan Sheahan, Ned O'Connor, Tim and Jack Savage, Jack O'Connor, Johnny Hartnett, Jim Healy, Jack Enright, Paddy and James McNamara, Jim Kirwan, Ned Walsh, Mick Sullivan, Dan O'Sullivan, Jim Shanahan, Mickie Shanahan, and Stephan Jackson. The club colours were green and gold and the team members wore caps of the same hue.

THE INTRODUCTION OF FOOTBALL.

The "Father Murphys" flourished until about 1900, when football was introduced into the village. Some years later the footballers succeeded in winning the senior County championships, beating Commercials in the final, played at the Markets Field.

The name O'Connor has been closely associated with the G.A.A. in Foynes all down the years. John O'Connor, the subject of our sketch this week, captained the Limerick team in the 1908 Munster Senior Football Championship ties. John's brother, James, was an active member of the "Smith O'Brien" club Committee, while their younger brother, Michael, was one of the most prominent players on the team. Their cousins, Jack and Ned, were useful hurlers on the old "Father Murphys" Club of sixty years ago and more, while other relatives, Jerry and Tommy, were keen followers of the national pastimes and patrons of the "Smith O'Brien" Club.

ONE OF IRELAND'S LEADING FULL BACKS.

The soundest of critics asserts that John O'Connor was one of Ireland's leading full backs. He had a wonderful pair of hands, while his command of falling balls and mighty clearances were among the many memories he left at the end of a brilliant career. The great Foynes side had a wonderful set of backs in those days. Tom Hughes, Tom O'Brien, "Birdie" Madden, Pat Sheehan and Pat O'Shea were stonewall defenders, but their great leader, John O'Connor, was the daddy of them all.

John was a man of powerful physique, standing six feet three inches in height and weighing close on fourteen stone. Like most great men in this world, he was a toiler, a carpenter by trade, and was both decent and honest in his aim of life, while the character of the man was as high and strong as his stature.

Undoubtedly John O'Connor was one of the safest men ever for a goalkeeper, while behind him the fearless Tom Corbett was unpenetrable. There was a great understanding between both and very few major scores were registered against them during their glorious career.

A HUNDRED PER CENT. GAEL.

If ever there was a real sportsman and a hundred per cent. Gael it was John O'Connor. Truly this great handsome man was one of nature's gentlemen and one of the best footballers of his time—a delight to watch. His unexpected passing in May, 1952, caused profound regret. He was a straightforward, upright man who never harmed anybody by voice or act. May God be good to him. He truly deserves it.

Michael O'Connor and John Sheahan were wonderful marksmen and two of the most potential forwards that ever came out of the West, while Jim Hallet was a prince of mid-fielders. Michael O'Connor was the youngest player on the team and was only a mere stripling when he first appeared with the men. He had not the speed and dash of John Sheahan and Martin Fitzgerald, but as a sharp shooter this lithe lanky lad had no equal.

THE 1907 COUNTY HURLING FINAL.

The winning of the 1907 County senior title stands out as being the most glorious day in the history of the Foynes G.A.A., and on this memorable occasion John and Michael O'Connor had their greatest game; while the latter contributed in no small way to the scoring, the other marksmen being John Sheahan, Jim Kirwan and Martin Fitzgerald. But it was the magnificent defensive work of John O'Connor, Tom Hughes, and Pat Sheahan that really won the day for the Lower Shannonsiders, while Jim Hallet, Ned Enright and "Jeweler" Sheehy were also superior around the middle.

Another useful marksman of this great Foynes side was Jack McCarthy. He was reputed to be a native of Tralee and came to Foynes parish as a farm labourer. Jack was a splendid place-kicker and had a fine long raking kick for which his team mates and admirers nicknamed him "grass-cutter."

There are many good stories told about Jack, for he worked in many parts of Ireland and England too. One night in Askeaton Jack had a skirmish with one of the local "toughs." The fight took place outside a big shop window and in the height of their jostling the pair crashed through the glass and toppled on to the floor inside. However, they managed to come out the window again.

DESERVE RECALLING.

The names of all that great Foynes side deserve recalling; The late John O'Connor was captain; the late Tom Corbett, goalkeeper; Michael O'Connor, Pat Sheahan, John Sheahan, the late Jim Kirwin, "Jeweler" Sheehy, the late "Birdie" Madden, Martin Fitzgerald, Ned Enright, the late Tom O'Brien, Ned Shaanhan, the late Jack McCarthy, Dan Costello, Tom Hughes, Jimmy Walsh, Jimmy Braddish, Jim Hallet, the late Paddy Liston and Pat O'Shea.

By their great victory in the 1907 County final the "Smith O'Briens" held the proud record of being the first West Limerick team ever to bring the County Senior Football title to that division, while the splendid medals presented to them

afterwards were the first set ever won by a Foynes combination.

Shortly afterwards Ned Shanahan left for America, and before his departure the "Smith O'Briens" players and officials presented him with a magnificent gold medal, an honour he richly deserved. He was a first-class footballer, and his departure was a severe blow to Foynes.

MUNSTER SENIOR FOOTBALL TEAM.

As already mentioned, John O'Connor captained the Limerick team in the 1908 Munster Senior Football Championship, other Foynes men on the team being Pat Sheahan, Jim Hallet, Jim Hughes, Jim Kirwan and Tom O'Brien. The remaining members of the seventeen were: E. Sheehy (goal), M. Buckley, J. O'Connor (Ballynahill), M. Cregan (Rathkeale), Albie Quillinan, D. Hogan, P. Cronin, P. Madigan, M. Duggan (Commercials), M. Ryan and J. Doherty (Kilmallock).

Many of the Smith O'Brien team later left their native land. Michael O'Connor and Jim Braddish went to England, where they still reside; while Jimmy Walsh, Jim Kirwan, and Martin Fitzgerald followed Ned Shanahan to the "land of the Stars and Stripes."

Most of the Foynes players of that time had nicknames: John O'Connor, "Wingle"; John Sheahan, "Son"; Pat Sheahan, "Pa"; Martin Fitzgerald, "Santan"; Paddy Madden, "Birdie"; Jim Hallet, "Cocker Daly"; Jim Braddish, "Cockney"; Tom Corbett, "Big Tom"; Ned Sheehy, "Jeweler"; Michael O'Connor, "Rus-sell"; Jim Kirwan, "Cox"; Jack McCarthy, "Grass Cutter"; and Jim Walsh, "Big Jim."

THEIR OCCUPATIONS.

Drawn from almost every station in life their occupations will be read with interest. Dan Costello was a jarvey; Pat and John Sheahan were victuallers; Jim Walsh, Tom Corbett and Tom Hughes were farmers, the latter being a stone-cutter and a dancing master. Jim Kirwan too, was a stone-cutter; Ned Sheehy was a railway worker; Paddy Madden a teacher; Pat O'Shea a cooper, Paddy Liston, Jim Hallett and Tom O'Brien all worked at Foynes Saw Mills. Jim Hallett later took up his trade as a carpenter, which was also the occupation of John O'Connor, whilst Tom O'Brien, in his spare time, acted as a dancing master. Jack McCarthy was a farm labourer, Ned Shanahan a boatman and Ml. O'Connor a commercial traveller. Jim Braddish worked as a gardener in the Monteagle Estate.

During the Foynes "Smith O'Brien" period there was also a football team in their joint parish, Shanagolden. The best players of this side were Paddy Cregan, now in America; George Madigan, Mick Power, Jack O'Shea and Tom Carter.

Fifty years ago John O'Connor and his merry men made football history by the Lower Shannon, history that a new generation hope to re-make in time for the jubilee celebrations. They have already returned the parish to the championship roll of honour, indication enough that the work of men like O'Connor and his comrades was not in vain.

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