

“Patsy Harrold was a most unusual woman”

by Seamus Harrold

P

atsy Harrold was born on 10 March 1930 to Paddy Sheahan and Sally McGowan. Her upbringing was most unusual, but similar to that of many families that emigrated to America in the early part of the twentieth century. Patsy's father Paddy went to America in search of work before Patsy was born and she never met him. Patsy mother Sally followed her husband to New York in October 1930, Sally returned to Ireland once in 1960, when Patsy met her mother for the first time, but they were in constant contact right up to Sally's death in January 1976.

Patsy did not meet her sister Ann and brother Jimmy until she was 42 years of age in 1972. When Sally went to America the plan was that Patsy would join her mother at a later stage.

Meanwhile Patsy was left in the care of her grandmother Ann McGowan. Sally had created her own piece of history when she was sacked in 1917 for joining the Workers Union of Ireland and lost her job as a book-binder's assistant in McKerns Printers. It is reputed that she was the first woman in that Union to lose her job in such circumstances.

Patsy's grandfather Michael McGowan, a World War One veteran, was instrumental in Patsy's early education and Patsy was able to read and write before she went to St John's Primary School. Patsy got on very well at Primary School and was awarded a scholarship to recently opened St Mary's Secondary School where she completed her Leaving Certificate. She applied for the Primary School Teaching Diploma at Mary Immaculate College but her singing skills left her down at the interview stage.

Granny McGowan was very keen that Patsy would remain in Ireland and to keep the Sheahan's happy, Patsy would spend every weekend with that family in Henry Street, where Willie Sexton's pub is now located. Patsy's Aunt Eileen married Vincent Guerinni a first generation Italian and



The late Patsy Harrold, R.I.P.

the family lived nearby in O'Curry Street. Patsy spent most of her weekends there and she established a lifelong bond with the Guerinni children Marie, Alice, Peggy and Vincent. Every Sunday evening Patsy returned to Doyle's Cottages off John St, where she lived with her grandparents.

After Patsy's granddad died in 1942, as a result of gas poisoning in World War 1, the family moved to Athlunkard Street where her granny helped to rear Shanahan children. Patsy developed a life-long friendship with her first cousins Michael, Mary, Paddy, Elizabeth and Ann Shanahan. As she had no brothers or sisters in Ireland the Shanahans and the Guerinnis became her surrogate families.

At the age of 18 Patsy was living under a strict but kind grandmother and her lifelong friend Kitty Clancy had moved to Dublin and with the chance of total freedom Patsy joined the Civil Service and followed Kitty to Dublin, where she stayed with the Stack family. Mick Stack was one of Michael Collins' elite squad which took out the British Intelligence Unit the night before the Croke Park Massacre. He was

then the caretaker of Dublin City Council offices in Parnell Square and the mews behind the offices was now home for Patsy. She had a great social life in Dublin and anything that was free Patsy would be there, museums, art galleries, and poetry readings. The little money she had was spent going to plays and the pictures, but she would also send home money to her grandmother each week.

Patsy returned to Limerick in the early 1950's to work in the Income Tax office in O'Connell St opposite the Limerick Leader office. Patsy's social life revolved around the College Players where her cousin Marie and Alice Guerinni were also involved. Alice was the first leading lady to Richard Harris. During a cinema strike in the early

1950's they put on a play a week in Theatre Lane for six weeks of the dispute followed with a party on the Saturday night at the end of each production.

Patsy had a school friend Clare Harrold and through Clare she met and later married Clare's brother Fintan, who had worked in the Post Office but he got a better job with Revenue and a transfer to Dublin. Patsy was now back in Dublin, married with her eldest son Seamus on the way, they secured a small flat in Monkstown. Patsy was also looking after her (husband) Fintan's two brothers who were in college in Dublin, not an easy task on the wage of a civil servant; she had to resign her job in the civil service when she married Fintan which was the rule at the time. By 1957 Patsy now had two young boys with few parenting skills, her landlady, the wife of Lennox Robinson (the writer), threatened her with eviction if her eldest child did not stop crying. Patsy did not realise that the new rubber teats for the baby's bottle required a hole to be made with a hot needle.

Fintan was diagnosed with diabetes in 1957 when his body weight went down

to six stone. This was during a very bad flu epidemic in Dublin when they waited nearly six weeks for a doctor's visit. Patsy felt she needed to get Fintan back to Limerick where she would have good family support for her young husband. Patsy borrowed her mother-in-law's best coat and pleaded her case with the Director of Establishments in Dublin Castle, one of the most senior civil servants in Ireland. Patsy and Fintan moved back to Limerick shortly afterwards to live first in Broad Street with her mother-in-law and in 1960 the family moved to Plassey Avenue, Corbally.

By 1962 Patsy has five children in her care and became fully immersed in family life, her children will always remember when she would read poetry and tell stories after school. She was always a great help with the Irish essay, but there was no use asking her about a maths problem as that was left to her husband Fintan to solve. Patsy's great escape from domestic life was the Thomond Archaeological Society and on many Sundays her children were brought to the various historical sites in Munster or they were left in Fintan's care.

Patsy went back to the College Players and played the prostitute in 'The Hostage' in 1966 and her older children were disappointed that they were not allowed to see her on stage. Fintan did not quite approve of their attendance at the play. Her other social escape in the late 1960's early 1970's was attending the poetry readings in King John's Castle where she became great friends with Kitty Bredin, Claude and Dáirine Byrne, Desmond O'Grady and many of the Bohemian set in Limerick. By this stage Patsy's culinary skills had improved immensely and she reached the final of the 'Housewife of the Year' competition. She won the interview section, but judges refused to taste her main dish which included rabbit a bit unsporting to pardon the pun.

Patsy had a very serious accident at home in 1966 when as result of faulty electric wiring she got a massive electric shock and pulled a kettle of boiling water over her chest and arm, scars she carried until the time of her death. Patsy and Fintan were persuaded by an employee of the ESB not to take a court case which nowadays would have resulted in a six figure pay-out. Her last son Paddy arrived on the scene on the 30 March 1969, a home birth, she was back on domestic duties a few days later.

With her youngest child now at school Patsy decided to start a degree course in the National Institute of Higher Education (N.I.H.E.) in Plassey which had opened its doors two years earlier in 1972. Patsy started modules in European Studies which included Irish folklore and history. One of her first projects in college was on the

people of the Park area in Corbally and their history. She got to interview many of the old Park men who supplied vegetables to Limerick. She and Jim Kemmy submitted a thesis based on her research on the Park people to the North Cork Writer's Week in Doneraile in the late 1970's and they won first prize.

After the 1974 local elections Patsy was nominated by the Thomond Archaeological Society to the National Monuments Committee of Limerick Corporation, the chairman was the newly elected councillor Jim Kemmy, Kevin Hannan another noted Limerick historian was also nominated to that committee and so began a lifelong friendship for all three concerned.

Unfortunately Fintan Harrold's diabetes had deteriorated with various complications and he died 10 June 1976 aged only 49. Patsy was left with a six children ranging in age from 20 down to 7 years old. Patsy returned briefly to the Tax Office in 1977,

but due to domestic responsibilities and unsympathetic management she quit her post. Her next job was with the Irish Film Theatre in Roxboro Shopping Centre, as a private club restricted to members 18 years and over. Any film could be shown and Patsy was amazed at the number of people who came to view 'Last Tango in Paris' starring Marlon Brando. In 1977 Jim Kemmy fought his first General Election and all the Harrolds helped his campaign and Jim had now become familiar face in Corbally. Patsy also acted as a volunteer in the Limerick Family Planning Clinic in the late 1970's because when she grew up in Limerick she saw the poverty created by having large families.

Patsy started back in college in the early 1980's again, sometimes attending N.I.H.E. and other times doing modules in Mary Immaculate College. This trend would continue right up to the year 2000 when she graduated as the oldest graduate from Mary Immaculate College.

The Old Limerick Journal



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The Old Limerick Journal with a picture of its founder and editor, the late Jim Kemmy

The period during the elections of the early 1980's was a most tumultuous time in Ireland and Patsy played a major part in Jim Kemmy's election to Dail Eireann. Jim's defeat in November 1982 was a major blow to them both and with only Patsy's pension and small stipend that Jim earned from his Union work and the odd article he wrote for the newspapers they both lived a frugal life style.

The Divorce and Abortion referendums were major battles that they both took on and made some unusual friends, some from a Republican background. Patsy had fallen out with the Church authorities at this stage of her life and she deeply resented the power the Church exercised over Irish society. In the mid 1980's Patsy was back at work at the Belltable Arts Centre working with her daughter Ellen who was the manageress of the restaurant. Patsy continued in the Belltable until the early 1990's.

Patsy was now in her early 60's and often accompanied Jim to various functions around the country when he was a much in demand after-dinner speaker. She recalls meeting Brendan Kennelly (the writer) in Killarney and the great afternoon they had with him. Jim Kemmy often had to go to Union meetings in Dublin on Saturdays and Patsy would accompany him. The last stop before the train home was the Harp Bar where a young Vincent Browne, Con Houlihan, the sports journalist among many other well-known faces would be holding court, she enjoyed meeting these characters and was well able to converse with them.

After the election of 1997 Jim Kemmy was diagnosed with Multiple Myeloma and was transferred to St James' Hospital Dublin in early August and so began another painful period in Patsy's life. Jim died on 25 September just barely two months after his diagnosis. His funeral was one of the biggest ever seen in Limerick and Patsy did her best to stay out of the public limelight. The period after Jim's death was a very sad period for Patsy. Her cousin Mary Shanahan who was the nearest thing she had to a sister was also diagnosed with cancer, so Patsy spent the last two years of the 1990's caring for Mary and trying to finish her course in Mary Immaculate College. When Mary died in September 2001 Patsy had lost a very dear soul-mate and somebody she could confide in.

Patsy was now into her 70's and her grandchildren got to spend time with her after school, swimming in Jurys Hotel, the odd trip to the seaside by bus and help with homework. When they were going to Third Level college Patsy was always a great source of information.



The poet Robert Graves

Patsy wrote many articles for the *Old Limerick Journal* and she did book-reviews for Jim as his work schedule was so busy. Jim was sent a proof copy of 'Angela's Ashes' and it was Patsy who did the review for the national papers. She said at the time "it will rock Limerick to its very foundations". Her own story is very close to that of Frank McCourt's life.

She was seen as a great source for information on local history and writers and she helped many students to complete their undergraduate and postgraduate theses. She was invited to act as tour guide for many visitors to Limerick including Robert Graves of 'I Claudius' fame when BBC made a film about his time in Limerick during 1914-1918 period, Graves had been sent to Ireland as he was a pacifist.

As Patsy approached her 80's she suffered from severe general osteoarthritis and she became very immobile and seldom went out. She had some very good friends who called frequently and kept her up to date with all the news. She loved to listen to

the radio and with the aid of internet and wireless technology she loved to listen to the various BBC stations. She loved box sets and her favourite was one on the complete Shakespeare plays which she would watch over and over again. Patsy health declined very rapidly in the end and she died on the 23 December 2013.

Patsy is survived by Seamus, Liz Griffith, Ellen Richardson, Fintan, Paddy, her second eldest Michael died from medical complications in 2005.