

THE PARK DANES

PASTIMES AND PUBS

by Kevin Hannan



he Park people did not actively participate in outdoor sports; the grinding routine of their daily lives did not allow for such frivolities.

The city's cinemas and dance halls were only a short distance away but their blandishments failed to lure the Park community. The older men preferred to gather at the Bun Ard on most evenings before nightfall where they passed the time in conversation. Sometimes the men would walk around the plots "sizing-up" the condition of each other's crops.

The young people, like young people everywhere, loved to dance but only in their own locality. At one time the district supported no fewer than four dance halls. One hall bore the exotic name, "La Scala", and two others were called, "The 45" and the "Half Moon". The music played was a mixture of Irish and modern styles. The half-set, waltz and polka were the favourite dances. Most tunes were played to waltz or polka time.

Farrell's Road, a secluded spot below Groody Bridge, was a popular place for outdoor dancing. Here on summer evenings the boys and girls gathered to dance to the music of a melodeon. The road would ring to the sound of hob-nailed boots and black woollen shawls would whirl around the trees until the clatter of a horse's hooves announced the arrival of Father Murphy, the parish priest. Brandishing a stout blackthorn stick in furious defence of the Sixth Commandment, the priest would quickly scatter the carefree youngsters. The girls often left their shawls behind as they fearfully fled before the priest's wrath. The moral purity of the Park people was so successfully taken care of that a large number of the men remained celibate to the end of their days, thus sadly reducing the size of the little community.

Up to the time of the diversion of the Shannon into the new canal, caused by the building of the hydro electric works, still known as the "Shannon Scheme", young Parkmen and some of their more intrepid fellows from Pennywell and Garryowen enjoyed their own little St. Moritz at the Canal Field (now a

greyhound track). At that time all the land of Rhebogue adjoining the Shannon and the Groody rivers was under water for most of the year. Though the banks of the canal and the Shannon were never breached, the winter floods backed up the Groody to the Bloodmill, forming a great lake that stretched between Kilbane and Singland. The sluice at the head of the canal also admitted the river to flood the low-lying fields between the railway embankment and Peggy Touhy's Boreen.

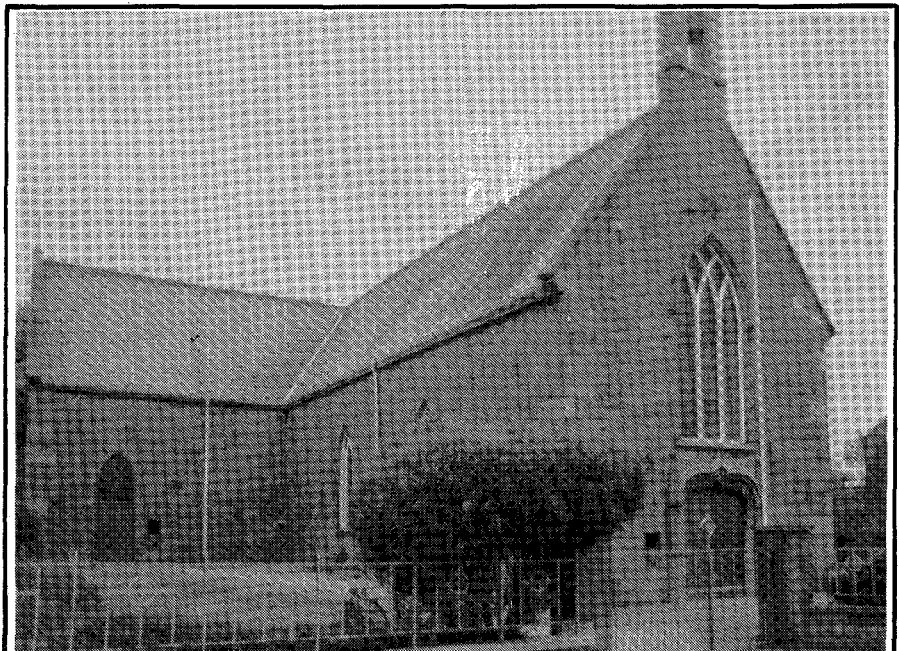
During heavy winter frosts the Canal Field became a natural skating rink. A carnival atmosphere prevailed as the young men gathered in the late afternoons, all determined to do better than their fellows. Foremost among the skaters was "Feeney" Shanny, whose spiked broomhandle was used with such power and dexterity that his performance was the envy of all.

The flooded lowlands also provided "on their doorstep" sport for many wildfowlers who preyed on the geese and mallard that came in great numbers to the excellent feeding grounds. The teeming denizens of the swamps

were all members of a grand orchestra that never tired of contributing to the crescendo. All through the long winter evenings the piping of the curlew, the quacking of the mallard and teal and the gaggling of the greylag reverberated in the chill air. The woodwinds came from the myriad baldcoots, while the booming heron provided the bassoon. It was a soothing symphony that gradually diminished into silence — a silence that still recalls for older folk in Park the sounds of a bygone age.

But a few men did take part in field games. St. Patrick's Gaelic Athletic Association club is the oldest team in the district, having played in county championships in 1886. The club won the Co. Limerick senior football title in 1890. Parkmen played a prominent part in the victory. The team was captained by Michael Lawlor of Rhebogue and members of the Ryan (Lacken) and Cross families were also to the fore.

The club also produced some notable senior hurlers in the first few decades of the present century. Among the best of these were "Feeney" Shanny and Patsy Troy, who came from



St. Patrick's Church.



The pump at Pennywell (From a watercolour by Dorothy Stewart).

Lower Park.

In 1935, Michael Cross, from Rhebogue led Limerick to victory in the All-Ireland junior hurling final in London. Another Parkman, Paddy Cunneen, was an outstanding goalkeeper on the Limerick senior hurling team in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

The game of rugby became very popular throughout Limerick at the turn of the century. Two Park families, the Cunneens and the Cusacks, gave many leading players to the game, first to the Star junior club and later to Richmond. Two of the toughest forwards to play for the Garryowen senior team in the twenties and thirties were Jack Cunneen and Mick "Gonner" Cusack. For more than a decade Gonner trained the Richmond junior teams during which time they achieved their greatest successes. Jack Cunneen was one of the finest men ever to step on to a local rugby field. And maintaining their old sporting traditions, the Cunneens, and the Cusacks still continue to play with Richmond.

Most Park people were temperate in their habits, having neither the time nor the money for drinking. But some of the men liked to have a few drinks, especially at weekends. One of Limerick's ancient districts, Pennywell, situated in the Liberties of the city, provided a variety of pubs, the best known being Owen Ryan's and Pat McGrath's. Pennywell received its name from a well in the district of the same name. A caretaker was once in charge of this well; payment of one penny secured the right to draw water for a fixed period. People who were too poor to avail of this service could continue their journey to the well called Ha'penny Well, where water was available for half the price.

Known to Park people as "the

Village", Pennywell presented all the appearances of a country hamlet to travellers entering Limerick by the yellow-washed mud cabins stretched right up to the walls of John's Gate. The Park people felt at home in Pennywell. The old stock there had a long understanding of the "Danes" and their way of life. The two communities socialised well together and members occasionally intermarried.

One of the most popular Pennywell pubs was owned by Kitty Ryan (Malachy), who was better known by her marriage name Kitty O'Doherty. For over fifty years, until her death in 1960 she kept an old world public house on the very edge of the city boundary, in the little townland of Monamuck. Her pub was one of the favourite haunts of some of the toil-worn stalwarts from Rhebogue and Singland and the homecoming fishermen from Plassey. Kitty never bothered too much about the march of progress. She preserved her bar-cum-kitchen style of the late eighteenth century which best suited her rustic clientele.

A natural storyteller, she regaled her customers with anecdotes of other days, and had an unflinching knowledge of the genealogy of most of the colourful characters of the area. She had a particular aversion of changing things that were good enough for her mother. The large kitchen, table, the sugan chairs, the fire-grate flanked by the whitewashed hobs and the three-legged stool in the corner were features that Kitty preserved with quiet pride and which her customers highly appreciated. Could some of the more adventurous Parkmen be blamed if they occasionally strayed beyond their traditional boundaries into these homely surroundings?

Parkmen also drank at Kilmartin's

(now O'Driscoll's Bar) in Corbally and at Quilligan's near the Goose's Corner. But by far the most famous of all the pubs frequented by Parkmen was Shanny's Pub in the neighbouring townland of Plassey. The pub was owned by three Shannon sisters, Kate, Ann and Mary, daughters of an Abbey fisherman. It was natural, therefore, for Parkmen to have a warm affinity with a pub owned by members of one of their own Lower Park families.

Those who remember Shanny's Pub will not easily forget the 'parlour splendours of that festive place'. It had a peculiar attraction for all those who came to Plassey. Perhaps it was its unique location, its fairy-tale approach along the towpath by the river, across the plank over the drain and through the big field. It was a very special place to shelter in during squally October days, when the bridge was obscured by the incessant sheets of rain driving up from the south-west. The warmth within the walls, the lively conversation, the smell of stout and sawdust, and the friendliness of the Shanny sisters, made the pub a haven for every Waltonian who ever plied line and lure in the river there. Known colloquially as "The Thatch", the house was a refuge of hospitality for every pilgrim out of Limerick and out of farmhouses and cottages from the surrounding countryside.

Perched boldly close to the river's edge just above Plassey Bridge on the Clare bank, the pub was a spiritual and temporal oasis for wayfarer and fisherman. A stranger might pass it by, pausing only perhaps to admire the lilac trees or the roses that reached right up to the thatch, if his attention was not arrested by the legend painted on the