

No. 198—TOM PRENDERGAST of St. Michael's

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MENTION of Tom Prendergast brings us back to the very early days of the G.A.A. in Limerick, and recalls stirring events at a stage when the Association was in its infancy and struggling for its very existence.

St. Michael's Temperance Society was one of the first such organisations to rally to the clarion call of the great Archbishop of Cashel, Most Rev. Dr. Croke, and the part it played in the formative years must not be forgotten by present-day Gaels, who know little of the record of that once famous Gaelic combination.

FIRST LIMERICK HURLING MATCH UNDER G.A.A. RULES.

Many years ago, when collecting some data for the "History of the Limerick G.A.A.," I contacted Tom Prendergast, and from him got much valuable information concerning the early Gaelic days by the Shannon. Looking back over some of the notes I made then I discover the following reference to the first hurling match under G.A.A. rules played in the city:—

"When the G.A.A. was formed by Archbishop Croke and Michael Davitt, 'St. Michael's' joined the Association. There was only one other affiliated club in the city at the time, the 'Shamrocks,' from which the more famous Young Ireland Club later sprang. In connection with these clubs a match was arranged between them, the first under G.A.A. rules. It was played at Rosbrien, I forget who won, probably the rain. I was the referee. I had, therefore, the honour to referee the first match played in Limerick under the G.A.A. rules."

Tom refereed that first hurling game and was again in charge of the return engagement played at the Island Bank, and in which St. Michael's were victorious.

HURLING TOURNAMENT.

We next meet Tom Prendergast as an actual player, when he participated with St. Michael's in the first big hurling tournament organised in County Limerick. Consisting of a foursome—St. Michael's and Shamrock's, with Creora and South Liberties to complete the bill.

South Liberties made their first appearance as a club in that competition, although many of their individual players had already figured in other colours. They made a great impression and surprised all by their splendid play, to defeat St. Michael's in the final, and secure a valuable silver cup.

St. Michael's were directly represented at the 1886 All-Ireland G.A.A. Congress held at Thurles, and the Club played their first inter-county game at Birdhill in March that year, losing to Nenagh after an interesting and hard fought tussle.

NINETEEN CITY CLUBS.

The seeds St. Michael's and Shamrocks set bore rich fruit and in very short time clubs sprang up all over the city. Nineteen of them actually flourished by the end of 1886 and as many are long since forgotten it will be of interest to recall their names: They were: St. Michael's, Shamrocks, South Liberties, St. Patrick's, Commercials, St. Mary's, Treaty Stones, Carmen, Clan na Gael, St. John's, Wolfe Tone's, League of the Cross, Sarsfields, Henry Grattan's, O'Connell's, Smith O'Brien's, Glencore, Lord Edward's, and Slashers.

About this time the first County Board was established and it was not long before County championships were set in motion. These attracted a fine entry. Matches in both codes, hurling and football, were played in rapid succession, and the final stages were reached by the mid July of 1887.

BOTH DECIDERS ON THE SAME DAY.

Both deciders were played the same day, at the Grocers Field. Sunday, July 17th, saw a huge crowd present and for the football final the contenders were St. Michael's and Commercials. The latter had already built a big reputation and in a much discussed challenge game had earlier scored a decisive victory over the St. Michael's lads.

It consequently came as a great surprise when St. Michael's triumphed over their far famed rivals by five points and one forfeit point to one forfeit point, after an outstanding game which aroused terrific excitement and produced much interesting and thrilling football. The "Saints" twenty-one were: Michael Joyce (captain), J. Clancy, T. McDonald, E. Kearney, P. O'Sullivan, R. A. Gleeson, William Gleeson, E. O'Dwyer, J. Collins, M. Danaher, J. O'Connor,

M. Tuite, T. Fitzgibbon, Tom Prendergast, J. Hennessy, P. Barrett, W. O'Connor, J. McCarthy, P. Stapleton, T. O'Donnell, J. Fitzgibbon.

BIGGER SURPRISE IN STORE.

A bigger surprise, however, was in store. Commercials lodged an objection on the grounds that St. Michael's had included in their team five members who had played rugby, and this was upheld. A replay was ordered, and as "Saints" had to find substitutes for those declared illegal they were no match for the Commercials on the second attempt.

It was hard luck on the Temperance lads to have lost under such circumstances, but it goes to show the strength of football in Limerick at the time when one remembers that the Commercials were subsequently able to beat all the great club teams of the country and bring to Limerick the first All-Ireland Senior Football Championship ever played.

Commercials and St. Michael's again qualified for the 1888 County senior football final and this was fixed for Croom, to be played in conjunction with the hurling final, in which the contestants were Murroe and South Liberties.

MEMORABLE OCCASION.

The coming together of such famous clubs created great excitement and what must have been one of the biggest crowds ever to see a County final gathered at Croom for the memorable occasion. Seven special trains left the City that unforgettable day. Elaborate precautions were taken to ensure that the game would be played in strict accordance with the rules, and the Central Council appointed John Cullinane of Bansha to referee.

There was no paling around the pitch but Very Rev. T. Halpin, P.P., Donoughmore, and Very Rev. E. Sheehy, P.P., Bruree, mounted on horseback, paraded up and down the margin between players and the spectators thus ensuring a fair field and no favour.

Splendid order was maintained, but the game proved disappointing. Commercials winning rather easily after a vigorous match of fast open football.

POLITICAL DISSENSIONS.

The year 1891 saw a big decline in the strength of the G.A.A. Political dissensions were largely responsible for this regrettable position, the "Parnell Split" proving a serious blow to the Association and resulting in the breaking up of many clubs.

In Limerick, as in other counties, numbers decreased considerably, and those that remained were only able to carry on with the aid of some members of the disbanded clubs.

St. Michael's were one of the clubs that passed from the active arena, but seven members of the Club helped Treaty Stones win 1891 county hurling honours. A couple of the Treaty players immediately afterwards turned out and won the football championship with St. Patrick's, including Dan McNiece, a former St. Michael's stalwart.

BACK IN THE ACTIVE LISTS IN 1893.

St. Michael's were back in the active lists in 1893, and reached the final of the County Senior Hurling Championship, in which they were well beaten by Bruree.

Two years later they realised their cherished ambition, when victories over Smith O'Briens, Nationals and South Liberties got them to another County Senior Hurling Final, and in which they beat Boher Nationals, 2-3 to 0-1, to put their name on the roll of fame.

Representing Limerick in the Inter-County arena, they had a great win over Kilmoyley (Kerry) at Mallow, but lost to a grand Tubberadora side in the Munster Final, played at Kilmallock.

When St. Michael's eventually passed from the active arena Tom Prendergast played Rugby with Garryowen, a game in which he continued to take an active interest long after his active days were over.

By vocation an operative baker, and one of the earliest members of the Bakers' Union, he was, in early 1899, elected to the Corporation as Alderman, a member of the party organised by Mr. John Daly, for whom he deputised as Mayor.

He was the last of the Sub-Sheriffs, a position he held for 30 years, discharging his duties with ability, tact, and a sympathetic understanding and consideration.