

RECOLLECTION OF
SOME LIMERICK NEWSBOYS

PART ONE

by Frank Renihan

ONE OF my earliest ambitions as a young newsboy was to earn a half-crown to buy a bag of coal for my mother. Two-and-six was a lot of money in those days. My mother died in childbirth and I regret very much that I never had a chance to repay her for all the suffering and hardship she endured in rearing me and my sister.

My father worked at the city gas works. When that job finished he became a lamplighter and went around lighting up and quenching the gas lights on the streets. When the E.S.B. started to light up the streets my father lost his job and was forced into retirement.

I was born in Garryowen, "under the Tower", and soon afterwards the family moved to Dominick Street. At that time there was no such thing as flush toilets and the Corporation cleansing workers had a tough and dirty job. Each cleaning cart was manned by two labourers and their daily task was performed during the hours of darkness.

I remember when I used to stand at the top of the lane where we lived and watch train loads of pigs arriving at the railway station and the drovers hunting them into Matterson's bacon factory to be slaughtered. When we lived in the lane each house had a half-door and window shutters. I also remember imitating the Corporation workers as a young boy and sweeping the lane up and down with my mother's brush. In those times poverty and sickness were widespread, sanitary arrangements primitive but the neighbours were good neighbours.

The people baked their own bread. On the window sill of every house in the lane there would be a cake cooling. We played around Tait's clock, near Teasy McGuinness' shop. It was a great treat to be given a penny to buy one of her Chester buns bursting with currants. If we had not a penny we would go to Pa Cassidy's kiosk and buy a ha'worth of black-jack, which was as long as a skipping rope. It was a great event to go to the "gods" up the iron steps of the Lyric cinema to watch a picture, if we could raise the twopence admission price.

I started my schooling in the Presentation Convent, Sexton Street. Each member of the class got a gansy and a pants at Christmas time. After my term there, I moved to St. John the Baptist school. I spent the happiest days of my life during those years, but it is only now I realise that.

I began selling newspapers at an early age. Competition was cut-throat and we had to shout at the top of our voices to attract attention. The shouting was a useful exercise for many newsboys and improved their voices; some of them went on to become popular public house singers.

When I entered the business selling newspapers meant physically fighting for your corner and punches were often exchanged. But in spite of the efforts of a rough, tough element, most of the newsboys survived.

There were other unpleasant parts of the lives of the boys. When they were finished selling for the day, they would usually hold a gambling school—better known as a pitch-and-toss school—under the gas lamps. The school could last for anything up to five hours. It was a strange and sad sight to see twenty or more newboys standing around in a circle gambling away their hard-earned pence. Some went home drunk; some went home broke but none went rich.

The newsboys used to compete with one another to sell their papers to the sailors at the docks. The quay was often lined with ships and the boys would go aboard to provide a service that has long since ended. Other spots



A tossing school at Mulgrave Street.

we used to concentrate on were the late cinemas, dance halls and 45 drives. The people living in the housing estates got a special service of their own and they used to wait up till all hours—no matter how late the paper boy was on his rounds. Thomondgate, St. Mary's Park, the Distillery, O'Dwyer's Villas, Garryowen and many other places got their own delivery from Tom "Sully" O'Sullivan, a man who had a smile and a tip for a horse for everyone he met on his rounds.

All of the young newsboys looked up to Joe Allen. He was regarded as the top man at paper selling and was also good to give a tip for a racing winner. Joe's favourite bet was Capt. Keen's nap in the *Irish Independent*. A familiar newspaper stand was located outside the *Limerick Leader* office, in the same spot as it is today. It was manned by Paddy Reidy, an invalid who spent most of his life in a wheelchair. He was helped by his mother, Mary, and his brother Foncey, now the only member of this well-liked family left. This pitch is held today by Jack Nash—a man who has spent his life selling newspapers on the streets of Limerick. It should be recorded that Jack is the senior member of the newsboys, with more than half a century of selling behind him.

One tough man was the late Joe Crimmins, a newsboy who was nationally known through his service to the buses at the Sarsfield Street bus depot (outside "Tiger" O'Brien's bar), one of the main depots in the country. I thought I got up early but Joe took some beating. I would be up and on the streets at 5 a.m. but he would be there before me, well before cockcrow, selling his papers at E.G. Fitt's corner. This long tradition has been carried on right down to the present day by his son-in-law, Paddy Carmody.

Another well-known newsboy was Tom Foley, who occupied Fitt's corner for the sale of evening papers and Burton's corner for morning papers. He was a father-figure among the newsboys and was always ready to help out a colleague. He was known as "the peacemaker", for when trouble arose, he was always there to sort out the squabble. He would have made an excellent negotiator.

When Burton's shop in O'Connell Street had a billiard room above its ground floor, two of the most talented performers on the tables were newsboys, Tom Foley and Jack Nash. When they met in a final or championship game, the crowds swarmed in to create a gallery of spectators larger than any found in other indoor sporting competitions in the city.

