
TREACY'S PACKET AND TRIPE

by Jim Kemmy

UNTIL about a decade ago Limerick was the centre of the country's bacon curing industry. This position was reflected in many ways in the life of the city, particularly in its food. During the depressed times of the thirties, forties and fifties, "bones" of all shapes and descriptions—backbones, eyebones, breastbones, spare ribs, strips, lots and knuckles—were familiar sights on the kitchen tables of those working class families fortunate enough to be able to afford them. Pig's heads, tails, toes, (crubeens), sheep's heads and feet (trotters) were also eagerly devoured in many homes in those not too distant days.

The decline of the local bacon curing industry and the coming of more affluent times brought changes in long established eating habits. But a unique Limerick dish—packet and tripe—has not only survived these changes but has also traditionally managed to transcend class barriers in the city. The mere mention of packet and tripe is enough to bring a wistful longing to the eyes and palates of most exiled Limerick men and is as emotive as haggis is for the Scot, bubble and squeak for the Londoner or coddle for the Dubliner.

The home of the packet and tripe industry has always been, and still is, King's Island. Slattery's and O'Rourke's of the Island Road and Barrett's of the Sandmall were renowned packet and tripe house-factories earlier this century, whose products were sold from street tables in many parts of the city. Now, however, only one family continues the business, carrying on the tradition in the most famous packet and tripe house of all—the one-storey cottage known as Treacy's, at Courthouse Lane, off Athlunkard Street. A latched door gives entrance to a cool, flagged kitchen, divided by a wooden counter. An open yard and shed at the back complete the simple architectural picture.

Inside the house the honeycombs of tripe and long tangles of packet are still contained in zinc basins behind the counter. The packet and tripe is cut off in sections at the customer's request and flung expertly from about six feet on to an old-fashioned weighing scale. When an old-age pensioner comes looking for 25p worth Joe Mullane turns on a well practised blind eye if the piece is overweight. The purchased lot is then unceremoniously wrapped in an old newspaper and carried home.

As its title indicates, Treacy's was originally owned by a family of that name. Later the premises were taken over by Jim "Packet" O'Halloran, who is credited with being the author of that well known Limerick expression: "It's three o'clock and not a belly in the house scraped yet!" This remark is now related as a humorous story but it sounded less funny for the ten or so women who were employed scraping the bellies of the sheep in the uncovered yard for a few shillings a week. O'Halloran had a song written about his tripe, the words of which went: "Jim Packet, Jim Packet, your tripe is so green, The finest in Ireland that ever was seen."

The taste for packet and tripe is an acquired one and most "outsiders" usually cannot stand its appearance or flavour. The green coloured, pleated, accordion-like tripe is a part of the sheep's belly which, having been washed and scraped, is sold in its raw state. Packet is a blood-sausage or pudding and is dark brown in colour. Sheep's blood is poured into skin taken from the sheep's intestines and spices are also added. Onions and tansy were often included at this stage of its manufacture during past times. The mixture is then boiled in a big vat and the cluster of long, jelly-like lengths are placed in a container ready for sale.

A time-honoured way of cooking the tripe is to chop it

into small cubes and then steep it overnight in salted water. The water can be drained off or the tripe boiled in the same water. The tripe is then boiled a second time in milk and onion is added. The packet is cut into slivers and also added at this stage. When the dish is simmering gently it is thickened with breadcrumbs and flavoured with a big knob of butter. It is then served, eaten slowly and savoured lovingly for days afterwards.

After about fifteen minutes, during which time strong tea is made and served with bread and butter, the packet and tripe is ready for eating. The use of Clevee's condensed milk was reputed to give the meal an extra flavour. Some of the more sophisticated gourmets have been known to add a spoon of curry to give a further exotic touch to the occasion.

Packet and tripe, washed down with strong, sweet tea had been found to be easily digestible and rests gently on the stomach, especially one ravaged by an excess of alcohol. For this reason the dish is very much in demand after a weekend "feed of porter" has rendered the stomach hostile to other more abrasive forms of nourishment. Packet and tripe is reputed to give a "lining" to the stomach. So the dish has traditionally been a weekend treat in Limerick, a distinctive Saturday night/Sunday morning ritual.

Treacy's also provided other succulent delights for local epicures. The phrase used to describe the whole array was "book, reed and belly". The book is a part of the digestive system of the sheep, and is scored like a book, hence its name. The grisly reed, when grilled, is considered a rare delicacy. But the belly is regarded as the choicest part of all. The nuns of St. Mary's Convent were very partial to packet and tripe and a large zinc bathful was unfailingly delivered to the convent on Sundays. A special belly was scraped for this purpose, and a "well in" Treacy's customer might, on rare occasions and as a great favour, get a piece of the much-coveted "nuns' belly"!

Another popular Treacy's speciality were the sheep's feet or trotters. They are now no longer sold there, mainly because of the long, hard work necessary for their preparation. The trotters were difficult to clean, as the thick covering of wool had to be completely removed from the feet before they were boiled. Up to about thirty years ago processions of women and boys were a familiar sight in Athlunkard Street, as they carried plates, bowls and other receptacles. They converged on Treacy's, where their orders were taken and the plates handed in overnight, having first been marked with each person's name. On Sunday morning the trotter-filled receptacles were collected in time for breakfast.

Many humorous tales are told about the exploits of packet and tripe lovers but the following story is a true one. When it became possible for Limerick people to travel to America on holiday it was considered a rare treat for the mouth-watering exiles to bring them some packet and tripe from home. A well known "Parish" painter bought his plane ticket for a holiday in New York and also arranged to bring a trunk full of packet and tripe, backbones and trotters with him. But when he arrived at Shannon Airport to board the plane, it was found that he had neglected to secure a passport and visa. However, by this stage his trunk was already on board the plane on which it was duly carried to New York—without its owner. The surprise - and smell - that