

# West Limerick Reminiscences

**John McAuliffe, Newcastle West, Co. Limerick**

by Pat Feeley

**J**ohn remembered journeymen smiths and journeymen carpenters coming to Newcastle. The carpenters were following schemes of houses that were being built. The blacksmith was 'just out of his time' and wanted more experience of the trade. He would hear that a particular smith was very good at shoeing horses and he would spend some time with him. He would hear that a man was a great implement maker of 'sleans' and spades, and he would spend some time learning from him. When John was young, the era of the journeymen was coming to an end. The length of time that the smith stayed in a district was dependent on the work that he had, especially in harvest time. The smith would hold onto him, even if he did not like him, so that he would repair broken machinery. In some cases the journeyman smith would remain on in the district and open his own forge. There was a smith who, if he did not strike the anvil before 8am, would not work on that day. He would consider it too late to work.

On the question of emigration, John McAuliffe said that from the end of the nineteenth century to the world war, the greater part of emigration was to America. But the emigration from the immediate area around Newcastle would not be as high as from the surrounding hills. Presents would be given to the people going away. In Newcastle, when they got to the train platform, the people who accompanied them would bid them adieu. Their friends would accompany them to the Railway Bridge. They would wave to each other, and that would often be the last sight that they would have of each other. There was a bridge near the town known as 'Briseadh Croí', broken-hearted, that told its own sad tale. It was later known as the Cork Bridge, because it was there that the carters would gather to take butter to the Cork butter market. Later still it was called the Creamery Bridge, as it was the bridge nearest the creamery. The people were very innocent in those times, and fearful and unaccustomed when setting out on any strange journey. Consequently, when going to Cork to sell butter or take a ship to America, they stayed close to the carters so that they would not be robbed by any strangers that they might encounter.

Contrary to what many might think, the real increase in emigration was not in

the famine years, but ten or fifteen years later when a terrible plague struck the area. Also people were leaving because of the poverty in the general area, of the hills especially, and the absence of any worthwhile future for them. This whole part of the country was very backward. There were no roads between Newcastle, north Kerry and Cork city until Griffith opened the Cork line. The roads that Richard Griffith built were used to civilise and bring law and order to the hill country and to make it easier to transport agricultural produce to the Cork Butter Market.

In the 1880s and the 1890s emigration in the Newcastle area increased and continued to be high, up until 1916 and 1917. This was the time of the American wakes. The American wake was well established in west Limerick and north Kerry. All the people of the district came to the house, two nights or the last night before the person emigrating set off. The night, or nights, were given up to music, singing, dancing and yarns. The musicians played and the people danced polkas, still the favourite dance in the hill country, 'round the house and mind the dresser'.

After a while dancing the polkas, they called on the step dancer. Most houses in those times had a half-door: its principal purpose was to let in sun and air and also to keep the hens from rambling into the house. The half door hung on two large hinges, called 'buckawns'. On the night, this door was lifted off the 'buckawns' and brought into the kitchen. The step-dancer tapped out his steps in a lively fashion on the half door. The house always provided plenty of food and drink, even though they often had very little of the goods of this world. But the neighbours frequently came to their assistance with currant cakes and other food. But it had a sad vein running deep through it, for the young person leaving was most likely never to return to his native parish again. At some later time, if he had sisters or brothers, he might send home the passage fare so they could join him in America. The morning after the wake, the emigrant's humble possessions were placed in a wooden trunk made by the local carpenter. (There were no travelling bags or valises in those times). All his belongings were placed in the wooden box, as well as food and drink for the journey to Cork. They then put the trunk into the horse and car and all the people of the district walked with him to

the boundary of the parish. This might be two miles or three miles. Here they bade him a last farewell. From there he went with the buttermen who were going to the Cork butter market. They knew the road well, the places to stay and where to stay when they reached Cork. He booked his passage the next day in Cobh and then went to America.

The carters would not make the return journey in one day. They often broke the journey with an overnight in the Halfway House at a place called Nad. This building is still to be seen. It subsequently was turned into a public house. It had a special rate for the carters who stayed there at night. They made an overnight stop there going and coming back.

John McAuliffe was an expert with the scythe. It had to be set properly and properly edged by the expert mower. The two handles, called the 'duirnins', had to be the length from the elbow to the tip of the finger. They had to balance with the lower handle, the one nearest the blade. The handles were held with wedges so that they could be moved up and down. A nail was driven into the end of the handle of the scythe. This was called a grass nail. When the scythe was being edged, it was driven into the ground so that the blade would not slip and cut the man edging. To see an expert scythesman working was to see a 'work of art'. But to see a man mowing with a scythe who did not know how to use it was 'a crucifixion'.

**Larry Begley, teacher,  
Mountcollins**

When the hay was in wynds and brought in to make the reek or the stack, the mower was usually called on that day to participate in the making of the stack. In the hill country, and indeed elsewhere, at that time, there were professional scythesmen who went around the country, mowing for the farmers.

When the mowing machines were first introduced, they were not popular with the scythesmen. They sometimes drove iron pegs into the meadows of the big farmers to damage the machines. But some of the scythesmen became expert subsequently mowing with the horses.

With a Massey Harris machine, which had wide blades, a number 18 or number 24, on a fair day with two good horses, you would knock an acre an hour. You would start at 4.a.m. and finish at twelve, midday. You would then rest the horses. You would start again at 4p.m. and work until the dew began to fall. There was one big blade that had to be changed every few

*Fair Day, Newcastle West, Co. Limerick.*



Fair day at Newcastlewest, c.1900. Lawrence postcard.

(Limerick Museum)

hours. It was said that a man who could tell lies was the best man to edge a blade. The blade was taken out, a new blade was put in. The man edging the blade worked at this on the headland, and the mower mowed.

The man who was a good scythesman was often a good man with the 'slean' too, strong and sure, cutting the turf. The 'taobhfód', for setting the potatoes would often be turned in November. A good spadesman, using a spade made by Bill Phil O'Connell, a Mountcollins blacksmith, would cut and turn a quarter acre of ground in a day. That is if it was free of scutch grass or gabhal - luachair (forked rushes) and if he did not encounter under the ground, the 'reanga dubha', a growth found especially in boggy ground that impeded the work of the spadesman. He could be turning the 'taobhfods' up until the end of February. If he had no work in between these times, he could make drains, stone drains or earth drains. To shelter himself from the rain while working the spadesman would sometimes have a stick stuck in the ground and a sheet of galvanized with a hole in the top of it leaning against the stick and a piece of wire tying the sheet to the top of the stick. As the rain moved from one point of the compass to the other, he moved the sheet of galvanized to protect himself.

There was a particular system of cutting turf in the hill country. The 'slean'

had only one wing. The 'sleansman' threw the turf out in front of him. The 'brancher' had a three prong pike. He stuck this in the gleaming, soggy peat and threw this up on the bank. On the bank was a third man known as the spreader. In many ways, the brancher was the key man as his work was the heaviest. Turf cutting went on from April through May into early June. If there was an enmity between the 'sleansman' and the brancher, this could easily surface in different ways. The sleansman 'could make each sod fall differently making thus the 'brancher's' work more difficult and breaking the rhythm of his work. But if the brancher wanted to put a stop to this or to slow down the 'sleansman', he could do so by striking the 'slean' with the pike and so knocking the edge off the blade. In this way, he got a respite. If the cutter was cutting the turf too fast for the brancher, he could ram the pike over the treadle and say something like: "You'll pull it up now when I'll let you".

There were many travellers and sellers of goods going about the hill country in the nineteenth century. One of these was the 'chaney' seller, 'Chaney' was a type of earthenware which the people of the countryside used as drinking vessels, jugs, bowls and mugs. The chaney man sold at fairs in Mountcollins, Abbeyfeale and Brosna. The chaney men sold from stalls. There was one known as Hourigan, the

tinker. He was a famous character who used to come to the fairs at Abbeyfeale and shout for all to hear: "I have ware from Derbyshire where they pull the cows with machinery and every cow has two calves every year".

There were also the tinsmiths, or the tinkers, as they were correctly known, the workers in tin. The best remembered of these in the Mountcollins district was Paddy O'Brien who died about thirty years ago. I think he was a native of the Duagh area in county Kerry and he may also have fought in the Great War. He was very popular with the people of the area and he would have been well received at most doors. I remember him living and sleeping in a bow-shaped canvas tent at the end of the Bog Road, close to Mosie Bawn's shop. There was a then derelict house near where he camped which, I suppose, gave him some shelter. (In subsequent years this house was restored and inhabited). I can well remember seeing him at work near his open air fire, making tin ponneys which were used in every farmer's house, indeed in every house in the whole parish at that time. There was a special use for them in the springtime of the year. At that time he would be kept very busy as the ponneys would be in use in the bogs, when they were cutting or footing the turf. Similarly later in the summer when they were making up the cocks or drawing in the hay, ponneys and

tin gallons of tea would be passed around. As well as making ponneys, he also made the tin gallons. These were used for carrying milk and water from the well and they also had other uses. Paddy had no wife insofar as we knew. But travellers' wives went around the country selling the tin ware, or one could come to the campsite and buy them. Paddy O'Brien also went around to the houses and made them in the houses. Amongst themselves, some of the travellers spoke their secret language, Shelta. No one knew whether Paddy O'Brien knew it or not.

Travelling musicians moved around the hill country of Sliabh Luachra. There was a famous piper, from around Killarney, it was said. He was called 'Geansai' probably because he wore a 'geansai' or jumper. He moved around the borders of the three counties, north Cork, east Kerry and west Limerick. There was in the twentieth century a musician named Wall who sometimes stayed from six to twelve months in a particular parish. He taught music to the young people of the border districts and then moved on after getting them to form bands. And there was another travelling musician Scully, a native of Cork, who taught the young people how to play brass instruments.

In many parts of the upland country, there was very little timber. There were whitethorn bushes and blackthorn bushes, hazel trees and alder, plenty of furze bushes, pine trees, always called 'palms' by the people, planted for shelter close to some of the houses, willows, always known as sallies on ditches and along streams, some sycamores. But very little trees suitable for roofing houses or laying floors or making window frames. Up until the 1920s and 1930s, most of the houses in the high country would have been roofed with thatch. Because of the shortage of hard timber in the general area, bog deal, seasoned and hardened from centuries in the peat, was widely used as a roof timber.

Many parishes in the hill country had a bogdeal diviner, and when they were roofing houses, sheds or cabins, he was usually called in to find the bogdeal in the bogs. He would go out early in the morning when the dew was still on the ground. It was possible to discover where the 'crockel' of bog deal lay on a dewy morning because the ground under which it lay was free of the dew ... The bogdeal finder carried with him an iron spit and he probed the bog with this to discover the size and the general outline of the piece of bogdeal that lay underneath. In this way, he discovered where the best deal sticks were for the roofing of the house. He showed the builders of the house where the long-buried trunks and branches lay and they then set about digging these out. When they dug these up and out, they cut them to the size and shape required for the roofing of the house. In this way, they were able to procure timber for the roof that was seasoned and hardened and would last for as long as the thatched house stood. There was a man who went about the parishes of Tournafulla, Brosna

and Abbeyfeale discovering where the great trunks of the bogdeal lay. This was full-time work for the man engaged in it, travelling the whole of the surrounding country. This lasted for as long as there was a shortage of building timber in the countryside. This came to an end when country houses began to be built with concrete blocks or what was known as 'stone-to-the-board'. At that time deal roofing timber became available.

Another man who travelled around the countryside in the course of his work was the pig killer. There was a famous pig killer in Mountcollins named Con 'Mockey' Lyons. He was also a shoemaker and shoemender and he lived in a small house with an iron roof at the foot of a small hill which was close to the Caher river at the western entry to the village. His house was small on a little piece of ground by the roadside, but people were always dropping in to see him and for a chat as he sat hammering or cutting leather behind his bench. Often the schoolchildren on their way home from school stopped in for a few words with Con, who was always happy to see them come in. Over the small back window of the little house hung a print of Daniel O'Connell, the Liberator.

But Con's other occupation, that of travelling pig killer, took him away from his cobbler's bench into the surrounding hills and country. He once boasted that he had killed 483 pigs in one year. His only instrument was a knife and he brought in his pocket a stone out of the river for sharpening the knife. He used a flat stone for this. He also carried a small timber handle with a ring of leather at the end of it for holding the pig's snout. When the pig was being killed and the blood was flowing, it was taken up in pans, dishes and other containers. After the pig was killed, the pig was opened up with the big knife and the entrails were taken out. The guts and the large intestines were then taken out and they were washed and cleaned. Preceding the killing, the women of the house would have prepared fillings for these puddings. The filling would be made up of bread, pinhead oatmeal, blood, onions and probably some herbs, like sage or thyme, if these were available at the particular time. The oatmeal, blood and onions would all be boiled in a pot before they were used for the stuffing. A gang of the neighbours would usually turn up to salt the pig. There was an ulterior motive for this, too, as all who came would be given some of the fresh meat and some puddings. After it was salted, it was put into a barrel to be cured and pickled for about a month. Then it was taken out and hung on the meat stick over the fire in the kitchen. The meat stick ran from one side of the kitchen to the other. There were iron crooks on the stick and there were usually eight to ten pieces of meat hanging from the stick. A sheet of brown paper or a newspaper page was usually put around the meat to keep the dust and the flies off it. If the householder wanted smoked, yellow bacon, a piece or two was hung in the open hearth. You

would need a strong stomach to eat this yellow, smokey bacon as it was tough and strong.

The youngsters of the house were sent around to the neighbours the day after the killing with the pork steak and the puddings. Special friends of the family were given extra pieces of meat and maybe two puddings. The children would be sent because they would usually get a threepence or a sixpence for bringing the fresh meat and the pudding. Sometimes, they might even get the full shilling.

The pig's bladder would be blown up and used as a football. Sometimes it was seasoned and covered in leather. There are stories of inter-parish and inter-district football matches, with the pig's bladder as football. There is a story from olden times of a football match between the young men of Tournafulla and Mountcollins. The 'caid' or football was thrown in at Naughton's Cross. There the match began. There were no rules, no holds barred in this long ago match. After a great struggle, the Mountcollins men succeeded in bringing the ball to the Cross of Mountcollins. Up to that time, we are told, Mountcollins was a hurling district and Tournafulla was a football area. Mountcollins had a hurling team called the Mountcollins Shamrocks and Tournafulla had a football team. But after this momentous game, the traditions changed, with Tournafulla taking up hurling, the game still played there, and Mountcollins going over to football, which they continue to play.

The lowland rich farmers of the Golden Vale never had, with honourable exceptions here and there, but a poor opinion of their servants who frequently came from the barren mountains and the rushy fields of the hill country. It was not unknown for the farmer to kill one pig, a young pig, for himself and his family and an old pig for the servants. The meat of the old pig would, of course, have been very tough and unappetising.

Paddy Drury, the versemaker from Listowel, was known for his biting couplets. Once he was working for a farmer with three other servant boys. The food in this particular house was anything but good. So when the dinner was placed on the table one day, Paddy got down on his knees and with his eyes raised to heaven spoke the following lines:

*"Oh God on high look down upon us four  
Please give us meat that we can eat  
And take away the boar".*

At another time the same Paddy Drury passed through the small village of Knockanure and unsuccessfully begged alms from the inhabitants of the village. Standing empty-handed at the end of the village, he vented his spleen:

*"Knockanure both mane and poor, a  
church without a steeple  
With sons of hoors looking over half-  
doors, insulting decent people".*