

(By Seamus O'Ceallaigh)

TRADITION has a strong hold on our Irish people, and we may thank tradition for favouring us with the knowledge that the game called "Hurling Home" was carried on in Castleconnell Parish over a century ago.

The chief meeting place for this game in the good old days of yore was Coffey's Field at Sallymount—right opposite the home of the well known hurling family, the Herberts.

Two opposite sides of the country filed up every available man or youth in their locality as a member of the team, and the number of players was limited only by the male population of the district.

When the rough big ball of the period was thrown in the excitement started, and over hedge, ditch, dyke, hill, hollow and bog hole, the trial was to find the side capable of bringing the ball to their own territory and thus gain the victory.

NO REFEREE.

There was no referee, no goalposts, and the play oftentimes went on all day, the end coming usually with darkness.

When hurling was revived, with the founding of the G.A.A., some seventy years ago, rugby was fairly strong in Castleconnell. It was mainly through the efforts of Rev. P. M. O'Kelly, C.C., ably assisted by Pat Lee, Michael and Anthony Mackey, that the G.A.A. game was introduced to the district. Michael Mackey was first captain of the hurling team and Pat Lee, who had a boot business in the village, made the first hurling ball. Others who were actively associated with early organised hurling endeavours in Castleconnell were Dan Lee, Mick Sammon (Annaholy) and Maud Johnson (Killaloe).

THE "EMMETS."

Castleconnell affiliated a hurling team called the "Emmets," but so keen was the interest in the locality that very large numbers played the game. Matches were arranged between local teams, selected by Michael Mackey and Dan Lee, and played in the old famous "High Field" for prizes subscribed locally. These were the days when twenty-one players took place in the contests, and some great sport was the order.

The success of these matches encouraged the "Emmets" to organise a top class hurling tournament. The "Castleconnell Cup" was put up for competition and attracted a very big entry, teams from Clare, Tipperary and Limerick participating. Severay matches were played each Sunday, arousing remarkable interest and enthusiasm, and bringing large crowds to the popular venue by the Shannon, over a lengthy period.

KEEN RIVALRY.

The competition, however, ended unsatisfactorily. It is known that the once famous Garranboy team, from near Killaloe, took a leading part and are stated to have won out but they never received the cup. Rivalry between this team and the Castleconnell "twenty-one" was very keen, and it is on record that the pair met in a great game at O'Brien's Bridge, which the Limerickmen won, a victory which caused great joy in the Castleconnell area.

The team which Michael Mackey captained was considered one of the best in East Limerick. They defeated fine sides from Dromkeen and Pallas in Caherconlish but lost to a great South Liberties side, mainly due to the hurling prowess of a famous athlete, the late Johnny Coll, who played for "Liberties" although a native of Castleconnell parish.

A POPULAR SUNDAY RENDEZVOUS.

In those days before the advent

of the motor car Castleconnell was the popular Sunday evening rendezvous in summer for Limerick families seeking recreation. Excursion trains were popular, and "Long Cars" also brought their quota.

Occasionally, when an evening turned wet, or for some other reason, some of the visitors spent too much of their time in the public houses. An overdose of drink made them troublesome and they had to be forcibly ejected from the village once or twice in a season.

A Sunday following one such incident, Castleconnell were fixed to play Caherline at the Poor House Field, Limerick, in the semi-final of the first County Senior Hurling Championship, and some of the city trouble makers decided it was the opportunity to get even with the lads from Shannonside.

A ROUGH CONTEST.

Some twenty years ago Michael Mackey told me the story of that day: "The match was rough, and not long in progress when a number of Limerick blackguards came on the field and attacked our players with weapons. Our goalposts were pulled up, but I defended my men, with the result I got badly injured and had to be taken to Barrington's Hospital where I was detained. The match was not finished, but was awarded to 'Liberties' by the referee, Mr. Sheehy of Liptons. We appealed to the Central Council later and got it."

The Association was only in its infancy at the time, and experiencing many difficulties—in fact, it was fighting a great battle for its very existence in many areas.

POLITICAL DIFFERENCES.

Political differences were not unusual. The Association had the secret backing of the Irish Republican Brotherhood, and members of that organisation held many positions in it. "The I.R.B., more than any other body, realised the wonderful work the G.A.A. could perform in moulding the youth of Ireland in the Gaelic tradition and decided the Association must survive no matter the cost.

The G.A.A. had to contend from the start with the open hostility of the ascendancy classes, and their numerous "hangers on." It triumphed over this opposition, only to find a greater threat inside its own ranks, as the members of the physical force and constitutional parties fought for control.

TWO COUNTY BOARDS.

The Limerick County Convention, which met on December 30th, 1897, re-elected Paddy O'Brien ("Twenty") the outgoing chairman and a member of the I.R.B., by seventy-one votes to fifty-nine for the well-known athlete, Bob Coll of Dromin, the nominee of the constitutional side. Following the election a number of delegates, led by Very Rev. Eugene Sheehy, P.P., Bruree, left the meeting and formed a rival County Board, with Father Sheehy as chairman.

Castleconnell declared its allegiance to the O'Brien Board as the properly constituted authority, but Murroe, whom they were to meet in the next round of the championship, went over to the Father Sheehy Board.

THE FIRST ALL-IRELAND CHAMPIONSHIP.

When the first All-Ireland Championships were announced, Castleconnell were selected by the O'Brien Board to represent Limerick, who were drawn against Kilkenny in the opening round, to be played in Dublin.

Murroe disputed Castleconnell's right to play, and the Central Council, on being appealed to, ordered both teams to play at the Cross of Lought, Ahane, on the Friday previous to the Dublin

game—the winning team to represent the County.

Murroe made no appearance for this game, but when Castleconnell boarded the train for the Metropolis the following day, they found that the Murroe team were also travelling.

Michael Mackey's version of what followed has been hotly contested in Murroe all down the years, but we will deal with that aspect when considering the careers of some of the great Murroe men of that time—Tim Humphries, Pat Godfrey and Paddy Ryan ("Farmer") notably.

MICHAEL MACKEY'S VERSION.

Anyway, here is what Michael told me concerning that trip to Dublin: "We went to Dublin on Saturday and so did Murroe. There was a meeting of the Central Council that night and they decided the two Limerick teams should hurl and the winning team to play Kilkenny. Murroe refused to hurl. The Central Council then asked us to take half of each team and hurl. Murroe refused, so Kilkenny got a walk-over, with the result we both came back with our tails between our legs."

Castleconnell faded out of the hurling picture for a time following this disappointing experience, and when the revival came Michael Mackey was out of the active service list.

However, he never lost interest in the games and lived to see his son, "Tyler," captain a Limerick team in an All-Ireland final, and later still, his grandson, and namesake, as skipper of the greatest of all Limerick sides—the magnificent 1936 fifteen.

17th December 1955