

LIMERICK COMMUNITIES By PATRICIA FEEHILY

Inner city renewal in Limerick has come too late to save many of its oldest communities. In any case it makes no provision for any revival of the skills and industry which were the lifeblood of those communities for generations. The Coopers, Sandmen, Fishermen of the Strand, the Abbey and the Lower Shannon, the pig buyers of St. Mary's and the Park Market Gardeners were all a breed unto themselves. What is left of them is now part of the wider community but any renewal of the older parts of Limerick is incomplete without reference to them. This is Part 1 of a series . . .

# Rise and fall of Parish pig buyers

THEY WERE once the elite of "The Parish", generations of bowler-hatted men with revealing nicknames like "Skillet of Gold", whose fate has finally been sealed by the decline of Limerick's once famous bacon industry.

But the people who live today along Athlunkard Street and Mary Street will tell you that the fate of a whole community of pig buyers was decided as long ago as the period of de Valera's economic war and even before that.

They are almost gone, but they have left their own legacies, in colourful memories in St. Mary's Parish, in the flourishing Athlunkard Boat Club, in Garryowen and Shannon rugby clubs, and in an indelible mark on the social, economic and religious life of the city that can probably never be measured. Today in Athlunkard Street, once known far afield as "Grunt Road," they will boast about a young boy who bought a pair of bonhams that started a bacon empire. His son became the first Senator elected to the new Irish Free State.

## Papal names

The pig buyers of St. Mary's Parish played a particularly significant role in the church life of Limerick and had their own section in the Confraternity since 1868. They named their children "Pacelli" and "Pius" after the Popes of the day.

"You'd have to have pig buyers' blood in your bones to live here at all," said Mrs. Mary Byrnes, whose family owned a pawnshop in Athlunkard Street and who has a colourful history herself, having once wheeled a pramful of ammunition through the city during the "Tan" war, and who picked out a pair of worn trousers in the pawnshop to fit a young man on the run, named Eamon de Valera.

Some of them, according to Mrs. Byrnes, were the salt of the earth—families like the Sheahans "who could have lived in the biggest mansion anywhere in the city but they preferred to remain here."

"The Sheahans," she said, "always kept a good table and a great fire with the best of coal."

Mrs. Byrnes said that she enjoyed a prestigious place among the pig buying fraternity herself because her late husband's people "were the first pig buyers in the city. But mostly they were a clan of their own," she recalls.

## Ardnacrusha

From her somewhat neutral position in the pawnshop, she believed that the real heart of the community were the Abbey Fishermen, the last of whose breed, Jackie Clancy—he led a rebellion against the Ardnacrusha Power Station—was laid to rest recently.

There were at least 50 pig buyers in that small community when its heyday. They travelled throughout the country, sometimes as far as Ballinrobe by train,



Mary Byrnes, Athlunkard Street (right), with her friend, Stella Fitzgerald, Leo Estate.

□ Picture: DERMOT LYNCH

buying for O'Mara's, Shaws, Matterson's and Denny's. The Hartys, Sheahans, Reids, O'Connors and O'Donovans were known far and wide at fairs. Many of them were connected through marriage and bore double-barrelled names.

They had a skill handed down from father to son which could determine the weight of a pig to the last ounce without any weighing scale and according to some people they could even tell you what a pig was fed on.

Their social lives revolved around music hall entertainment and holidays in Killee.

The last of the old-time pig buyers of Limerick, Anthony McNamara, stands in the doorway of his home in Mary Street and says that it "riles" him to even talk of the past, or of his career.

"A life of slavery, a miserable existence," he says, recalling the days when he travelled the country buying pigs.

"You were up at 5 in the morning and you took your losses as well as your gains," he says.

Now almost 80 years old, he hasn't bought a pig for 20 years, but he was once a well known face at country fairs.

Occasionally still on the streets of Limerick, he meets old farmers from places like North Tipperary who "tell me that there isn't a pig going into the town of Nenagh now."

## Fate sealed

To this day, Mr. McNamara remembers 1935 as the date when his own fate and that of all the pig dealers were sealed. He makes no secret of his bitterness towards the Fianna Fail Government of the day and says that when they introduced fixed pricing: "they were trying to get rid of the dealers, and they succeeded."

He went into pig buying himself because his uncles on his mother's side were well-known pig dealers, but there was no money in it, he maintains, "only

hardship." Many of the older inhabitants of St. Mary's Parish who refer to the "elitism" of some of the pig buyers, and who are themselves steeped in nationalism, say that the pig buyers were responsible for the name "Little England" being applied to the area.

Pig buying was apparently a skill in the parish long before the establishment of the bacon industry in the city, and it is reasonable to assume that their origins as dealers began in supplying the garrisons of the city. It is certainly a fact that their skills as pig buyers helped determine the outcome of the Great War when Limerick bacon went to the front.

But even in later years, their clients weren't always the farmers. Pigs were kept in abundance in many parts of the city

when the bacon industry was thriving, and Deputy Frank Prendergast recalls in his youth people calling on houses with

large boxes to collect offal for their pigs.

## Flavour

O'Mara's, Denny's and Shaw's are gone. The flavour of Limerick bacon has been diluted by the changing circumstances and social upheavals of what we like to call progress.

The last pig dealer of Athlunkard Street, Des Reid, drives a taxi now for a living and declines to talk of his skill as a pig buyer.

The skill and reputation that once brought prosperity to Athlunkard Street is no longer passed on. As Anthony McNamara says: "It is finished."

# O'DONNELL REPORT APPROVED

By A SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

AFTER ALL the controversy in recent months in the European Parliament about the reform of the Common Agricultural Policy — and particularly the disastrous outcome for Ireland of the annual Agricultural Prices Debate last week — the Parliament displayed a most unusual degree of unanimity last Friday when it unanimously approved a major report drawn up by Tom O'Donnell, T.D., M.E.P., on the effects of the Common Agricultural Policy on the different European regions.

## Significance

During the debate in the Parliament, MEPs from all the political parties in the Parliament and from all the E.E.C. member countries congratulated Mr. O'Donnell on the quality of his report and in the vote at the end of the debate the report was adopted unanimously.

The report is "of special significance to Ireland because it brings out very clearly the exceptionally high degree of dependency on agriculture and on agricultural related industries, which is characteristic of the Irish economy".

It emphasises the "disastrous consequences" which any cutback on the Common Agricultural Policy would have, not merely for the Irish farming community but



Mr. O'Donnell

for the Irish economy also. The O'Donnell report recommends that special consideration should be given to Ireland and to other

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The important thing about schools is that, in all cases, it from the parents themselves initiative for the establishment of schools came.

There are now 50 such schools in the country; they are to be found in all the provinces, and on both sides of the Border.

All-Irish primary school is in operation in Newcastle West since year, and within the past year, have been opened in Cork and two more are about to be opened there.

A meeting in connection with the establishment of the Southill school will be held in the Southill Community Centre next Monday evening, 28th April, at 8.30.

## Ashe — Emly Youth Notes

THE MOST exciting programme has been planned for the summer over the next few weeks for the youth service. Involved in the Youth Service, the week Newport and Birdhill battled for winner of 'Brain of the Region' and Newport gained victory over Birdhill. Well done to the clubs. Next week, April 24, is in the Tipperary area will be to find a winner in that area, which will take place in the Community Centre, Room 3, on Thursday, April 24. Supporters all are welcome to attend.

INTERNATIONAL Youth takes place on Saturday, April 26. You can make this a memorable and exciting day by organising a special event. Why not do something positive, like planting a tree, visit an elderly person in your community, be involved with local handicapped groups. The important thing is: Just do something special for this day.

TWO DAYS OF canoeing and rowing will take place in conjunction with T.W.A.C., Tipperary Water and Sports Adventure Club. Four places have been entered to the Youth Service. First one, first served. Applications to go to Youth Office by Thursday, April 24th.

HOW TO organise a summer holiday training programme in your club, parish or community. 24th, 31st of May and 7th June, from 10.30 to 6.30 p.m. Venues 3 times to be confirmed.

THE PRESENTATION of certificates to leaders who completed leadership training courses 1 take place in The Rectory, Ardmore, Wednesday, May 7.

CLUB MEMBERSHIP and registration books are available in the Youth Office.

one of the Youth Service staff) will hold the next meeting (management group and leaders) will be held on May 5, 1986.

PLANNING FOR Youth-Air is now well under way with staff and volunteers from both Limerick and Clare working hard. Most of the work done depends on members going on the week-end if you are interested would you let us know as soon as possible? If you want further details please contact Meabh or Catherine at Limerick Youth Service.

DON'T FORGET to get your ticket for the Seafood evening being held at the Glentworth Hotel on Thursday, May 1st, 1986.

The event, held in association with IM, will consist of a cookery demonstration, and wine and soups will be served. Tickets, if available from Agatha Gorman at the Youth Service.

CHOICE — a weekend for young adults in the 20+ age group will be held at Ballyloughran house, Ballybunion, on the weekend May 9th - 11th, 1986.

The weekend invites people to explore the relationships that are important to them, in their lives and is for single or engaged people. To find out more please contact Gerry at Limerick Youth

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## GROUP SAVINGS

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