

Those Good Old Days In Mayo

By Martin Kelly

As Pádraic Colum reminds us in his poem, “An Old Woman of the Roads”:

O, to have a little house!
To own the hearth and stool and all!
The heaped up sods against the fire,
The pile of turf against the wall!

To have a clock with weights and chains
And pendulum swinging up and down!
A dresser filled with shining delph,
Speckled and white and blue and brown!

Thankfully, the clocks have moved forward one hour and the calorie loaded Easter eggs are now only a fading memory. Moreover, the Spring birds are returning and frantically gathering useful materials to build their nests. As the soil is gradually heating up and the dormant gardens are slowly awakening from their inert state. With the heating up of the soil, the Spring bulbs and shrubs are tentatively emerging from their Winter slumber. Meanwhile, according to folklore, daylight is extending by a hen’s step each day as we head towards the Summer equinox.

So! Before too long, my school year will be winding down and the long anticipated Summer holidays will thankfully have come around again. Today is my penultimate day in 5th Class in the Primary School at the Curragh Military Camp with Mrs Costello. We've been informed that after we return for the new school year, Mrs O'Brien will take over as our class teacher.

We've all said our fond goodbyes to Mrs Costello and, before departing, we gorged ourselves with lemonade and biscuits before dashing across the large school playground and out the decorative iron gates. The mind now focused on getting home and stashing my mála scoile (school bag) for the next eight weeks or so. After a ten minute trot home through the barracks, to McDonagh married quarters, I grabbed a piece of my mother's homemade bread topped with jam, before heading out to join with my friends.

Although I had reduced eyesight due to a progressive eye disease, not to worry. Now with holidays in the air and Spring in my step, I joined in a collection of interactive games taking place around our endless Curragh Camp playground. Participating in children's games, ranging from Queenie-Eye-Oh using a small handball to hopscotch around a chalk-marked area using a small sand-filled polish tin to kick on one leg to move the place marker. On occasions, it was Ring a Ring o' Rosie using a small hankie as the deadly symbol. More tellingly, on fine evenings, everyone around the married quarters joined in a communal skipping session, with children and adults joining together to enjoy this energetic exercise.

My mum's homemade bread had been baked in the oven of a heavy duty black iron range. The black range sat in one corner of our former British Army house which consisted of a small kitchen, an adjacent sitting room, a single upstairs bedroom and an extremely cold outside toilet. For a fridge, we had a built-in larder for storing the perishable food. There was a small white ceramic sink with a single cold tap. No mod cons to cater for all of our food storage along with washing and cleaning needs.

Nevertheless, with our annual holidays now on the horizon, apart from dealing with unending domestic chores, Mum was now focused on preparing our large holiday suitcase. Filling it with essentials for our annual country visit to her birth place in County Mayo. While my dad, Mike, a sergeant in the regular army, had arranged a requisition to purchase our rail tickets from the nearby Kildare rail station to our destination in Claremorris. Our Triumph bicycles were cleaned and oiled for hours of gallivanting around the gravel roads and boreens of South Mayo. These sturdy bicycles will be our principle modus operandi once we arrive at my Uncle Johnny's holding off the Ballinrobe road.

After departing Kildare and a couple of train changes at Portarlinton and Athlone, it's onward and upward now on the Westport train as it scoots up Gallagher's Hill on the final leg into Claremorris Railway Station.

Claremorris Rail Station is acknowledged as a hub for pilgrims across Ireland and beyond as they make their way to the Holy Shrine at Knock where, in 1879, a reputed apparition began for a group of local villagers. The Knock Shrine is recognised by the Catholic Church as a place of faith, hope and healing and, during our stay, we also made a visit to the Knock Shrine, to pray for a cure for my diminishing eyesight.

Dan Lavelle, the local hackney driver, had already been primed to meet us at the station to whisk us back to Gortlough. Once everything had been loaded up, we set off with our suitcase and bicycles now securely tied down. However, after a couple of miles on a regular tarred road we turned right onto a dirt road and headed up Caltra Hill on the run down to Gortlough and our

final destination. The Parish of Taugheen was my mother's birth place before she made her way to Kildare to marry Mike Kelly, who was then a soldier based on the Curragh Military Camp.

Once everything is off-loaded and, within a matter of minutes, our Sunday best is neatly stored away and it's into our conventional farming gear for the remainder of the holidays. My mother, Mary, dons one of her sensible cross-over aprons and we were suitably attired for our country holiday.

Naturally, adjusting to the unique features associated with a traditional thatched cottage was a challenge in itself. Adapting to no water on tap, a pottie under the bed or an outdoor dry toilet in the cart house wasn't pleasant but unavoidable. Moreover, we relied on a large tar barrel at the gable of the cottage to collect the rain water coming down off the roof, to cater for all of our general washing needs. Out of necessity, our drinking water was fetched from a local spring-well on a regular basis. During dry Summer spells, the emptied tar barrel was loaded onto the ass-cart and off we went to Lizzy Harley's bridge to fill the barrel from the gently flowing stream.

Unlike "An Old Woman of the Roads", the cottage did have a dresser filled with shining delph and family life routinely revolved around the comfort of the large open turf fireplace. Apart from the unique smell of burning turf, the fireplace also comprised a rotating iron structure called a "crane" where the blackened kettle and cooking pots hung expectantly over the open flames. The fireside hob held the blackened skillet pot surrounded with hot coals baking the homemade bread.

Believe it or not, back in those “good old days” in County Mayo, everyone headed to mass on Sundays. For us it was a two mile trip to Carramore Parish Church. In undertaking this weekly sojourn, Mum and myself accompanied Granny Brennan in the family's time-honoured fancy trap, drawn by Henry, the wise old grey donkey. Us all neatly turned out in our Sunday best with a thick comfort blanket covering our knees. We trundled along the narrow gravel roads to the rhythmic sound of the donkey's hooves, clip-clopping, keeping in time with the jingling traces.

Before too long, we pulled into McHugh's yard (a public house) located within walking distance to the church. The faithful donkey was released from between the shafts before being presented with a tasty nose bag to keep him chewing happily until we returned to tackle up for our return journey. In those “halcyon days”, attending the Sunday mass was obligatory with the whole community coming together dressed in their Sunday best. As the church bell rang out to summon the awaiting gathering flock, we followed like sheep into the chapel.

Slowly making our way up the main aisle, with the women and children taking their places on the left and the men suitably suited and booted, taking up positions on the right. Fortunately, living in a bucolic society meant that weekly church visits offered an ideal opportunity to check in with neighbours. In addition, allowing time to catch up on farming news or occasionally transact outstanding farming business.

Immediately on our return to Gortlough, the Sunday clothes were quickly stored away in their camphor-laden retreat. Before the family all gathered together to revel in the traditional Sunday dinner. With the jelly and ice-cream under the belt, it was bicycle time for us youngsters so off we went exploring for

the afternoon. While the adults relaxed with their cup of tea while perusing the Sunday newspapers. Back then in good old holy Ireland, Sunday was regarded as a rest day and only weather-related essential jobs were undertaken during this designated period of “unnecessary servile work”. So! Everyone hoped that the Sunday prayers for fine weather would be answered by the man above. However, the weather occasionally disrupted our planned Sunday adventures overruling the prevailing religious constraints as saving the crops always took precedence over Church dogma.

Given our state of semi-isolation and largely relying on self-sufficiency, our Sunday chicken dinner had earlier been peacefully picking up grubs and cackling happily around the yard before Aunt Mary selected a plump candidate to add extra flavour to the stew pot. Meanwhile, as enterprising young farmers, our contribution to the Sunday special was a visit to the cottage garden to dig out potatoes and pull fresh vegetables to complement the Sunday treat. Just imagine! Fresh vegetables along with Arran Banner potatoes enhanced with a sliver of fresh country butter.

Speaking of country butter, the butter-making process involved the whole family participating as tradition required the household to give the churn handle a twist, believing this practice would encourage the process and bring the cream solids to the top for gathering. The rhythmic beat of the churn changed as the creamy solids separated and rose to the top. Before being transferred into a large wooden bowl where salt was added to assist in the butter-making operation. Of course, nothing useful was ever wasted back then. The remaining butter-milk was retained for mixing with the flour and moulded

into the desired shape, before being placed into the blackened skillet pot.

One significant memory for me occurred when visiting the cowhouse at milking time. With Uncle Johnny encouraging me to approach the cow for a closer look, before turning the cow's tit with hot milk into my angelic face. Leaving me scarred for life with an unexpected hot milkshake. However, once the evening's milking was complete and the household's share set aside, we collected our milk buckets to feed the young calves now anxiously awaiting their evening treat. A firm rattle on a bucket handle soon brought them scampering enthusiastically along to the wooden gate to literally gallop down their own fresh milkshake fortified with some tasty calf nuts. To observe this ritualistic meal dance with tails rotating vigorously was certainly a sight to behold.

On inclement days with no work outstanding, we headed off to the family bog. Back again on the bikes and hit out for the large community bog to work on Uncle Johnny's turf plot. At this juncture, the turf had already been cut and spread out to dry around Easter time. At this point, the dried sods are already formed into dauphins, standing uniformly like well-trained soldiers on a military parade ground. The dauphins absorb the energy from the sun. While the gentle bog breeze passes over and through them. Depending on their density, turning them a colourful shade of light brown or solid black.

However, time moved along to stand down this colourful parade and remove the seasoned sods from their comfort blanket of soft purple heather bed. Thus moving the seasoned turf through the next phase in gathering this vital fuel source. The dried seasoned turf was now loaded onto wheelbarrows for

transferring from its heather bed to a solid footing up on the gravel roadside. The heavily laden barrows were transferring the turf sods for Uncle Johnny, to build the well-shaped sods into a large turf reek.

Fortunately for us, a selection of wheelbarrows was generally available around the expansive bogland as, again, the meitheal system applied so we could borrow the neighbours' barrows. These large wooden hand barrows are specially designed for bog work, comprising an enormous wooden wheel at the front with two large solid squat feet beneath the handles to prevent the load bogging down in the marshy terrain. In general, one of the roadside reeks was earmarked for sale, more than likely to a local "towny", thereby adding to the annual family income. The governing price was determined by the length of the given reek as the reek was sold by the yard.

Given that the family bog was quite a distance from the homestead and the work was energy sapping, we were always on high alert for Aunt Mary coming along the winding bog road on her ladies bicycle, carrying our picnic lunch. This normally consisted of bottles of tea wrapped in woolly socks with lots of freshly baked soda bread, along with our protein laden hard boiled eggs. Yum Yum! This was a feast fit for a king and not a crumb was left over to feed the skylarks singing melodiously above us and the mournful call of the curlew in the distance.

Once lunch was demolished, and while Uncle Johnny filled his dudeen (pipe) for a smoke, we took off like wild deer scampering over the marshy terrain in our private wilderness. Romping across the bogland and finding the widest bog hole to challenge our athleticism. However, after our short-lived leaping across bog holes, it was back to work and wheeling those

enormous barrows again. As pioneers in the biodiversity movement, any surplus turf mole was taken home and distributed across the vegetable garden. On occasions, scattered across the pig house floor as potential bedding and a favourite with the fattening pigs. Doubling up as a warm dry bed or an enticing surface to forage through with their nosy snouts.

Unlike saving the turf, saving the hay was absolutely weather-dependent. Once Martin Woolly entered the grassy meadow with a heavy duty mowing machine attached to his Massey Ferguson tractor, the smell of freshly mown hay would stimulate the most dormant of human senses. After the cutting of the meadow, it was time to roll up the sleeves, grab a hayfork or rake to begin the next phase in the haymaking process.

Firstly, came the scattering and loosening of the freshly mown grass to allow any moisture to evaporate. Once the grass had dried out into a pale greenish-yellow colour, it was ready to rake into neat large rows to prepare the next step of transforming the dried grass into solid haycocks. Not a grass coicheán of hay was wasted during the haymaking operation as the rakes' large wooden teeth gathered up every last wisp of dried grass, leaving the cut meadow as smooth as a well-tended bowling green.

By the end of a very long day, the meadow field had been transformed to a military display with symmetrical haycocks, standing uniformly in confirmation to our hard days labours. After a couple of weeks maturing in the Summer sunshine, it was time to disrupt this tranquil setting and draw each and every haycock back to the cottage and the adjacent large garden area. However, not before yet again using the

conventional meitheal system. Our personal “wagon train” of neighbours’ carts were assembled for the loading of the hay onto each cart and, like clockwork, we travelled back and over the road until the field was cleared, leaving a lush pasture. Before very long the after-grass had returned and the ruminants always enjoyed this luscious tasty treat.

In preparation for the Winter, the large garden area had already been prepared. Sticks and stones might break your bones but, on this occasion, the sticks and stones created a perfect foundation for the building of extra large garden cocks. The creation of these mighty structures was always great fun. As children, our role was reserved to playfully tramping around the cock’s circumference to compact the hay. In other words, innocently packing it tightly together while we were happily enjoying our homemade bouncy castle. Unknowingly, embedding the haycock to prepare it to withstand the coming Winter weather. Given that the farm animals would be housed for several months and rely on this food source to sustain them until Springtime when the whole cycle would begin once again.

The next seasonal farming operation was the cutting and saving of the oats and barley. The fields containing these seed crops had been planted around Easter time and, since then, were happily maturing in a sea of green. However, nature moved everything along and this emerging sea of green slowly converted to an eye-catching golden glow. While the lengthening strands fluttered and whispered gently in the Summer breeze. As the seed heads filled to bursting, it was time to focus on the cutting and saving of another important food source. Unlike the hay-making, this time it was rolling down the sleeves to protect the skin from chafing - as the strands might be prickly - as we bundled and tied the individual

sheafs. Dropping them behind us and moving adroitly to gather and tie the next one.

Again, it was all hands on deck as we followed systematically after Uncle Johnny as his long handled scythe made a swishing sound as the sharpened, curved blade brought the long strands to their knees. Again, working efficiently as a well-honed team, we rolled and tied the wheat sheaves while next in line built the neatly-tied bundles into stooks. Each stook generally contained ten sheafs with two on top, acting as a protective cover over each stook. At the end of the process, there were long lines of upstanding stooks now decorating the closely-cut stubbled area. Similar to the hay, once the moisture had evaporated, the stooks were ready to build into larger stacks.

However, just like the transferring of the haycocks, these stacks were also loaded onto carts and drawn back to the large garden area close to the cottage. On completion, all standing proudly and colourfully beside the neighbouring haycocks. Unlike the hay, the corn reeks would soon fall under the rotating beaters of the threshing machine. Once again, the local meitheal system would operate as the neighbours came together, accompanying the thresher around the village to separate the “wheat from the chaff” during this delicate process to produce animal bedding or feedstuff and, if necessary, fresh thatch to bolster the cottage roof. As this “beast of engineering” was off limits for children, our role was to stand by the seed shoots and fill the sacks then haul the filled bags into the prepared dry storage area.

The thresher arriving in the village was another noteworthy occasion as we all gathered together for the communal lunch which invariably evolved into a feast fit for a king as extra food

was prepared to feed the horde of ravenous workers. Apart from the plates of ham sandwiches, homemade apple or blackberry pies were always a welcome treat. At that time, the adults took a well-earned smoking break along with their lunch as this incendiary practice was outlawed around the busy thresher. Once everyone was fed and watered and the cigarettes and pipes extinguished, it was back to work again to complete the threshing operation. Thereby, releasing this amazing machine to move - lock, stock and barrel - to the next small-holding on the thresher's list.

Living in virtual isolation, we always looked forward to the bi-weekly travelling shop calling to the end of the boreen. This facilitated some bulk-buying by Aunt Mary including large bags of flour, sugar and salt and also some animal feedstuffs and, more importantly, a fancy treat or bullseyes and emerald toffees for us children. The large cloth bags, once emptied, would be transformed into bed-sheets or pillow-cases as, back then, recycling was a necessity and, as I said, nothing useful was ever wasted.

My Aunt Mary had a hand-operated sewing machine and this was always on standby to repair damaged clothes or to create other tailored apparel. As the Summer was drawing to a close, and some of the mature farmstock were ready for the market, a day at the local Claremorris Fair is yet another memorable occasion for me. Aunt Mary would wake us at some ungodly hour to prepare for the task. After a hearty cooked breakfast, we would head to the bicycle shed and mount our trusty steeds. Our role, on this occasion, was to cycle ahead of the animals to guard against the livestock straying off the direct route to the Fair Green.

On arrival, we found a suitable holding area for the livestock and stood agape as we observed the bartering process unfold with the mutual slapping of palms until a reciprocal price was confirmed. After this customary exchange, it was into the nearest hostelry to complete the financial element of the deal. Our reward, as participants, was a serving of soup and sandwiches while the adults sealed the deal with something stronger. Regulations around alcohol and drink-driving were far more relaxed in those days as motorised vehicles were few and far between. As attending the celebrated market or fair was an integral part of country life, we never returned back to the cottage empty-handed. In general, time spent in the pub/grocers meant that essential groceries were purchased.

However, all good things must come to an end and the holidays in the extraordinary Gorklough thatched cottage were closing in for me. On our return from Claremorris, after another market day, my Aunt Mary informed us that "the men in suits" from the Land Commission had called to Gorklough earlier that morning. This resulted in Aunt Mary and Uncle Johnny travelling up to Castle McGarrett, the former landed estate of Lord Oranmore and Browne, the vast estate which the Irish Land Commission had purchased towards improving life chances for local small farmers.

Not surprisingly, my Aunt Mary was really keen to take us up to Castle McGarrett to view a potential site for the Brennan family to relocate. So! It was back onto our trusty bicycles once again to head for the Browne Estate. We entered through the northern gates and worked our way along a very run-down avenue, avoiding serious potholes as we carefully made our way to the designated site. As you can imagine, my Aunt Mary was all excited to take us around the site with timber pegs

marking out the location of a bungalow, animal sheds and other outhouses. So we moved through the virtual rooms and outhouses, while trying to build a mind's eye picture.

However, as the sun was sinking in the west and twilight approaching, it was time to saddle up and head back to the tranquillity of the little whitewashed thatched cottage to carry on with the “daily jobs” before supper. Closing up the henhouse in the evening, with the poultry now sitting serenely on their perches, brought each farming day to a peaceful end.

Alas! After our final meal of the day, we took our favourite spots around the kitchen and dropped onto our knees for Aunt Mary to lead a Decade of the Rosary. Then it was lights-out for everyone and the conclusion of yet another busy farming day in that memory laden “Little House”.