

Images of a Free Range Childhood

MEMORY is electric – it selects the pleasant scenes and leaves the unpleasant buried in the depths of the mind. It tends to paint them a rosy colour thus exaggerating the impression of what may have been an ordinary scene in reality but becomes technicoloured in 3D to preserve its retention.

Cloonfad – Cluain Fhada – the long meadow – a small village on the main Galway/Mayo route just a quarter mile from the Mayo border and one mile from the Galway border, complete with two schools – Boys & Girls, a Post Office, New Church (St. Patricks built in 1932), four shops and two pubs, Dance Hall, and Ball Alley, and a Garda Barracks with 2-3 guards and a Sergeant was where I grew up. Not a typical village, today nothing left of that.

We, my two bothers and cousins and I were baptised in the Old Church – very dark inside with a wooden floor and a big hole just inside the front door as you stepped down. We made our first confession and Communion in the New Church built in 1932 with donations from the USA & England – wherever relatives could be reached with books of tickets specially printed with a photo of the New Church in construction and Whist Drives and Raffles. I think the total cost was £5,000 at that time. Altar The builder Jim Kilgarriff fell off the scaffolding and died from his injuries). The photo taken from the garden of our house (now O'Malleys) shows the Bellfry of the old Church and the gable of the new being build. The curate at that time was Fr. Malachy Concannon a very popular man and his housekeeper/chauffeur (had a Hillman car) Maggie Concely. He was succeeded by Fr. Jarlath Canney who was young and just back from the mission fields of Africa. He was very

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Growing up in Cloonfad in the 30's and 40's

popular a great Gardener and music lover and introduced us in the Choir to Plain Chant and we later took part in a Choral Festival in Tuam. He was succeeded by Fr. Martin Lee, a quite man who held the record for Mass-15 minutes!!.

Cars were essential to get anywhere. We had a standard 9 bought in 1932-until 1952 in Archers of Dublin, we all learned to drive it. Flood had a Citroen, and the new Baby Ford – £90 ex.Cork, we went to Caseys of Roscommon to collect it. Those were the days!!

My earliest memory is going to Mass on Christmas morning, the frost glistening on every tree the road white and slippery and the stained glass windows of the New Church lit with green and pink glass oil lamps shining like beacons in the dark of a winter morning. This was when we had 3 masses (in Latin) on Christmas morning 8:00, 9.30, 11:00 and fasting from midnight – all said by the one priest.

The Church was very cold and the heating was from paraffin oil stoves – the lamps and stores all tended by James Flood who also with Owen McCormack and Jim Kilraine sat in the cold porch to take the names of the Christmas collection. After

Christmas the full list of names and their contributions would be read out at the two masses – amounts ranging from £5, 10/=-, 5/=-, 2/6 and 1/=- “old” money and multiply by 10 for today's values.

The Congregation came on foot, bicycle, side car, pony and trap all parked outside McCormacks and Floods yard. The 'style' at Sunday Mass was something I remember, and unlike today everyone wore their Sunday best going to Mass then and even during war time the Standard was kept up and was quite a distraction ! Inside the Church the glow from all the lamps on each window, the big candles on the Altar, the crib decked out with ivy and straw (by James Flood) and the little black man in front who nodded his head in thanks for our pennies. Is he still there ?

I was in the Choir and we sang the Mass in Latin Gregorian late and Plain Chant and hearing the Adeste sung in Latin (pavorotti does a fine rendering today) is the sound of by-gone Christmas for me. Then home to a breakfast of rashers and sausages and the joy of Santa's gift and books, toys, games and sharing them with our Flood Cousins.

Having a “real live Santa” in full dress (my Father) calling to our house or our cousins each Christmas made him very real and credible. When we asked childish questions as to how he got here and from where we got a short answer. However our belief in Santa lasted till I was 12!

No TV in those days but instead a round of “parties” in each of our cousins homes – 6 in all – a large extended family of Uncles, Aunts and two sets of Grandparents made Christmas a real feast of goodies washed down by unlimited quantities of red lemonade from Syphons. The party lasted till midnight with a card

game for the grown-ups and our our games for us ending with a sing song and "A Perfect Day" (by my Father).

The radio or wireless kept us informed and was run off a large Exide Battery which had to be brought to the Garage in Ballyhaunis every two weeks to be charged. On Sundays in summer some of the football fans would gather outside our front window to listen to the Match – GAA of course, the Connaught Final & All Ireland finals broadcast from Athlone receiver.

I remember hearing the news of "The War in Spain" as I climbed the stairs at 8:00 pm for bed, the awful Civil War of '36-39 in which the Irish Brigade fought against Communism and which was the forerunner of the Second World War '39-'45 which cast its shadow on our young lives with food and clothes rationing, coupons for petrol, black out blinds for our windows.

I enrolled in a Red Cross Course given in the Boys School by Dr. Duffy while the young and older men joined the Local Defence Forces and wore green uniforms.

The startling appearance of a Barrage Balloon, escaped from Britain somewhere and sailing over Cloonfad in 1940, with basket and wires trailing over the houses and trees caused consternation and an emergency crisis. L.D.F were called out to save us from this strange Invader but it sailed on and was captured later – where I can't remember?

Owne McCormack held the agency for the Holland-American Line, and prewar the Big Liners, the "Mauritania" and "Rotterdam" came into Galway Bay as well as Cobh with returned "Yanks" some on holiday and some for good. I remember watching the cars laden with trunks coming from Galway on Sunday afternoons in summertime.

Outside McCormacks was a

huge billboard – Poster of Uncle Sam and the Stars and Stripes pointing to USA. My Father, James Flood (himself a returned Yank) and Owen McCormack had planned a trip to the New York World's Fair in Summer 1939 to visit cousins there but had to cancel due to the crisis in Germany and the eventual outbreak of the war on 3rd Sept 1939.

Looking back with Technicoloured memory, it seems to me that Summers were hot and sunny with the frightening Thunder and Lightening summer storms which made us hide under the table or bed till it passed. In the warm sunny days we



Ciaran, Brendan and Collete Fahy in the 1930's.

would take off our shoes like most of our school mates and burst the tar bubbles with our toes. Our dog a White Terrier called Ginger Dick, (after the Curly Wee series in the Irish Independent) was our constant companion for 14 years and we would throw him in from the Bridge to test his swimming ability in the deep water below. He is buried in the garden beside the river which played an important part in our summer activities – catching the little fish (leebeens) and sometimes crayfish which were stuffed down someones neck. The advent of Duffys and Tupperfields Circus for "one night only" was a major event in our lives.

Summer – helping in the hayfield with our cousins and Grandfather in Lavallyroe – with cans of fresh buttermilk and tea and hot-buttered currant cake for refreshment. The smell of new-mown hay (now

almost gone with silage) brings back the tastes and smell of summer.

Day trips to the sea at Salthill or Enniscrone with buckets and spades and flasks of tea and 'sandy' sandwiches were a great treat. We played hurling and 'Rounders' and 'tennis' with imaginary nets. We 'camped' in the garden in fine weather and even slept in the tent weather permitting.

Winters were dark and cold and frosty and we made slides on the road or tested the ice on the frozen river which usually gave away (we had books galore and comics from America and games like Ludo, Snakes & Ladders, and card games 25 and 110 to pass the long winter evenings). The year was divided into two periods – School and holidays. School and lessons and homework with little time to play in the dark winter evenings. If you were in the Choir or an Altar boy you got time off from School for the 11 o'clock High Mass for which the Altar Boys got paid (1/=) a shilling (5p), the Choir didn't.

In summer when the weather was hot, classes were held outside in the yard. We did Irish dancing in the evenings and also had a mouth organ band. We did Irish Drama and both our schools took part in the Taidhbhearc Theatre in Galway and we got prizes for our performances.

Dancing and Dance Halls were a very important part of Social Life for the 'grown-ups' in every community in rural Ireland in the 40's and 50's.

On Sunday nights except during Lent and Advent Burke's Hall – the "ballroom of Romance" run by Peg Gannon would be packed with young people from all the surrounding areas, Dunmore, Williamstown, Garrafrauns, Ballinlough most came by bicycle – some grouped together and took a car here. It was out of bounds for me but stories of the current 'lines' or romances as well as rows outside the

hall were relayed to me next day by our housekeeper Peg (Regan RIP). Being continually reminded by the Sunday sermon that 'Company Keeping was sinful' did not deter the spirit of youth. I wondered then (as I do now) if you didn't 'keep company' what were you to do?

Of course no intoxicating drink was served – only 'minerals' and a favourite introduction "Would you care for a Mineral" after led to a lifetime union.

Later, in the 50's the Ballroom at Tureen ran by Fr. James Horan, later C.C. Cloonfad, become a legend in the Dance World with all the Big Bands and was so popular that even the Devil himself with cloven hoof was "seen" there a big scoop for the Media in those days !.

Respect for authority in the person of Teachers, Parents, Priest, Gardai the deterrent factor was always there. We sometimes got slapped with the cane on the hands and sore it was too when we deserved it for trespassing or breaking the rules but it

did us no harm – only made us determined not to get caught again.

Teenage years were during the War, Boarding School from 12-18 meant incarceration during term and 'freedom' during holidays. Altar No holiday jobs and pocket money was scarce and carefully 'pooled'. We went everywhere on bicycles whatever the weather – to football matches or golfcourse in Ballyhaunis in Summer. No private cars during the Emergency war years. We cycled the six miles to Ballyhaunis to the Cinema in Parochial Hall " the Pictures" and home again afterwards often by moonlight without any fear of being 'attacked' – it never even occurred from A star-Studded era of Hollywoods Best stars and motion pictures helped to create another 'gliding' world in contrast to our ordinary one. No sex or violence and no problem about moral issues. The only violence was a good push out in the Saloon Bar when the hero knocked out the baddie who had it coming to him. Nearly always the happy ending

the hero got the girl and the baddie is clamped in jail by the Sheriff and his posse clear cut morals – right versus wrong and right always wins the day.

Idyllic years ? Hardly. Innocent, yes and even blissfully ignorant of all the present day evils now shattering the lives of the young today. We had to make our own fun and games and amuse ourselves and grow up in an era without TV, Videos, Crime sex and violence in a small but closely knit village. In 1947 we moved to 'town' – Ballyhaunis and a new post-war era began. Altar In 1953 our worlds divided and we went our separate ways 'abroad' – my brothers to Japan and Florida and new civilisations.

But perhaps the life style in the security of the small village, protected as we were, in our early formative years, sustained us and helped us to adjust to a new world of rapidly changing values. Memory may play tricks but I remember Cloonfad as a happy carefree place where it was nearly always – Summer.

Remembering a Cloonfad Teacher

THE HIGHLIGHT for most Irish emigrants on holiday is a visit to the local pub for a chat with old school mates. Inevitably the conversation would almost certainly revert to schooldays. A name that constantly turns up within Kiltullagh Parish is Brendan Kelly, who died 10 years ago.

Brendan spent most of his teaching years within the parish of Kiltullagh where he was held with great affection by his students and fellow teachers alike. He came from a long line of teachers. His maternal grandparents, Timothy Flatley and his wife lived and taught for many years in Coolafarna, Ballyhaunis. Their daughter, Josephine, Brendan's mother later came to teach in Carrick National School. On his paternal side his grandmother also taught in Carrick.

Brendan was born in Coolatinny House, October 29th., 1927. He received his primary school education in Carrick National School where his mother was teaching. After finishing primary school, Brendan went as a boarder to St. Jarlath's College, Tuam. He finished his secondary education in 1946 and went to University College Dublin. He received a B.A and a H. Dip in education. Brendan



Brendan and Ailish Kelly.

then trained as a National School teacher in St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra. His first permanent position was as principal in Carrick National School, Ballinlough.

Around this time he met his future wife Noirin Walsh, Kiltmagh, whom he wed in 1959. He was appointed as Principal Teacher of the Cloonfad Boys National School. While in Cloonfad, he started a juvenile football team and spent most of his free time training and transporting them to matches. Brendan had a passionate interest in politics. He was a founding member of the C.Y.M.S., a life long member of the St. Vincent de Paul Society, and a worker for Fr. McDyer's Save the West campaign.

Brendan's last post as teacher was as principal of Carrick National School, the school that had so many happy memories for the Kelly family. In 1979 his health began to deteriorate and he took early retirement in 1982. He spent the remaining years of his life in and out of hospitals. He always kept his sense of humour despite his long illness. He will always be remembered by his former pupils, colleagues and friends.