

DANCES AND FAIRS OF LONG AGO

Introduction

A regular correspondent, Mr. Jimmy Smith - formerly of Lissummon, now resident in Blackburn - sent us the following recollections of his youthful days.

When I look back on my youthful days in the Jerrettspass area of Co. Armagh, I often wonder where I got all the energy. Leaving the public elementary school in July 1939, I took a "temporary" job on a local farm, but it turned out to be for the duration of the war, because of the "essential works order". The hours were long and tiring, and I didn't get home until about 7.30. So there was rarely time to cycle the 7 miles to town for a bit of entertainment. Sunday was a busy day - to the farm for milking and stock feeding, then home to change for church; a couple of hours free in the afternoon, and back again for the evening milking and foddering. All for a small, fixed weekly wage.

For us country lads Friday was the time for the "all-night" dances (often finishing about 3 in the morning). We usually managed to find one every Friday - maybe at Tullyhappy, Mountnorris, Clare. If you took a girl home from the dance and she happened to live in the opposite direction, it often meant there was only time to change clothes and go straight to work. In the dance halls there were always more men than girls - a situation made worse by the presence of Army camps and the girls' preference for soldiers! Mostly there were quick steps and foxtrots, with a few old-time and square dances thrown in. They were always a few men standing just inside the doorway and every now and then they would shout "Give us the Lancers". For some it was their only dance of the night, and all hell broke loose; girls' legs were flying in all directions when they swung.

On a Saturday night, it was an awful rush to get to town for the second half of the "pictures". Our cottage was on a long lane called "the big loanin", with high grassy banks on each side, sometimes I would feel a bump as the front wheel of the bike hit one of the banks (I was sleeping and pedalling at the same time). On the way to Newry I had to go down the very steep Blue Hill. In the darkness it was tricky enough. The blackout meant that cycle lamps had to be shaded. I often think of the enormous trouble I took to visit the cinema - nowadays I wouldn't walk down the road to see a film!

Regularly my mother walked the 3 miles there and back to Poyntzpass to fetch the groceries. Country miles always seemed longer than town miles - and it was no joke carrying a heavy basket in each hand, including a stone of flour for bread-making. Once a week the travelling grocer arrived with his vanload at the nearest crossroads or the top of the lane. During school holidays it was the children's job to watch for the van - and it was worthwhile, as he always had some boiled sweets to give round. The sweets came in 4-quart cans, and many an empty one my mother

had from her grocer they came in handy for carrying buttermilk.

Dotted here and there through the countryside were little shops which sold small items such as bread, tea, sugar, sweets and cigarettes. Sometimes on a Saturday night it was my job to go to the local shop for a neighbour's bread, which was usually delivered at 10 o'clock from a horse drawn Inglis breadcart, on top of which sat Alex Robb. He turned up in all weathers, and still had to work his way back to Newry to park his van, pay in, feed and stable his horse, and then cycle out to Tullyhappy where he lived. On dark winter evening I always preferred to go across the fields to the shop, as I had a fear of meeting gypsies on the road. The short cut meant walking through the yard of a bachelor farmer. If I saw a light in the kitchen I felt secure; but sadly one night he was killed in a car accident. After that I still used the same route, but you couldn't have seen my heels for smoke as I ran through that yard-in case I would meet Tommy's ghost.

In the 1930s most towns and large villages had a Fair Day. Poyntzpass fair was on the first Saturday in the month and was held in the main street. As there were very few cattle trucks in those days, "Wee fellas" were in great demand to help walk the cattle to the fairs; it was their job to go in front and stand at the crossroads to guide the animals through, or to stand in gaps in the hedgerows to stop the cattle going into the fields. If they did get in, it was up to the "Wee fellas" to get them out again. It was hard work all right, but I always looked forward to going to the fair. If the farmer sold his livestock, he would usually go to the hardware shop for his nails and bolts, (or for a drink with one of his cronies). This gave me time to have a walk round and purchase a fourpenny "slider" from Tommy Price, the ice-cream man.

The cattle dealers generally wore brown boots and "warehouse" coats over their market suits. The farmer and his helper stood on the street herding their animals. Along would come a dealer and offer a price which the farmer would often refuse. Then they were joined by a couple of men (the dealer's pals). After a lot of "prigging", one of the cronies would suggest a final offer and the dealer would say: "Hold out your hand - and don't break Alberts word." (Albert was probably the biggest crook in town). The deal was clinched by a hard slap on the farmer's hand. Some dealers would spit on the hand first. Then a luck-penny would be given to the dealer. If my man sold his cattle I usually got a shilling (5p today) and a lift home in a van or spring trap. If unsold, it was a matter of walking the animals home again and having a free tea.

The council workmen had overtime sweeping and scraping the streets after the fair. I wish they would hold a fair in Blackburn. I could do with some manure for my garden!