

SARA AND MINNIE SAVAGE

MEMOIRS

Between 1981 and 1986 a group of local young people were involved in a project which aimed to produce a weekly community 'newspaper' known as 'The Pass Times'. During that time over 200 editions of 'The Pass Times' were produced, each of which contained an interview with locals who because of their work, hobbies, sporting achievements or life experiences, had an interesting story to tell. These interviews now form an invaluable part of the Local History Society's archive and it is hoped that future editions of 'Before I forget...' will include some of them.

In December 1985 two young members of the group, Catherine Magennis and Kathryn O'Loughlin, interviewed Sara and Minnie Savage in their home at Laurel Hill, Cullentragh, Lissummon about their family history and memories of times past. The following is a transcript of their interview.



Sara Savage



Minnie Savage

The sisters Sara and Minnie Savage were born at the family home 'Laurel Hill' in the townland of Cullentragh, Lissummon, about 3 miles from Poyntzpass. Sara was born in 1903 and Minnie in 1908. They were the daughters of Robert Savage and his wife Jane. Their world was small and focused on home and family, school and church, the local community with the occasional trip to Poyntzpass or Newry. Although very talented, the sisters had little opportunity to further their education but their talents showed in many different ways.

Minnie, the more out-going of the two, was a talented actress enjoying taking part in various plays with Jerrettspass Amateur Dramatic Society. She was always keen to ensure that the talents of her more reserved sister, Sara, were appreciated. Sara wrote a number of poems which lovingly and graphically evoke a way of country life, familiar in her childhood but rapidly disappearing. Some of her poems were published in earlier editions of 'Before I forget..' She also created a series of models depicting scenes from the traditional farming life. Her models, made from scraps of material gathered around the house, are remarkable for their detail and in examining them one cannot fail to appreciate the love and care with which they were made.

Over the years the sisters built up a collection of artefacts from bygone days which formed a private museum in their home and these along with Sara's models were donated to our Society for safe keeping. Our Society owes the sisters a huge debt of gratitude. We have used pictures of some of Sara's models as illustrations here.

Our grandfather, Alexander Savage was born in the Ballylaggan district of Derry, not far from Coleraine. As a young man he did some private teaching to gentlemen's sons, in one case walking six miles to teach a family and six miles home. When he had enough money gathered up he was able to enter a theological college to train for the ministry. He became

a minister in the Reformed Presbyterian Church and came here to Ballenon in 1849.

When members of the congregation lived within four or five miles he walked to visit them but when visiting members further afield, he went on horseback.

His salary was small - £70 or £80 a year - but he was able to buy some land here and started the building of



Robert Nesbitt Savage and Jane Elizabeth Irvine, parents of Minnie and Sara Savage.

this house, Laurel Hill, where we still live. That was about 1855. In 1858, he married Sarah Nesbitt of Glascar, Loughbrickland, whose grandmother had been taught by Patrick Bronte, father of the famous novelists. They had nine children.

Father and his brothers and sisters went to Taniockey School, two Irish miles away. Mr and Mrs Watson were the teachers. There was a Boys School and a Girls School with the teachers' residence in between. In warm weather Mrs Watson took the senior girls out to sit on the grass to do their sewing. Three nights a week Mr Watson took boys, who had left school, back for extra classes in mathematics, science and so on. There was very little chance of going to secondary school in those days, especially for country lads with no money to pay fees and no means of transport.

Father left school at twelve years of age because he was needed to work on the farm but after a hard day's work, maybe following horses ploughing or harrowing, he was still glad to walk to Taniockey for that extra bit of education. The old Ministry of Education awarded Certificates of Proficiency in these subjects taken at the night classes. Mr Watson was also able to teach Latin and prepare young men for entrance to University. Several went into the Church or Medicine via Mr Watson's teaching.

When my father was at school there was no house-to-house postal delivery then. A man came to the school twice a week from Poyntzpass and left letters at the school, which were given to senior pupils by the master to bring home. When a letter came from America it was delivered to the house by an old woman who was paid

four pence. She had to give three pence to the postmaster and kept one penny for herself. She was usually given tea and she waited to hear the letter read. As many of those who left here worked together in the States the letter would contain news of several. Perhaps only one of a group like this was able to write home and so the old woman was able to tell their friends how they were.

Father remembered a time when fever broke out in the countryside round here. One family near us lost seven members within a week. For a long time *'Fever graves'* would be pointed out in Lissummon graveyard. He told us that a young girl who could write letters was called to the window of a house where there was fever and asked to write a letter to their kinsfolk in the States. Father paid for the stamp as money daren't be passed out of the house.



The flax pullers

The girl who wrote that letter later married and had a large family of her own. She became what was known as a *'handy-woman'* doing such jobs locally as acting as a midwife and laying out corpses. Father remembered two of the girls who survived the fever out of that house coming here to gather ears of corn round the harvest field so they could feed their hens with a wee bit of grain. They refused to enter our house as they still felt they might smite someone, so our grandmother brought out broth and dumplings to them.

Father remembered that when he was first going to school, he was warned what to do if he and his brothers and sisters met a mad dog on the road, for at that time rabies was very common. They were to jump the ditch and lie still, for it was said that a dog with rabies was never known to look left or right. One time an aunt of ours was on the road when she saw a mad dog coming towards her. He was foaming at the mouth so she ran to a house as fast as she could and shouted to men who were working there, to look out for a mad dog was coming. One of the men lifted a brick and as the dog passed the gate he hit him as hard as he could. The dog never seemed to give any indication of pain and continued on his way. Later, one of the men got a gun and shot him.

On another occasion, a mad dog came running into a farm yard and a little boy ran over to it for it was the family pet. The dog snapped at the child and drew blood. The parents knew that in a given time the child would develop rabies so the father and uncle took the child and smothered him between two feather ticks. It seems that they were allowed to do this by law for there

was no known cure and the victim suffered a most agonising death.

We got our early education at Lissummon National School. It was a mixed school with around one hundred pupils at that time. Early on the principal was a Mrs McDonnell. Her daughter Patricia was the second teacher. Later on Patricia became principal. They gave a very thorough training in the 'three R's' with a good amount of character training thrown in. The girls were taught sewing and cookery.

Senior pupils who showed promise and wanted to go to the teaching profession were made 'monitors' and taught as student teachers. They sat for a King's Scholarship Examination which, if they passed, admitted them to training college. Some senior pupils stayed behind on certain days to sweep and dust the school rooms. We were asked to bring one shilling per winter towards buying coal. In summer some children went barefoot. Their feet needed to be well-hardened for the roads at the time had a gravel surface rolled in with wet clay.

Doctors were not often sent for as there were people who could treat patients with herbal remedies and poultices, which were often used. A local shoemaker was good at pulling teeth. There would usually be a few men in the shoemaker's house of an evening having boots soled. If somebody wanted a tooth pulled, the shoemaker would put his pincers in the fire in order to sterilize them. The patient was given a mouthful of raw whiskey or poteen and put into an armchair where two men held his or her arms. When the pincers were cool, the shoemaker pulled the tooth. The patient was then given more whiskey to



One man and his dog

clean out his mouth. Father said that no one was ever known to have any trouble with their gums afterwards. He said the shoemaker wouldn't pull a tooth for anybody under sixteen years of age.

There was always a 'cow doctor' in the district. He worked with natural remedies – dandelion and other herbs. A pea of garlic was sometimes put in an animal's dewlap to prevent the dreaded 'Black-leg' disease. This cow-doctor was not to be confused with those people who would have been sent for to remove a charm supposed to have been put on animals and especially cows whose milk yield dropped or whose milk wouldn't churn into butter. It was supposed that an ill-wishing neighbour had 'blinked' them. Locally a lady called 'Saucy Mary' would have been sent for, or another called 'Susie the Shot'.

Looking back over seventy years, we feel that the spring



One man sowing corn out of sheet and man harrowing

planting and sowing and again the harvest times were very busy and happy times for country children. Thinking of the corn harvest - for there were few other cereals grown then – we remember a couple of men going out with scythes to 'open' a field of corn. That was to mow a swathe around the field so that the mowing machine, drawn by two strong hairy-legged Clydesdale horses, could be driven in to start mowing the crop.

Usually an elderly man sat in the driving seat (of the mowing machine) to guide the horses. A younger man sat on the other seat nearer the crop and as the grain was cut he pulled it back with a wooden hay-rake to make an amount of one sheaf. It was said he was 'shaving'.

Usually women tied the sheaves and threw them back to make way for the horses on the next swathe. The 'shaving man' usually jumped off at the end and helped to tie as well. When the cutting was finished, the men set-to, to 'stook'. A stook was four sheaves, grain end up, stood together tucked in at the top.

As very small children we remember sitting inside a stook, a little tent-like shelter, waiting for father to finish stooking.

Given good winnowing weather the stooks were built into 'huts' or small stacks more-like, and tied down with hay ropes. There was no binder-twine then. These hay-ropes were made by a child walking backwards using a 'twister' (a piece of strong hooked wire), the father feeding in loose hay.

By-and-by the corn was judged ready to be drawn into the 'haggard', where it was built into large stacks or oblong barts, thatched with rushes and tied down with more hay-ropes, as one windy night could cause havoc in the haggard.



Threshing with flails

The harvest reached its climax when the steam *'thresher'* was coming. A lot of preparations had to be made - coal for stoking the engine, hemp meal bags, ready for holding the grain - maybe some had to be mended - and twine and packing-needles for sewing the tops of full bags of grain.



Savage Family Home, Laurel Hill, Cullentragh

The entrances into the haggards were mostly narrow, made for horses and carts and sometimes a pillar had to be taken down to allow the engine and the mill to pass through. This often annoyed older farmers when the son brought the new-fangled *'steamer'* in to thresh. Indeed one old man took to his bed and pulled the blankets over his head to drown the sound of this steam monster.

The steam threshing engine was the first *'horseless'* machine to come on the road and a law was passed limiting it to not travel over 8 miles per hour. By law, a man called a *'pilot'* had to walk in front of the machine. Very often this job was done by an old tramp, harmless, but doing this job for his keep. Sara remembers seeing such a one walking in front of Hugh John McDowell's steam engine.

The first car on this road that Sara remembers belonged to a firm of soap makers named Brown from Donaghmore, Co. Tyrone. That was in 1906 or 1907.

We should have said that prior to the steam-engine age, threshing was done in the barn by a portable threshing machine. This was rotated by an arrangement outside where a horse walked round and round and rotated an iron shaft setting cog wheels in motion. The horse walk was called a *'ginning'*. The same arrangement did churning.

Earlier still threshing was done with flails. There is a part double floor in our corn barn where flail threshing was done. Two open doors, opposite each other allowed the *'stoor'* (dust) to blow away.

When we think of harvest we usually think of cereal harvest - corn or barley. Just as important was the potato harvest. When we were young every farmer put in whatever acreage of potatoes he could afford, for the potato played a big part in the human diet, as well as feeding for poultry, pigs and indeed cattle too. There was a *'boiling house'* around most farm houses; a hearth with

fan bellows boiled large pots or boilers holding maybe a half-hundredweight of potatoes. When cooked the potatoes were pounded with a large wooden beetle. Yellow (maize) meal was mixed in for feeding hens and pigs with maybe buttermilk added.

Some people dug small acreage with spades. Indeed it was the only method before the mechanical digger, drawn by horses, came into use. Mostly women and children gathered potatoes and, in our school, *'potato-gathering holidays'* of a fortnight were granted. Potato baskets made of sally osiers were set at intervals up and down the field. When filled they would have held maybe half a hundredweight of potatoes. So two men came along and emptied them where they were to be stored all winter. An oblong grave-like patch dug out and lined with rushes able to hold one or two tons of potatoes was called a *'bing'*. The potatoes were well thatched with rushes and earth all over and clapped down with spades. In the early spring, a little at a time was uncovered so that seed could be picked out for sprouting for planting. The bing was well *'happed up'* again for fear of frost.

At the time there was a *'harvest home'* or *'churn'* held at the end of the harvest. When the last stalks were cut, they were plaited like a girl's hair and the oldest harvester brought home to the farm kitchen this plait of corn and threw it around the shoulders of the woman of the house. She laughed it off and it was then hung up in the rafters of the kitchen until the next harvest when it was replaced by a new one. It was said to be a survival of a fertility rite of pagan times.

The mother was the heart of the home and it was believed that the spirit of the harvest was driven into the last stalks of grain. We remember this being done in our house around 1913 or 1914. This was a gathering of all those who had helped to save the harvest. Neighbours all helped each other and these gatherings took place in large farmhouses as there was more room and all the workers and their wives were present. There was plenty of home-baked apple bread and currant soda; singers and fiddlers and story-telling, great crack generally. In our house the Sands family were the chief performers. They were the grandfathers of the present Sands group we've seen on television.

There were lots of tramps or travelling people in bygone days. They were mostly decent old people who had fallen on hard times. There was no old-age pension or homes for the old then. They came round this way at intervals, not too often. Many had a little bag divided into two or three compartments into which oatmeal, sugar or tea was put. Our grandmother told us that one man would ask her, *"Could you give me a wee smell of oatmeal"* or *"...a wee snuff of tea"?*

This grandmother would take wool from the sheep, wash the *'eak'* out of it and dye it with whin blossom or heather. She carded the wool, spun it into thread on a spinning wheel and knitted socks and stockings for her large family. She dried herbs like parsley for use in cooking.

During famine times her mother had made broth from potatoes and ham bones for starving people. One poor woman who came round to our mother's old home periodically, had lost both her arms when working in a

beetling mill. She got no compensation for her accident and had to beg for her living. Our grandmother always kept the linen flour-bags washed and bleached and always had a new chemise ready for her. Granny took her into a room where she washed her and put the clean clothes on her. Sometimes the travelling people had nicknames like 'Jack the flute'. Another was a tinker called Nailey Rice. He mended buckets and pots.

In our grandparents' time there were just tallow candles for light. There was a candle maker down the road. He bought raw tallow by the half-hundredweight and melted it in a 'cam' pouring it into a mould with a wick in the centre. The wick was inclined to fall over and burn the side out of the candle, so snuffers were used. These were scissor-like implements with a little box on the side to catch the burning wick. Father said he remembered 'resin slats', thin pieces of fir tree dipped in resin or oil and dried. This was stuck on an iron stand and lit. Rush lights were dipped likewise and set in stands.

Mother remembered the first paraffin lamp to come into her house when she was a wee girl. Her mother allowed no one but herself to fill it as she said that paraffin was very dangerous and she took the lamp out into the yard to fill it and light it. At night the fire in the hearth was raked and a few turves put on the bars of the hearth and hot embers covered them. In the morning the fire was 'redd' and then made up new again. A fire was rarely allowed to go out for the hot embers lit the new fire.

Water was very precious and scarce and people would save it in barrels, crocks and buckets. On wash-days the 'cleanest' clothes were washed first and so on with the men's twill shirts being left until last. Clothes were few and far between and couldn't be changed too often. Father remembered when his mother with a strong girl would put all the clothes they had washed in a zinc bath and carry them to a stream a field's length away and here our grandmother would hold each garment over a stick and the girl would pour water from the stream over them to rinse them. Wool was used to make flannel cloth. Linen and cotton for clothes and sheets were mostly made of flour-bags bleached.

Farmhouses usually had a killed pig being cured. A pig-butcher came and did the killing and would cut the pig into portions, hams and so on. Brown salt was usually rubbed into the bacon and sometimes it was smoked with green ash branches. Then it was packed into a wooden barrel where it was left to mature.

Usually at our house three pigs were killed in one day. One of these was kept for the house and the other two were taken to Newry Pork Market. They were left hanging all night by their heels and were all scrubbed white and their insides removed. The men would start for Newry in the morning about half past five as it took about two hours steady going with horse and cart to arrive at the Pork Market before the bell rang. He was counted a very 'through-other' farmer indeed who was not there waiting before the bell rang.

Old people of the district had a lot of stories. One was about a young fellow who, like many's another, went off to the States. He was working with some of his

countrymen and one morning he told them of a very vivid dream he had the previous night. He dreamed there was a pot of gold buried at the gable of his old home in Lissummon.

Of course in those days when one went abroad it was the point of no return. However, one of his pals was cute and he wrote a letter home to his brothers about this and one moonlit night they went to find the gold. They dug and dug and suddenly their spade hit on an iron pot. They carefully eased around it and as they lifted it out they actually heard the clink of coins inside. So they laid it down and began prising off the lid only to find that it was half-full of newly hatched maggots. You see, the fellow shouldn't have divulged his dream, he should have come home and dug it up himself.

Another story was of a man coming over a hill on a car-pad to a little shop that was near here. It was a short-cut and on the top of the hill before he started to descend, there was a stile. The elderly men used to dander over the hill when coming to the shop to buy an ounce of tobacco before dark. This night when Johnny landed into the shop he said, "*Barney is in very bad form the night!*" The shop owner replied, "*Well, I don't know why that should be, for tonight of all nights he wasn't in.*" "*Well that's strange,*" said Johnny, "*for I met him at the stile and he never answered me when I bid him the time of day. I don't know what I done on him.*"

Before Johnny left the shop a neighbour came running in with the news that poor Barney had been killed earlier that evening. When he was coming home from Newry, his horse and cart had couped on the Blue Hill and Barney's neck was broken. So you can make of it what you like!



Savage family headstone in Ballenon churchyard