

“Sponge-cakes and butter-sandwiches...”

Memories of Poyntzpass Technical School

BY MRS MARGARET LOCKHART

I was Domestic Science teacher in Poyntzpass Technical School, Meeting Street Poyntzpass for several years after the war. - I was Miss Peggy Robinson at the time. I was born and went to school in Omagh Co Tyrone and afterwards trained for three years at the Catering College in Belfast My first post was in Spalding in Lincolnshire. On coming home I had got a job in Portadown Technical College.

At that time, there was an attempt to bring some technical education to rural areas and the Technical Colleges in various larger towns throughout Northern Ireland operated an ‘outreach’ programme providing evening classes in the surrounding villages and one of those places served by Portadown Tech was Poyntzpass. I think I first came to take the evening classes in Poyntzpass in 1946.

Poyntzpass Tech was a large wooden building in Meeting Street just below the Presbyterian Church. It consisted of two large rooms. The girls cooked in the room nearest to the Presbyterian Church while the boys did woodwork next door. At the evening classes there was often considerable ‘interaction’ between the two rooms. The girls would have been in their late teens or early twenties and while village girls attended the classes, some of the others came from quite a distance outside the village. They would have come on bicycles.

There was a certain social ‘entertainment’ element in the evening classes for at the time there was little opportunity for young country people to meet and have a bit of fun. There was quite a lot of, what they call now-a-days, ‘crack,’ and innocent mischief and I particularly remember that Ida Loughlin who was the one who always got up to some mischief. At Christmas time there was a party which was good fun for the boys in the woodwork class next-door were invited in.

Mrs Joe McKee, who lived at the top of Rafe’s Hill was the caretaker. She prepared the rooms and swept up after the classes. Both rooms were heated by black stoves which she would light well before the start of class to have the rooms reasonably warm.

The girls were taught sewing and cookery and the boys did woodwork. Mr George Thompson was the



Miss Peggy Robinson

woodwork teacher at the time. I travelled from Portadown with him and Mr Best, who taught woodwork in Tandragee Technical. Mr Best had a car and when we got to Tandragee, he let George Thompson take the car on to Poyntzpass. Evening classes were from 7-30 to 9-30pm. Sometimes we took a taxi in the evenings or the train.

As well as the evening classes for adults, girls and boys came from the village’s Public Elementary Schools on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons from 2pm to 3pm. I often spent the time between these afternoon lessons and the evening classes in Mrs Hall’s in Church Street, as I was very friendly with her daughter Cora, who was a P.E. teacher at a school in Portadown.

While the time at the evening classes was intended to be spent on sewing and cookery, in practice the time was almost exclusively spent on cookery, for generally the girls wanted to have something to bring home. Some of the girls were as old, or maybe older, than me. They particularly liked to bake sponge-cakes and butter-sandwiches. They always wanted to bake sweet things but didn’t want to cook savoury dishes. While I was



A bungalow on the site of Poyntzpass Tech school - Meeting Street

supposed to make the decisions, very often it was actually these big girls who dictated what they made.

While all the equipment was available, the girls had to bring all their ingredients. In the years after the war, certain ingredients were hard to get because of rationing. Country girls could get eggs, for example, while town girls often could not. During rationing the girls were allowed an extra two ounces of margarine and two ounces of sugar per class. Many came simply because of that.

The domestic Science room was a good-sized room. It was furnished with long tables which acted as worktops. The tables were scrubbed at the start of the class and bowls etc were set out in readiness. While there was electricity, there was no running water. It was another job for the caretaker to have a supply of clean water there before classes began. She carried buckets of water from the village pump in the Square. The cooking or baking was done in an electric cooker. A class would vary in size but would have been at least ten. It was a busy two hours for the girls had to make their sandwich, or whatever, and have it baked in order to take it home. While things were baking in the oven they sometimes did a bit of sewing. The inspector was a Miss Jackson. She came in once during my time in Poyntzpass. She had a reputation for strictness but I found her not too bad, for she appreciated that we had limited resources and equipment.

The woodwork room was similar in size to the Domestic Science room. There were eight full-sized work-benches and all the necessary tools. Unlike the girls, who made something and had it home that night, an ambitious woodwork project would sometimes last a whole year or even longer. The teachers did not supply the ingredients but I kept a stock of flour etc for demonstration purposes. I left my post in the tech in 1950 when I married John Lockhart. I was succeeded by Miss Jean McComb who lived at the Ark, Kilbodagh and later the teacher was Mrs Flora Bryson. Mr Gates, who taught in Markethill, took over the woodwork class when George Thompson retired.



The Square, Poyntzpass circa 1950