

GROWING UP IN POYNTZPASS.....BEFORE THE GREAT WAR

BY GERTIE GLEESON

In 1984, as part of a project involving local young people in the production of a community news-sheet 'The Pass Times', Catherine Watters and Catherine Magennis interviewed 86-year-old Mrs Gertie Gleeson (nee Byrne) when she came on a visit to her native village.

We are glad to reprint the text of that interview here.

You know, the place where you were born and spend your childhood years is indeed a magical place in your memory, and the pals you had then will forever hold a special place in your affections. Mrs Ryder our teacher made us learn a poem in school all those years ago, that I sometimes say to myself now.

It begins:

*'I remember, I remember,
The house where I was born,
The little window where the sun
Came peeping in at morn'*



The Byrne Family home in Church Street (Credit Union building in 2015).

For me, that special house was in Church Street, Poyntzpass - it is now the Credit Union office. I was born there on October 15th 1898, the sixth child in a family of eight, five boys and three girls. A family of eight children was not regarded as a particularly big family at the time, for many families were much larger than ours. The eldest in the family was my sister Mary Anne. Then there were Kitty, Joe, Bridget, Johnny, myself, Rose and Ignatius.

I can recall every detail of our house.

Our house had three bedrooms upstairs and a little room above the entry that we called 'the dark room', because it had no window. My father was a shoemaker and downstairs there was a shop on each side at the front of the house. One was my father's workshop where all day long he made the boots and shoes and on the other side was the shop where he sold his work to the public. Behind that was our kitchen.

It's funny how some everyday thing can transport a person back to their childhood. For me, the smell of new shoes brings me back to our house then, for as a result of my father's work, our house was always filled with the sweet scent of new leather. My father was a good shoemaker but I believe my Uncle Jimmy was marvellous, especially at making ladies' shoes. He married a sister of Barney Conlon the blacksmith and went to live in America. My father rarely did repairs, for he got much greater satisfaction out of making boots or shoes, rather than repairing them.

The Poyntzpass of my childhood was a very different place from what it is today. At first, there were no motor cars at all. I remember the very first car to come to the village. It belonged to the Alexanders up the Markethill Road and Davey Alexander was driving it. The whole people came out to see it for it was such a novelty. The streets weren't tarred then, there were stones everywhere. There was no electricity, no water supply, no street lights and none of the devices we have now. At night, apart from the light from the windows, there was complete darkness. You would only recognise

people by their shapes or when they spoke. I remember particularly going down the street one night and there was a group of men on the street, I can still recall their shapes in the darkness.

Poyntzpass had no mills or industry and really depended on the countryside around for its trade. Farmers and their families came to the village for their goods and services and as a result, Poyntzpass was a busy place in those days. There were lots of horses and carts and ponies and traps going up and down and always plenty of people on the village streets. There was a bustle about the place for as well as the Post Office and the different shops such as grocers and butchers and five or six public houses, there were small businesses like shoemakers, dressmakers, tailors, barbers, carpenters and the blacksmiths all working here and there around the village. Customers were always coming and going and, of course, there was the monthly fair. On the fair day, cattle would be all over the village streets. Before the fair, people would be busy putting boarding up to protect their houses and, after the fair, they would be out washing the fronts and cleaning up. I often went down through the fair, maybe



The four Byrne brothers. Left to right: Willie, Joe, Charlie and John (Gertie's father).

on a message to Allen's or Pat Murray's. You know when you're reared in the country you aren't afraid of cattle.

My grandfather had come to Poyntzpass as a child from a place called 'The Montiags' near Lough Neagh in north Armagh and grew up to become a boot-maker here. My father, John Byrne, was born in Poyntzpass and served his time with his father. My grandmother's maiden name was Savage. She had six children, four boys and two girls. Unfortunately the two girls, Kate and Maryanne, died in infancy. An awful lot of children died young then.

In Poyntzpass at that time one very prominent citizen was the doctor, William R. MacDermott. He was a grand man – he delivered all of us in our house here in Church Street. Indeed he delivered nearly every baby born for miles around. He was the doctor here for fifty



Gertie's mother, Mary and sister Mary Anne

years and was very good to the people and never charged them anything. He was greatly admired and respected by all. He was always trying to get the County Council to do something to make the place healthier for he said the water from the pump in the Square was the cause of a lot of sickness.

Other very important people in the village then were the local clergy. The local priest was Father Shortt. He was the curate in Poyntzpass while the Parish Priest in Tandragee was also called Father Shortt. People used to say, "Well, we're not 'short' of priests anyway!" The Rev Johnston was the Church of Ireland Rector at the time. He lived in the big house at the top of the Chapel Hill. I sometimes saw him go by in his pony and trap. Rev Gordon, the Presbyterian Minister, lived in a house near the Post Office. When we met the Doctor or the Priest or the Rector we had to be very respectful and salute them. Men would touch their caps when they met someone like that and say, "Good day, your Reverence!".

Mrs Johnston, the Rector's wife was very friendly with my mother and often visited our house. She was lovely woman. My mother and Mrs Johnston had been patients in the Samaritan Hospital in Belfast at the same time and had become good friends there. My mother was Mary McManus to her own name. She came from Tullymacrieve, Mullabawn. I believe my father met her while she was hired here.

I remember that one time I was playing marbles on the footpath when the priest came along. Marbles was a boys' game and girls weren't supposed to play it. When I saw him coming, I put my foot on the 'taw' to hide it

from him but he saw it. He said, "I'm going to tell your mother that you were playing marbles!" I don't think he actually did tell my mother, but I didn't play anymore.

My father's brothers emigrated while my father stayed in the home place. Uncle Willie went to Australia, Jimmy went to America and Joe went to England.

In 1915 the three brothers, who had emigrated, all came back to Poyntzpass for a family re-union. It was regarded as almost a miracle that they should all manage to get back home from so far away. They all arrived together on the train from Belfast. They were met at the station by my father and the village's brass band, which played '*Come back to Erin*' and led them triumphantly through the streets.

My brother Johnny was very friendly with Mr White the station-master. Mr White was a great singer and taught people to sing. His wife was very musical too. She played the organ and taught the piano.

I remember all my old neighbours very well. Next door



A youthful Gertie Byrne.

to our house, going down towards the Square, lived the Davis family. Jemmy Davis worked on the railway as a platelayer. They had three girls. Next to that was Mrs Gibson. She was a dressmaker and had a shop there. She was a widow. Next was Robert Carson's shop. Then there was McMurray's carpenter's yard. There was John and Willie McMurray. John McMurray married a girl who worked in Alexander's of Acton House. They had three girls, Cissie, Mamie and Sarah. McMurray's house was directly across the street from their yard.

Then Rice's and Bickers.

Going up the street from our house, our next-door neighbours were Pat Foy and his daughter Ellen. Then there was Bob Gibson and his wife and son Willie. Willie worked on the railway. Next was Jane Clarke. She lived downstairs and I remember her so well because, when she was sick, we looked after her. Somebody lived upstairs in that house but I can't remember her name. Next to Jane's house lived Jemmy Lennon with his wife and their children, Alice, Minnie and Jimmy and next door to them lived Jemmy's mother, Mary. Beyond Mary Lennon's house was what we called 'the big entry', and then there were two houses. In the first one there was Mrs Carragher downstairs and an old lady called Mary Loy upstairs. In the other house lived Alfred Hanna with his wife and son Alfred junior. Alfred Hanna was a shoemaker and had his shop there. Around the end of the War, my father bought these two houses and made them into one and we went to live there.

Next door was the schoolteacher's house. At first there was Miss McDermott and then Mr Hynes. When Mr Hynes left and the Ryders came, the house wasn't big enough so they went to live in Chapel Street. Miss Madden lived next door and the Catholic curate boarded there. Finally at the top of the street, was Davey Little's grocer's shop. Davey was a widower with four children, Johnny, Davey, Gertie and Florrie. Florrie and I became great friends later when we went to work for the Post Office.

I went to school on the Chapel Hill. When I started the teacher was Mr Hynes but he soon left and Mr and Mrs Ryder came. They came from Newtownhamilton. At first the school was a single room, but during my time there, another room was built on. In the original room, the two teachers taught together. All the pupils, baby infants and all, were in that room. Mrs Ryder would maybe have a class up round the blackboard while Mr Ryder had a group down in the desks. They changed around.

The desks were rough and heavy with cast-iron legs – big long desks that held up to six or seven pupils. Four girls were kept in each day to sweep the floors after school. When it was my turn, with me were Mary Ryder, Cissie Loughlin and Mary Ellen McSherry. My best friends at school, (although we had the odd row!) were Mary Ellen McSherry, Alice Lennon and Christina 'Tiny' Guy. Tiny lived across the street from us and we played together a lot. There was no playground at the school so when the boys played football on the road the ball often went into John McComb's field. This caused a lot of bother and John McComb threatened to summons my brother Johnny for breaking down the ditches. However, my mother

talked to John McComb and apologised and that was all there was about it.

In the autumn we'd all be busy gathering blackberries. Allen's bought them at sixpence a stone.

We used to play skipping and in the winter there would always be a slide down the street. I remember a great big slide down round the pump and right down Railway Street to Willie Griffith's. Boys and girls and all would be on that slide. I used to pray that it would freeze. I can clearly remember that one time I was going down the slide in front of my brother Joe and he overtook me and caught me in his arms and the two of us went down the slide together.

At Christmas time Allen's big window, in the gable next the Court House, would be brilliantly decorated and lit up and we could spend hours just gazing in and discussing what we might get.

We spent a lot of time skipping and playing tig. We played tig over at Conlon's blacksmith's. It was a terrific place for playing tig. They had a byre and we would run up past the forge, in through the door, down the steps – flying down into the yard and back round and up again. We had great fun!

At school we were taught all the usual subjects. The Ryders were good teachers but they were very hard and corporal punishment was the norm. I left school when I was between fourteen and fifteen. I wanted to work in a shop but my mother thought I should try for the Post Office as it would give me security. So I did the entrance exam and luckily enough I was accepted.



Gertie with a group of local friends.

I was in the Post Office for five years. For three years I was in Northampton and the other two at Tarnworth in Staffordshire. I went as a learner and was taught telegraphy and Morse Code, which I can still remember after all these years. – A - dot, dash; B - dash, dot, dot, dot and so on. If there was an instrument here, I think



Gertie Gleeson at the time of her final interview in 1984.

I could still send a message on it, although it's more than sixty years since I used one.

I really enjoyed my time in England but I came back home when I was twenty, because my mother wasn't well. She was a very good mother to us all so I came home to look after her. I just did the housework and looked after my mother and my brothers. Then in 1926 we left the 'Pass and went to live in Ballyhackamore in Belfast. My brothers were involved in shipping cattle and it was more convenient for them. They only got home now and then and so there was just my mother and me in the house usually. After a while it was decided to move again, this time to Dublin. My brothers attended fairs all over the south of Ireland and the type of cattle they were buying were only available there. I was sorry to leave Belfast but in time I got to like Dublin. I live in Finglas now with my son Sean.

When my father died he was in the process of making a pair of boots which he hadn't finished. They were still on the lasts and I still have them

It's a long time since I left the 'Pass but in a way, I suppose, I've never left at all. My children know how much I love the place, so it's no wonder that my son Jim, named two horses he owns 'Poyntzpass' and 'Taniokey'.