GRAND OLD DAYS OF LEITRIM'S STEAM ROLLERS & STONE CRUSHERS

Michael Hamilton

MANY MONTHS BEFORE its arrival at Carrowcrin Quarry near Dromahair, many thousand tons of limestone, would be quarried from the huge rock face in Patrick "Pake" McTernan's land, some half a mile away from where the stone would be eventually crushed. The drill holes would be sledged manually, making ready for the gelignite to be packed into these bore holes for blasting. I remember on our way to St. Joseph's National School, Carrowcrin (not very far away from where the blasting would take place) Frank O'Rourke, Road Ganger with the Leitrim County Council (later became Roads Supervisor) would come out onto the roadway and stop us children from proceeding any further, explaining to us that a huge blast was about to go off in the stone quarry close by. We didn't mind at all, it was a great excuse for us if we arrived late into class. And sure it gave our schoolmaster Big Henry McMorrow no good reason for coming the "the heavy on us" with his big black sally rod.

By now the Council ganger had warned every body in the vicinity, the blast was ready to go off. We were all huddled near Breán "Breánys" Fowley's cottage, we knew him as Breány the "Sand Stone Breaker". His wife Annie had lit a fresh turf fire from the raked coals of

John Joe Farrell–hard at work.

the nights fire, a turf scented smell filled our nostrils as the smoke from the low chimneyed cottage billowed into the fresh morning air.

Now the quarry foreman sends a shrill warning whistle, seconds later a big bang is heard, clouds of churning dust begin to rise, blending in with the rising smoke from Breány's chimney. The small window panes would rattle in their frames, the noise sending a dozen hens or so scampering in all directions, finally settled, crouched underneath a well trimmed white thorn hedge. This would be a very bad time to have a clocking hen resting on fourteen hatching eggs, its chicks almost ready to come into this world!

The quarry field always had a lovely healthy look about it, the quarry dust made it rich and fertile, where well-fed cattle grazed on its lush grass. The stone would be taken by horse-drawn carts to the roadway close by and piled there.

The way the steam roller, stone crusher (and sleeping van for the crew) would arrive, you would think it was Duffy's Circus that had turned the corner as the steam roller slowly hauled the stone crusher, attached

to it the green painted living van, its iron shod wheels, its spokes and fellows painted bright signed red, its two half doors lazily swaying, causing great excitement. We children on our way to and from school would stop and marvel at its workings. The puffing of the steam engine, sending swirls of dark smoke into a grey sky above, a sulphery smell filled our nostrils mixed with a smell of crude oil dripping from underneath its belly. Its flywheel driving its pulley belts at a fast rate, onto the pulley-wheel on its stone crusher. We watched with awe as the council workmen with their bare hands lifted the large rough stones onto a wooden platform above the crusher. Another council worker fed them into its big hungry bouncing crusher jaws sending swirling dust all over the place as it swallowed each stone. Underneath the platform a huge round grading screen would revolve slowly grading the stone as it left its crushing jaws. Workmen would shovel the graded stone chippings into their wheelbarrows. If by any chance a barrow was overloaded you could notice a falter in the workman's step as he wheeled along, to where he finally piled the broken graded stone.

Each evening coming from school, we would watch all this taking place, always late going home for our evening meals. My mother used to say "there's going to be no damn comfort while the stone crusher is working at Carrowcrin - ye are always late home for your evening meals no matter how much I preach!"
Horse drawn turf carts took home the turf crop from Tullynascreena and Greaghnafarna bogs. Their handlers always had a big problem on their hands as they tried to calm and coax their animals past the noisy working machinery, they became nervous and hard to control when passing this hive of industry.

I remember a man named Paddy Lee from Manorhamilton, who drove the steam roller. During the working day the workmen would tease Paddy saying "she's steaming poorly today Paddy, you must be burning "Arigna Slate" in the fire box". Another bright fellow would say, "she's in great form today blowing off steam nicely", looking at the water gauge showing very little water in the boiler, then looking over at Paddy, "Ah, that's why she's steaming so well, she could do with a wee drop of water in the boiler! Keep her going Paddy that's the important thing!"

I suppose it was a great fascination of the many steam trains passing my house daily, that I developed my great interest and curiosity in the workings of the steam roller. The men who operated these great machines were remarkable people indeed, as they moved from place to place all through County Leitrim on road maintenance and stone breaking in the various quarries, tough and skilful at their work, also great characters in their own right, I knew most of them, Joe Walpole, Terry McGovern from Killargue, Bernie Conway, Jack McLoughlin, Tom McGowan, Harry Jones, John Joe Farrell.

The crew's living van or sleeping van as it was often called was hauled by the steam roller and stone breaker as they moved from one quarry to another crushing stones. It had a turntable and a spacious compartment at its rear for carrying oil and some necessary tools, also a place underneath its floor to convey coal and turf to fire the steam engine. It had a lovely black (Shamrock No. 7) stove, for cooking and heating. It gave off great heat especially if you fed it with steam coal, its top lid, glowing red, you could have a fry of eggs, sausages and rasher done in a few minutes. Ah, far quicker and better than your fancy microwave!

When moving from one quarry to another, if steam coal was in short supply a council worker with his horse and cart of turf would accompany you on your journey, to fuel the steam roller fire box and also a cart with a forty gallon barrel of water to fill its boiler tank. At times this would not be necessary as most crews were familiar with the various watering holes or wells as they travelled along, stopping to fill their water-tanks with buckets, which they carried with them for the purpose.

John Joe Farrell is the nicest person you could ever meet, who lives in the beautiful countryside of Cornalack, Drumcong. I got to know him when he worked on a diesel roller in the North Leitrim area. He told me he joined Leitrim County Council at fifteen years of age, his wages then 4s 8d a day in 1944. I expect the fact that the Cavan and Leitrim Narrow

Gauge Railway ran past his house, only a few yards from his door-step where he had a close look at the sturdy steam engines, with their "cow catchers" passed daily, hauling train loads of coal from Arigna coal mines, gave him the idea of becoming a steam or diesel roller driver.

Now it was open country for John Joe working in various locations in North Leitrim, he found the people very friendly, the same could be said of people in South Leitrim, he spent the greater part of his working time in North Leitrim. They all got to know John Joe over the years as that big quiet giant who had a nice word to say about everyone whom he came in contact with.

Wherever his "living van" was stationed in the course of his work, council men and neighbours nearby would call to céili with him on the long evenings, chatting and discussing all the local gossip.

Often a pack of playing cards would be taken from his locker, where a very keen hard fought game ensued. Some of these fellows sitting on his double-bed were real sharks at the game. For the last game of the evening, stakes would be doubled, the cards then gathered and left back in the locker. John Joe always had in his van, one of his proudest possessions "The Button Accordian". He would entertain his guests to some sweet céili music. Ah "The Pigeon on the Gate", "The Rambling Pitchfork"–tunes of that nature". I tell you he was a dinger on the box, he would encourage other musicians to call and have sessions of lively music, you could say "Pancogues" of music for the night.

Steamroller at work

He tells of the various pieces of road machinery he remembers from the early 40's. The two best known steam engines were the "Fowler 16 ton" traction engine driven by Harry Jones with different firemen, the last being Joe Walpole. It worked the "Edger Allen" stone breaker. The "Garet15 ton" roller was driven by Jack McGovern. He had different firemen but the only one I can remember was Terry Mc Govern. Jack worked most of his time in North Leitrim. At the wheel of the "Aveling and Porter" steam roller was Paddy Lee. John J. Reynolds worked an "Aveling and Porter traction engine breaking stones mostly in the Mohill area while Paddy Connor drove a "Goodwin Barsby" steam engine breaking stones. The council bought two new Fowler diesel rollers in 1936, Jimmie Moran drove one of them and Harry Maiden vacated his driving position on the Fowler steam engine for the other new machine. Tommy Rooney took his position and was assisted by fireman Harry Jones who was later promoted to driving duties. In 1940 the council again invested in a three cylinder Avering Barford diesel roller and had P. Moran at the wheel. Jack McLoughlin drove the "Road Marshe" single cylinder diesel tractor with Bernie Conway being his helper or "second man". Other drivers who worked on road machinery included Jim Regan, John Beirne, Mick Rynn, Michael John Rowley, Murty Dowd, Frank Donoghue, Jack McGowan and Tom McGowan.

I'm privileged to have known quite a number of these men who would have worked in trying conditions, away from their homes and families at various working sites throughout the county, living in their Green Mobile Vans provided by the council.At times it must have been very lonely especially during the winter months.

All you road users out there, driving on the roads of Leitrim, salute those dedicated band of workers. Beneath the lairs of tar lies the crushed smoothly rolled stone, dampened by their sweat and tobacco spits, to carry you on your merry way. Oh, watch out for the odd pot hole!

A Rich and Rare Land–Ducks in the Basin at Ballinamore Pic: Willie Donnellan