

Caleb Shera Laird

If Pat Quinn, Leitrim's newest and most colourful Man of the Year were to suddenly touch down in Drumshanbo in his own private helicopter, a feat he is, indeed, capable of performing, it could not have been half as sensational as on that day in 1899 when Caleb Shera Laird drove Leitrim's first motor car, IT4, down its bare and frightened streets. In the year in which Drumshanbo has at last captured the Progressive Community Award it is fitting that this great-hearted business genius of half a century ago be remembered in the district, where he built a former economic and social structure far surpassing that, which to-day has earned this premier award. In fact, if one surveys the long string of business projects, one for almost every year of his active life, one sees, in the hands of a skilful writer, sufficient material for a thriller.

MILLER, POWER-SUPPLIER, BUILDER AND FARMER

Though hardly twenty years of age when he launched into Leitrim the vehicle that was to revolutionise modern transport he had no intention of spending his youthful years pleasure-hunting modern style, for the next year, 1900, we find him overhauling and equipping the mills to grind Indian Corn during the dry season of that year. Soon he was supplying electricity to the town, an ultra modern amenity at a time when larger towns like Carrick-on-Shannon and Longford were using gas for cooking and heating. Next came the sewerage and sanitary system, which was perhaps the greatest blessing of all, to be followed shortly by another project of major

employment potential, namely, the huge saw-mills where local strong man, "Big Jack" Keane, commanded for a lifetime the position of general manager. A creamery, built on his land, was his by 1908 and by 1912 he was building his own splendid mansion on Curryard Hill, to which he added newly reclaimed acres, where he built up first class herds of cattle. What one might call an "all-rounder", he could judge cattle or horses with the eye of an expert, and as a horseman few could match his skill, whether in the hunt or on the gymkhana course at the 15th August Annual Sports in his native town.

1921. TESTING TIME

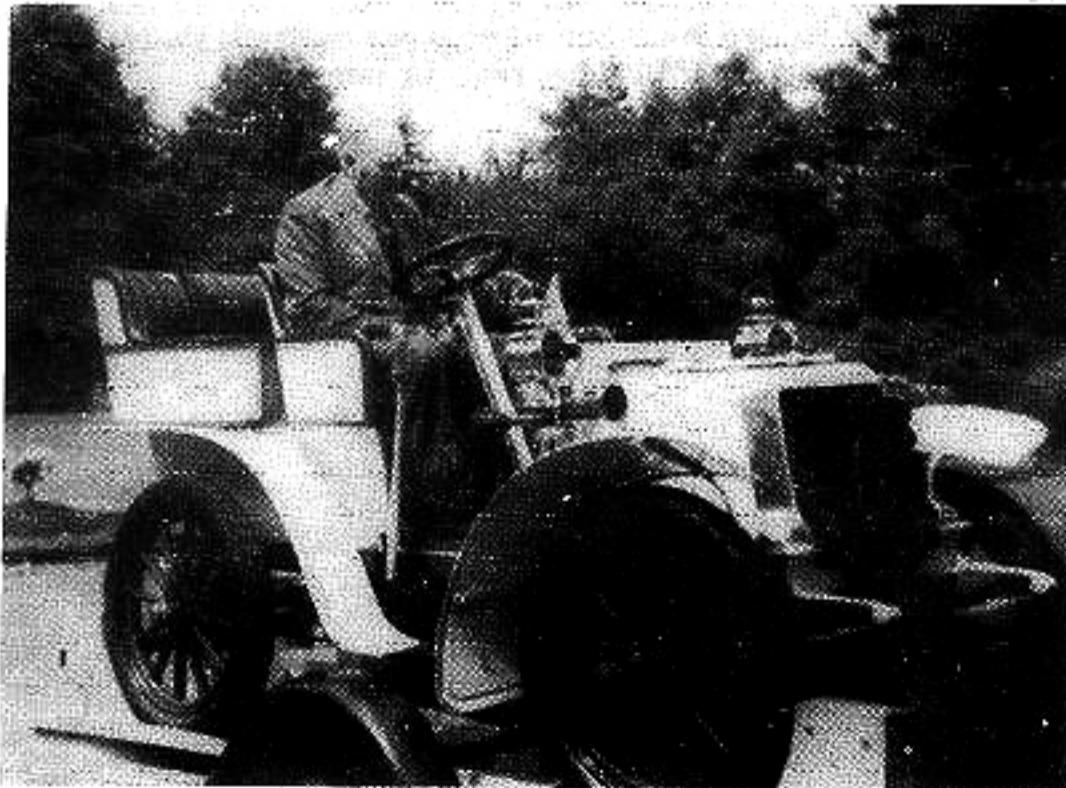
"He bore no hate against living thing
But he loved his country above his King."

When the young and restless Free State came into being in 1921 he did not take to his heels across the Border, or emigrate to the then more peaceful clime of Great Britain. His practical patriotism continued with even greater zeal and energy. He erected the wholesale stores at the bridge, built several houses in and around the town, and in 1934, following his characteristic urge to be an innovator, he gave to Drumshanbo a new type of industry, the Jam Factory, based on a raw material which he hoped could be fully obtained within the county. This was sound economic sense, his peak performance, one might say, and the industry remains to-day, in the hands of his popular son, Raymond, a flourishing concern sending forth the fruits of Leitrim's soil to no less than a dozen far away lands.

THE HUMAN SIDE OF THE MAN

By the firesides of Drumshanbo town and countryside Caleb Shera Laird will be remembered for these essays into new fields of technology and industry, but he will be even better remembered as a kindly God-fearing man, who was no taskmaster or alien landlord type. A devout Methodist he was a Circuit Steward for thirty years, and it was probably his adherence to the teaching of his revered founder of Methodism, John Wesley, that gave him his strict regard for the value of honest work. His huge staff, mostly Roman Catholic could not but be moved by his eternal punctuality and devotion to duty. On their Church holy-days he always closed the various employments, so that they could attend Mass, and he subscribed to the upkeep of their Church as generously as if he were a member of its flock. To this must be added his unbounded generosity towards the Franciscan Sisters of the Convent of Perpetual Adoration, which continued unfailingly throughout his life-time. The Roman Catholic Curate of Drumshanbo writing in a missionary magazine some years before his death — he died last year at the age of 92 — had this to say "Whenever I was in trouble, annoyance or bother of a serious nature I always went to Mr. Laird for his advice. His logical mind with premises contained in the conclusions without flaw or fallacy always solved my problems. His counsel was equal to, if not better, than that of any of those learned fellows who function in the Four Courts."

On this occasion of the launching of the Leitrim Guardian when a present-day successful business-man (Pat Quinn) steps forward to take possession of the County's foremost honour the spirit of Caleb Shera Laird must surely be hovering in the wings.



LIKE FATHER . . . LIKE SON !

Above, the late Caleb Shera Laird sporting the first ever motor car registered in Leitrim county, IT 7; while on his right stands son, Raymond, sporting AIT 1, registered in Leitrim county.