

CHANGED ENTERTAINMENT SCENE

In 1969, the year of the first issue of the Leitrim Guardian, public entertainment in the county was much different than what it is today. In this interview with Prin Duignan, Hubert McMorrow, chairman of the Leitrim Guardian committee recalls his own impressions of the entertainment scene 35 years ago.

Hubert, what are the major changes you have seen since the late 60s?

Well for a start there were no discos. Then the pub was not nearly as important as it is now and television was not such a big thing either. The consumption of alcohol today is amazing. Youngsters are serious drinkers at 15 or 16. Yes the pub is the big thing. Even card playing moved out of the houses into the pub.

Don't tell me there was no drinking back then!

As you know we hadn't the money. As well as that the Pioneers were going strong then and a lot of people kept the confirmation pledge. Of course the pubs closed at 10 on a Sunday night.

Tell me about the showbands

Well the two that stand out for me are Big Tom and the Mainliners and the Melody Aces. Both of them had their own following. The Rainbow in Glenfarne was our hall. It was usually 7/6 or 8/= to get in. Then in the hall you could get a ham or fish sandwich plus two arrowroot biscuits and a small plain bun—all with a cup of tea for one and twopence.

The Rainbow was huge in those days?
It was and so was the Mayflower and the Ivy Leaf. In the Leitrim Observer

they were always the first two at the top of the entertainment page. But the Rainbow drew people from all over the place. You'd often hear someone say 'there's two buses from Enniskillen tonight'. Dances were usually held on Sunday but never on a Saturday night.

Why was that?

Because Sunday morning was so important. You had to get up for mass, maybe early mass and you'd be fasting for three hours before receiving. Not long before that you had to fast from midnight.

Dressing up for the dance was a big thing?

Well it was a lot simpler than now! You wore your best and only suit with a white shirt and tie. Some fellas might have only one white shirt and that could be awkward if there was a second dance coming up soon.

Did ye use hairoil?

No! That was gone but I remember the Brylcreem back in the 50s. Mind you, we did use aftershave—Old Spice—it'd burn the face off you, you'd be as well using diesel! The crewcut was gone, fringes were in. You'd spend a lot of time polishing your shoes—you could shave with the shine of them.

Were carnivals still going strong in 1969?

No, they were beginning to die out. But I remember going to them in Manorhamilton and Mullaghduin.

In Fermanagh?

Yes, it wasn't far from us. But a lot of the contact with places in Fermanagh finished with the closing of the border

roads. You know, a lot of people wouldn't realise that there were more marriages between people from Leitrim and Fermanagh before the Troubles. The closing of the roads was very bad.

How would you travel to a place like Mullaghduin?

Oh by car. You could have eight or nine in a small car sitting on each others knees. Honda 50s were very common too. You'd often see a fella arriving, with a girl on the pillion. There's a thing now that was very popular back then—Fancy Dress dances. People would be wondering who you were. You could see anything at a Fancy Dress, from goats to sheep. I remember a Fancy Dress in Glangevlin. Animals were strictly banned this time and Mick Dolan was asked to adjudicate. Anyway things were going fine till the next thing this fella burst in through a side door next to the ladies toilet, all dressed up and riding an ass. The ass nearly went daft with all the excitement and women were screaming and scattering in all directions. The stewards finally brought order. I don't think Mick gave him a prize.

So much for regulations! Back then Hubert there was strict segregation in the hall—men on one side and women on the other.

Definitely but that was true in a lot of areas. In the church families divided up when they came to the door. I remember at the end of a mission around 1970 in Glenfarne the missionary asked the people to go into the seats in family groups. This was done but the following Sunday it was back the same way again except for just one



Singer Tommy Fleming with his fans in the Glen Centre, Manorhamilton.

Photo: James Molloy

couple who decided to kneel together. Nowadays everybody mixes together. Back then if a girl seemed to be friendly with boys she could get a bad name which wasn't right...When you think about it there have been huge changes. No way in 1969 would you see a man wheeling a pram! And no way either would you ever imagine a woman giving out communion.

What other thoughts occur to you regarding entertainment at that time?

Well without a doubt one of the things that made a huge impression on me was the lounge bars. They were beginning to come into their own at the end of the 60s. The lounges changed the music scene completely because small groups now had an outlet. I remember in particular Gurns Lounge and the Bamboo in Manorhamilton and some of the first musicians I heard were Tomas Gilgunn and Frankie Meehan and also John Rooney and Danny O'Hagan.

I'd like to ask you now about drama in Leitrim back then. I know you have a great interest in this subject.

The first thing I'd say about that is that the number of productions has gone down over the years but the standard of performance is much higher now than it was over thirty years ago. Generally the plays that used to be done were single set, usually kitchen scenes which required a box set.

What are the local productions you remember from that time?

Oh let me see now.....I remember

'Anyone can Rob a Bank'; 'Bugle in the Blood'; 'Paul Twynning'; 'Mrs Mulligan's Millions'; 'Professor Tim'; 'The Cobweb's Glory'. That time the play often came after a variety concert. John McGivern sometimes put on a concert in the Rainbow for parochial purposes. Generally the proceeds from a play went to the parish as did the takings from a dance on a church holiday.

There have been great changes in lighting?

Out of this world! Back then it was just bulbs in biscuit tins or with the shiny silvery paper from the inside of a tea chest. Sound effects were very rare! Emigration played hell with drama. Often there weren't enough actors of suitable age to play the various parts so you might find a young fella playing an eighty year old. And the only way to make him look old was to douse his hair with talcum powder. You'd sometimes see the powder falling onto the stage during the first act until it had time to bed in.

But a play in a parish was looked upon as a great achievement?

And still is. Sometimes if there was shortage of actors the local teacher would come under pressure to do a part. and it might be said at the end of a performance—'Didn't Johnny so and so do well, he was every bit as good if not better than the teacher!' The times have changed a lot alright. Long ago the prompter was every bit as important as the actors, now they are rarely used even in amateur productions. Plays at the end of the 60s were all held during Lent because dancing was not allowed. It is interesting that both

Leitrim drama festivals, Kiltyclogher and Ballinamore still take place during Lent. It's great to see the amateur movement still strong in the county and I wish Carrigallen every success in their staging of the All-Ireland One-Acts in the first week of December.

Well, Hubert what are your final thoughts on the Leitrim scene of now and thirty five years ago?

I could put it like this I suppose. Back in 1969 the Rainbow, the Mayflower and the Ivyleaf were three of the principal centres of entertainment in the county. Nowadays it's the nightclubs but at the same there aren't many that haven't heard of the Glens Centre or of the Cornmill Theatre or Carrick-on-Shannon Arts Centre which is presently under construction.

LEITRIM

Nora B Connolly

*No fairer a county than Leitrim
Is nestling on earth's sod today
Its fields are verdant as ever
And in meadows we're making the hay*

*The great mountains crown all with
their glory
High over glens and valleys below
The lowlands are rich in green pastures
As the sheep and the cattle well know*

*The leafy tree boughs stretch to tell us
To shade from the hot summer sun
As children play in their gardens
Our elders tend crops till they're won*

*This landscape of ours is enchanting
Its scenery is known near and far
It takes its own place in our tourism
With the picturesque falls of Glencar*

*History holds great pride for the County
In gallant, dear comrades so bold
For in days long gone by,
we could always rely
They would regain our true freedom of old*

*No finer a place than dear Leitrim
Is on earth's coloured maps of today
The people with pride, live there side by side
With a welcome as always, they say*