



- MEET A TOWNIE -



EILEEN REFLECTS ON LIFE IN TOYLAND AND TRUDGING THROUGH THE SNOW TO SCHOOL

She was a familiar and invariably friendly face in the former Toyland shop on Letterkenny's Lower Main Street – a place where childhood dreams came alive and where customers were always greeted with a smile.

And Eileen Bradley (nee Nee!) was never short of one of those in her days – close to half a century – serving for the bulk of that period in the popular toy shop that fronted the Donegal Printing Company and for a spell in the Donegal Stationery Company closer to the foot of the town before she and a working career took leave of each other.

Born in her grandmother's house in Drumany close to the old Dry Arch, she is one of nine children, six boys and three girls, including, John, Dessie, Tony, Columba, Kay, Christina, Danny, and Kevin.

Their father, Joe Nee, worked as a cinema operator while mother, Ellen (Wilkie) was employed in the hosiery factory. The family relocated to the Cullion Road in the early fifties and grew up with neighbours such as the Harkins, the McMonagles, the Grieves and the Wylies.

She recalls her nearest neighbour being Bridget Ann Cleary. 'Her father, Charlie and uncle Johnny had a farm and I spent most of my childhood there. Bridget and I became great friends. They had cattle and horses on the farm and I milked the odd cow.' And to this day still milks the memory of sleeping in a big feather bed during sleepovers at the Cleary home. 'It made a change from sharing with my sisters!'

Bridget married John Carlin in the early sixties and moved to Killygordon. Sadly, John died a few years ago but Eileen still keeps in touch with her childhood friend.

And reflections of those former days when the water was brought from the wells and the town of their birth was a lot less hectic.

Eileen's primary education had taken her to Lurgybrack National School, where the headmaster at the time was Joe Callaghan. The teaching staff also included Maggie Nee (no relation) and Aine O'Halpin. 'Miss O'Halpin arrived each day on her bicycle no matter what the weather,' Eileen recalls.

'I remember one year when heavy snow had drifted up to the window sills of our house. We were sure we'd have the day off school, but my father had other ideas. He cleared a path out to the road and of we went through the fields, across a train line. Our wellies were full of snow and we sat all day with wet feet.' And no doubt greeted at the school by Miss O'Halpin, fresh from her exertions on her bicycle ride through the snow!

Eileen was thirteen when she started the Tech in Ard O'Donnell, a time of her life she doesn't remember with any particular fondness. 'I can't say I enjoyed my time there – there were some nice teachers and some not so nice.'



Eileen Bradley.

But thanks to Miss Colhoun, she did learn typing which helped her to secure a position in Joe Bonner's Foundry – sited then where the old Dunnes Stores is located - after leaving school before her third level examinations.

'The men working there at the time included Mick Dunleavy, Henry Spratt, Jim Carson and Patrick Bonner. I stayed a few months but decided that office work wasn't for me,' Eileen relates.

Her first summer job, she remembers, was in Shesgreens along with her sister, Kay. The restaurant and bed and breakfast establishment was based on Lower Main Street where the Courtyard Shopping Centre is now located.

'We did the cleaning and washing up. And every day, Kay was sent to Patterson's butchers for steak for the dinners and bones for their very large dog. Well, one day the parcels got mixed up and the dog got the steak by accident!'

No complaints from the canine but, says Eileen: 'We weren't three long after that!'

In the late 50's, her father followed a trail undertaken by many of his fellow county men – going to work in the tunnels in Scotland.

'They were tough times for my mother but we didn't realise it at the time.'

And some years after to get tougher still. In 1972 at the all too young age of 54, Joe died from lung cancer – a cripplingly harrowing time for Ellen and her young brood.

Some time after, Eileen's mother got a job in the former Three Ways Motel – now the Clanree – with Sean and Imelda Harvey. 'She loved that job.'

And there were other happier times too. 'She was voted Glamorous Granny three times during the Letterkenny Folk Festival.'

But finally ill health forced Ellen to give up work and in 1996 she passed away.

Thirty years before that her daughter, Eileen, had commenced work in Toyland at Lower Main Street. Prior to Christmas 1966, she had seen a job advertised for the well known outlet and applied. 'The interview consisted of Sean Curran asking me adding and subtracting questions and as I was always good at mental arithmetic, I got the job. Those were the days before the fancy tills when you basically had a wooden box to count the money into.'

Initially, Eileen was taken on for a two week period to help out during the busy Christmas period but was subsequently kept on permanently. And there she became a familiar figure and never without a

smile and a friendly word with the shop's loyal customers.

'When I started the late Mary Rose Daly was there and the secretary was Kathleen Wasson. And so many people worked there over the years before its closure.'

Eileen recollects the Toyland Christmas Club that opened in September with people putting away toys for the big day in December. 'It was hard work keeping everything right and making sure everyone got the right toys.' And fearing the equivalent of a dog munching into a steak on Christmas Day!

And then there was the famous Santa Sunday. 'Queues of people would form hours before the shop opened and we'd spend weeks making parcels for the boys and girls. There were night we worked right up to 11 o'clock but the look on the children's faces made it all worthwhile.'

It was a shop but also a place for social interaction, connected as it was with the Donegal Printing Company. 'We'd have the likes of John McIntyre, the editor of the 'Donegal People's Press' which was based across the road in the C.Y.M.S. Rooms, coming in for a chat and a cup of tea and plenty of banter. And he almost always brought us in an ice cream on a sunny day. And he'd enquire of us: 'are you working hard today, cutties? God forgive you, you don't know the meaning of the word!'

The Toyland emporium eventually closed and set up as the Donegal Stationery Company further on down Lower Main Street.

And after close to fifty years, Eileen retired in 2016 in the company of another long-serving employee, Ita Daly.

Entertainment back in the day involved the pictures, the Fiesta and the Golden Grill. 'I loved dancing and would be keeping my eye out for a good jiver. The only drink we got in the Fiesta was McDaid's mineral and if you got a date you might get a sandwich. Happy times.'

And happier still when life chipped in with her future husband, Eamonn Bradley who she met in the Grill.

Eamonn's wallpaper and paint shop opened on the Main Street in 1978 and he was in business for twenty years. Son of the late Peter and Elizabeth Bradley of Ros Suilighe, his father worked for Larkin's Bakery. 'But every Christmas Eve he cooked turkeys for the half of Letterkenny in the bakery!'

And not the only service provided by the family, as Eileen recounts. 'Elizabeth was a dressmaker who could make you a wedding dress without a pattern.'

For Eileen, life has proceeded on merrily since her retirement and she, along with her sister, Christina – 'my taxi!' – go to the gymnasium and swimming pool in the Aura Leisure Centre three times a week. She also enjoys gardening and reading though rarely at the same time!

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Eileen Bradley reflects

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