



- MEET A TOWNIE -



LETTERKENNY'S MR PANTOMIME (AND OTHER MUSICAL ROLES)

When you're born on St Patrick' Day and you're of the male gender, there's the strongest of possibilities – or at least there was back in the day - that you might be named after the Patron Saint. And this indeed was the case for baby Patrick Doherty who arrived into the world on that date in 1950. Born on the feast day and christened on that very same day!

His parents, Neilus and Sheila (nee Vaughan) both hailed from Letterkenny and in all had six children, Johnny, Vera, Patrick, and the twins, Neilus and Bridie.

But they lost another daughter, Mary Frances, who died in infancy.

The family resided at 7 Plunkett Boyle Terrace where Patrick was born and would go on to live at Number 1 Ballymacool Terrace. "The house had been owned by the McMenamins and people like Teddy Gleeson and, I believe, Willie Wiseman, stayed there when they arrived in Letterkenny."

Patrick recalls those early years and famous battles with the Burmah Apaches or "stone fights" as he puts it. "Many a time I was going about with the blood running out of me." There were also orchards to raid at Horabines and Currys for these apples of their parents' eyes!

He attended Scoil Mhuire gan Smal and speaks highly of teachers, Mary Gallagher, Noreen Doherty, and Sister Benignus.

Indeed his first direct involvement with the imaginative world of pantomime came as a result of their influence, not to mention his own father's association in the scene.

"My father was a great singer and used to perform Irish ballads and sang in the Feiseanna along with people like Tucker Crampsie and Tommy Fletcher.

The Vaughans were very musical as well."

No surprise then that the young Patrick would go on to take a central role in staging pantomimes and other such events in subsequent years including being leader of the acclaimed – at least in their eyes! – Bumble Bee quartet of



Patrick Doherty.

Phonsie Kelly, Jim McManus, Tony McCaul, and Johnny Houston in one particular production.

The young Patrick received his early education at Scoil Mhuire gan Smal up until he made his first Holy Communion on the day of the Oldtown Fair, June 8th. Coincidentally also the date on which he would get married to Sligo native, Bernie Harran in 1974.

Like many of his peers, Patrick went on to further his primary grinding at the Presentation Brothers where he remembers Master Ferry, Master McNulty, Brother Columba, and Brother Philip.

"I met Brother Philip when I went on to work in the Post Office in Killarney," he reaches back into his memory.

The pantomimes were just one source of entertainment for Patrick and his young friends. "We would also go the La Scale Cinema where Packie Carberry was the caretaker.

"You'd pay 4d to get into the matinee on a Saturday and a Sunday." Hardly likely that any of the films they watched at the time were washouts but some of the patrons may have been for it wasn't unheard of for the mischievous among them to pour water down on unsuspecting audience members from the vantage point of the balcony. "We got thrown out a couple of times."

No such escapades at the Garda barracks at Lower Main Street where the likes of Sergeants McDaid and Hegarty would

allow eager children in to watch the television in the station and savour the weekly exploits of the Lone Ranger and Tonto.

There was also Courtneys travelling show which would locate itself adjacent to Tony and Mary Gallagher's home where the Station House Hotel is now based and which is indeed run by the couple's son, Brian.

"There'd be a cabaret in the first half and a play in the second half. We had Frankenstein and Murder and the Red Baron and Noreen Bawn. Great entertainment."

And the memories continue. His mum and dad dancing at the Scotch Fair held in the first fortnight of August and winning top prize in the waltzing competition; rehearsing for the pantomimes in the Devlin Hall and the tea and egg and onion sandwiches afterwards and the smell they would leave – "it would last for a month!" And more eggs, this time of the boiled variety served with toast at the Holy Communion breakfast in the Convent.

His father carrying him on his back to panto shows in the hall when the snow lay heavy on the ground.

And another season of the year when the blackcurrants and gooseberries were picked off the bushes in the vicinity of the Grotto. And swimming at the Sandbeds and Rodgers Burn and, he remembers, one particular occasion, at

the O'Donnell Park. "I got into a wee bit of trouble and Andy McGranaghan senior pulled me out."

Cowboys and Indians at Tomahawk Hill; and sleighing down from Glencar to Joe Bonner's Foundry on Curly McDaid's bogey. "You could have anything from eight to ten of us on it. Needless to say, there were a few broken limbs along the way - I remember Socks McDaid breaking his leg."

Living close to the Loreto Convent, there were many stories involving the nuns. His mother sending him with an Oatfield can to collect skimmed milk from the nuns who kept cows. It can only have tasted sweet...!

And the sisters – or mothers as some of them may have been – heading out for their daily constitutional to the top of the Back Road dressed in their full garb.

And the well documented tale of the reputed white nun. "I never met her but my grandmother, Biddy Doherty did have some kind of an encounter with someone fitting her description. She was sitting at the top of the Back Road and then she was gone!."

Stories to raise the hair on the back of your neck but it was the hair on his head that on one specific occasion preoccupied Patrick Doherty. Serving as an altar boy, a candle in too close proximity set his hair alight and there was the sight of Fr. Dan Doherty slapping at his head to put the fire out. "Johnny Keys always reminds me of that."

Patrick acted as train bearer for Cardinal Conway when the latter attended Bishop McNeely's funeral. "I think the Cardinal was in a Rolls but it couldn't make it up the Back Road and he had to get out and walk the rest of the way. It became known as Cardinal's Walk and Barney Doherty wrote a very funny parody on it."

Parodies, pantomimes and music have, and continue to, form a significant part in Patrick's life. "There were concerts with Hughie McGovern and Tommy Fletcher who was another great singer. And May Sweeney (Herrity) who was also a lovely singer."

Involvement in choirs with noted musicians and singers such as Jo McGlinchey, Fr. Mulreany, who conducted, and the tenor tones of Dan McTeague, and Patrick's own folk choir which continues to perform during masses at St. Eunan's Cathedral and the Church of the Irish Martyrs. He also

performed with the well known musical trio of Barney and the Circle.

After spending two years at St. Eunan's College, Patrick secured employment at the Post Office. It was a job that would see him posted to many a location throughout the country including Drogheda, where he was trained, Killarney, Mullingar, Cavan, and Sligo before ending up in Lifford, and a three month stint in Letterkenny among all that. A man who it can be said has left his stamp on the profession.

In 1978, Patrick went on to take up a role as clerical officer with the then Vocational Education Committee. "Paddy Gallagher started the same day as me and Sean O'Longain was in charge at the time."

Fourteen years ago, he retired after having two stents inserted to offset a health complaint.

Sadly, his beloved wife, Bernie, passed away on November 29th, 1994 – a bereavement that still holds heavy in his heart.

The couple had four children, Paul, Damian, Ciaran and David (Daithi) each of them with stage credits of their own. Indeed Paul has directed two Pantomimes and when the latest production, Alice in Wonderful, is performed in the An Grianan Theatre from January 26th, the latter's two children, Katie and Evie will be involved. "That makes it three generations of the Dohertys in the panto scene."

Many a charity has benefited from the staging of the Pantomimes over the years with well in excess of 300,000 euro having been raised for the worthiest of local causes.

Patrick reflects on personalities of past and present who have kept panto audiences laughing over the years including Tommy Sweeney, Seamus Fennessy, Paddy Gallagher, Aussie Bryson, Chris Duddy, Paddy O'Connor, Frances Walsh, and many another besides.

"Before the Theatre was built, we staged the pantomimes all over the place, including the Community Centre, St. Eunan's College Hall, and the Mount Errigal Hotel. It was great to have these places available and now equally so to have a facility like the An Grianan."

And to have a person in the form of Patrick Doherty to ensure those shows go on.

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