



- MEET A TOWNIE -



A JOURNEY DOWN LOWER MAIN STREET WITH NELL

Through the haze of the smoke from the cigarette she puffs on, Nell Crumlish has a clear recollection of the Lower Main Street of her youth and subsequent years.

Remarkably she is able to peer through that fog of distant times to list every single family owned business and residence that lined both sides of the street which, back then, was a bustling commercial hinterland

“My father always got his suits made by Johnny Cullen who lived on Lower Main Street. Johnny had the exact same measurements as him so my father never had to go for a fitting!”

Nell is also insistent that Larkin’s Lane should never be known by that name. “It’s actually Isle Lane – that’s what it should be called.”

She remembers the shops of her youth in the Lower Main Street including one of her favourite outlets, Susan McCauley’s premises. “You could buy anything from sweets to nylon stockings in it.”

And then there was Harkin’s Drapery. “Nurse Harkin lived there and delivered all the wains in the town.”

And Nee’s shop. “They’d have a barrel of fresh herring outside.”

From herring to hearing – Lower Main Street was also home to two men who played the organ in St. Eunan’s Cathedral, Alec Semple and Anthony Clarke.

And a favourite confectionary of the time, the Half-Time Jimmy, available for purchase, if you had the requisite cash, in McCafferty’s sweet shop.

As she lists the premises of those by-gone days – starting, as she does, with Tommy Stewart’s grocery store next door to her family home and travelling right the way to Holy Mickey’s at the Market Square via a whole street of outlets and memories – she mentions a survivor, the Drum Bar. Not that it would have enjoyed her custom too much. While she is indeed a smoker – fifteen a day she declares – Nell maintains: “I never had a drink in my life.”

And reflecting back on all those premises and family owned businesses that were a feature of both sides of Lower Main Street in her growing up years, Nell mentions Speers Drapery store. “And it’s still there and it’s still the same. It’s nice we’ve held on to something from our past.”

But only just. “Apart from the flats here, there are only five of us still living in Lower Main Street,” she bemoans.

It had all started for Nell up beyond the Market Square. “I was born at the top of Rosemount where we had the bookies office.” Her father, John, purchased a house at Lower Main Street in 1929 which was formerly the Letterkenny Cash Stores belonging, Nell recalls, to a McGeehan man. “It was built in 1866,” she puts a date on it.

There’s a photograph in the family collection of an eight-year old girl standing on the Church Lane outside cottage No. 19. A picture taken over one



Nell pictured with her late brother Seamus and family members.

hundred years ago and one spotted in the ‘Pictures from the Past’ page in the edition of ‘The Leader’ on May 31st last year.

And the Little Girl on the Lane in the image is none other than Nell’s mother, Winnie. “It was a surprise to see this picture. A lovely surprise.

“That was when the first Census took place,” she cites the year the photograph was taken in 1911.

Three of Nell’s siblings were also born in Rosemount, Andy, Mary and Johnny, while Una, Seamus, and Tommy arrived into the world at Lower Main Street. “Seamus lived here all his life,” Nell reflects on the brother she lost in recent months.

The stories from her youth abound. Such as the time some of her pals discovered a discarded bundle of Crazy Night tickets. “They were tickets to the dancing in the Devlin Hall and there were twelve of us, at least, that got in as a result of finding those tickets. None of us had a penny otherwise and we couldn’t have afforded it.

“My father was on the door and he had to let us all in because we had those tickets. But I’ll tell you I heard about it the next day!”

Her educational path took her, as it did so many of her peers, to the national school and the Convent.

One particular story, close to the end of her secondary education, stands out in her mind. “There was this teacher who had it in for me and turned on me for something I hadn’t done one day. It was very unfair.

“She gave out to me, gave out to me so much. But anyway that day, I got madder and madder and walked out and never went back. Of course, I got an eating when I got home.”

It was a week before she was due to sit her Leaving Certificate. “I still went and did it and got honours.”

And followed that up by undertaking a Domestic Economy course at Cathal Brugha Street in Dublin. “Mary went to U.C.D. at the same time.”

But her home town beckoned her back and Nell started working in the family laundry at Oldtown. “We had about ten working there and six more during summer time.”

Her brother, Johnny, drove the laundry van but before that had been involved in a completely different walk of life.

“He spent fifteen years at the Cistercian college in Roscrea. It was a silent order and a terrible life as far as I could see. They were vegetarians and never got a full meal. They had spuds and butter and tea and bread. And after high tea on a Sunday they’d get an

apple. No life for anybody.”

Having grown up in a bookie environment, Nell is a keen follower of horse racing.

“I had a great Punchestown,” she points to a decent return. I made some money in the Scottish Grand National too.

“The word was that Fagan, who was trained by Gordon Elliott, was the horse to put the money on. But way back when I was growing up, there was a painter called Joe Farrell who lived on the Church Lane.

“And wasn’t there a horse called Joe Farrell running in the National and I thought I’d put my money on it. It seemed to be a bit of an omen. And Joe Farrell won it at 33/1 and Fagan was hardly heard of!”

Nell confesses to having a “wee flutter” every Saturday and has in her time attended the Grand National and the Derby.

Golf is another sport that has played a part in Nell’s life. When this reporter calls to her Lower Main Street residence, she is watching the PGA Championship at Wentworth. “McIlroy’s in the lead,” she motions to the television screen in the corner of the sitting-room.

“I did play golf myself but I was a scrubber. But Mary was a good golfer. She won three Captain’s Prizes and played off twelve.

“The only thing was she had no patience for putting. She’d get the ball on the green but then she could, at times, take two or three shots to get it in the hole. But she was a good golfer.”

On a wall in one of the rooms is a plaque bearing the legend ‘Hole in One - Seamus Crumlish’. It records the achievement of Nell’s brother at Letterkenny Golf Club on July 17th, 2002, when, using a six iron, he holed out in one at the 5th.

Early in July, the Irish Open will be staged for the first time at Ballyliffen but Nell will be confined to watching it on television. “I would love to go but I couldn’t walk around or even stand for any length of time at it. But it’s great that Donegal is getting to host it.”

Some of the stories she tells, she advises are not for publication – sensitivity to surviving family members her reason, even if the tales are relatively innocent.

But she does relate the anecdote of Bump Coyle travelling to the fair in Milford when the Lough Swilly Bus collides with a Milford Bakery lorry at the Cup and Saucer junction at Ramelton.

Using his loaf, Bump applies for compensation and gets it. And proceeds to lodge it in Francie McLaughlin’s pub. And frequents it for a half and a bottle on the credit he has until one fine day, said credit runs out. And Francie says to him: “You’ll have to go back to the Cup and Saucer!”

And with that tale, Nell departs to the cups and saucers in her kitchen to brew up some refreshments for her visitor and deck out a plateful of biscuits and cake, the like of which would never have been permitted back in the day at the Cistercian College in Roscrea.

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