



# - MEET A TOWNIE -



## FROM TOOMEBRIDGE TO LETTERKENNY — VIA RHODESIA AND SOUTH AFRICA

**A**s he settles into his armchair in his comfortable home at Beechwood Avenue, Peadar Murphy's opening words are: "Letterkenny has been good to me."

It was not have looked that way for either he or his spouse, Maureen, and their two daughters when they first set eyes and foot on the town back in 1970 after having relocated from Cape Town in South Africa but it would become home and one they would grow to cherish.

"Travel was a big thing for me. I had a great interest in it," says Peadar. His first trip away was relatively short – taking him from his birthplace of Toomebridge in County Antrim to take up the position of railway clerk in Irvinestown, County Fermanagh. He still had to negotiate stop-off points at Cookstown, Dungannon, and Omagh before taking the train to Bundoran Junction and on to his new work environment. He was just eighteen.

His mother had been against him going to the United States and, equally so, to Canada, citing the fact they had a relative that had travelled there and had never been heard of again.

But eventually another anxious mother paved the way for the young Peadar. "A bloke I knew, Paddy Murray, had lined up a job with Rhodesian Railways but his mother would not let him go and he gave me the opportunity and so off I went."

And with the backing of his own mother who, back in those days, was none the wiser about Rhodesia or its potential dangers.

Prior to that he had worked in the world of Irish theatre going on tour in the Midlands and the West. "We were on stage every night seven nights a week.

"And after that it was very hard to go back to work!"

But that love of travel and adventure would take him from these shores, initially to the Congo, and from there to a life in the hospitality industry. It was a lengthy voyage. From Dublin to London and then a fourteen-day trip by boat from Southampton to Cape Town in South Africa followed by a train journey to Rhodesia.

He eventually was asked to do the accounts for hotel management for Rhodesian Breweries based in Bulawayo and subsequently was offered the post of assistant manager at the Grand Hotel. "THE hotel at that time in Rhodesia."

"It was a great centre for Irish people that hotel," Peadar's spouse, Maureen interjects.

Peadar recalls the annual Celtic quiz event featuring representatives from Wales, Scotland, England and Ireland. "And Ireland won it for twenty-one years!"

He joined up with an Irish drama club that went on to stage the Sean O'Casey play, 'The Shadow of a Gunman' among others. And a young woman from County Roscommon in the wings acting as prompt. And to this day still prompting him!

"We got married in Bulawayo in 1960 and our two daughters, Noeleen and Geraldine, were born there."

He met the controversial figure of Ian Smith, the Rhodesian Prime Minister, on a number of occasions at the hotel but as war loomed in the country, the Murphys opted to leave the politically unstable environment in 1964.

Peadar took up the post of manager of the

### **Peadar and Maureen reflect on a lifetime of travel and settling down**



*Peadar Murphy and his wife Maureen pictured at their Letterkenny home.*

newly refurbished Mayfair Hotel in Durban, South Africa, and remembers presenting the nightly cabaret going into the early hours of the morning.

Two years later, he and Maureen decamped to the 300-room Elizabeth Hotel at Seapoint, Cape Town, where he remained manager until 1970. "Cape Town was a fantastic place with some of the most incredible scenery you could imagine," Peadar reflects.

But apartheid was still rife and while the hotel with which he was involved did not support any racial segregation, there reached a time when Peadar and Maureen decided that a move back home was preferable.

"The girls were growing up and we thought that Africa was not the place for them to grow up in." At the time a number of vacancies were available in Irish hotels and Peadar was directed to apply for a position at the Ballyraine Hotel in Letterkenny, then owned by the Shields family.

Peadar was in the Irish Club in London when he got a call from one of the hotel directors, Sean

McCormick, to ask him would he take the job. He had no hesitation in saying yes.

"And I said where is Letterkenny?," Maureen remembers. And recalls them meeting one Irish nun in South Africa who had taught music in Letterkenny. "She described Letterkenny as one main street and the further you go, the mainer it gets!"

Peadar had little knowledge of it either. "I had never been in Donegal before so it was going to be a completely new start for us all."

But first they had to cut their ties in Cape Town. "One of the saddest days of my life," Maureen admits. "It was really heartbreaking. So many people came to see us off."

And because of the apartheid regime, some of them not permitted to board the boat to exchange goodbyes.

In October, 1970, Peadar took up the post of manager of the Ballyraine Hotel. "And while it was in a completely different location in a geographical sense, the problems associated with running a hotel, were still the same."

And Maureen's first impressions of her new home town? "I found the whole place so grey. The girls and I cried for three months."

Two years later, Peadar decided to purchase McCarry's Hotel. "It was the greatest place ever. The craic in the bar was just mighty. Laughter every single night and some great characters." He remembers the likes of Jack Holmes, Paddy McGavigan, Packie and Kathleen McGettigan. "And Joe Harley playing the fiddle and Peadar McLaughlin singing the 'Rock of Bawn.'

"They were the loveliest people. You had 'Wordy' McConnell, Dick Duffy and Manus Coyle. I'd be laughing each and every night with no exceptions."

Though not so much on the occasion when a couple vacated the hotel one night without paying their bill but left an assortment of jewellery instead. Stolen as it turned out.

"We gave the jewellery to the Gardai after finding it in the room." But never got so much as a ring back!

There was also the time when the hotel was subjected to flooding problems – the water cascading down the High Road and Speer's Lane. "I went storming down to the Urban Council meeting at Covehill as it was then and barged in to complain," Maureen relates. "They asked me to leave but Patsy O'Donnell stood up and said: 'let the woman speak.'" And speak she did.

McCarry's, like every other business in Letterkenny, was subjected to threats of intimidation during the Troubles specifically during demonstration marches through the town by those supporting the H-Block movement. And at a time of a high-profile court case involving a murder in Clonmany, Peadar recalls prominent television journalists, Trevor McDonald and Gerald Seymour having their lunch in the hotel. Seven years after taking ownership of the popular premises, Peadar sold up, and purchased 'Curley's', otherwise known as the Railway Tavern, on the Port Road but subsequently to be renamed 'Peadar's'.

"It took three or four months of renovation work to get it the way I wanted it," Peadar maintains. "And when we were renovating it we found sea shells under one of the walls," Maureen recalls. "The water must have come up as far as there over a hundred years before."

Peadar's was to become one of the town's most popular venues – a specially produced matchbook at the time describing it as 'THE 'IN' INN IN LETTERKENNY' beside a caricature profile of the pub's proprietor.

It wasn't just work that fostered a love of Letterkenny. Peadar continued to involve himself in local drama groups including the Vocational Players and Lifford Players alongside fellow enthusiasts such as Margaret Dunne, Maurice Sweeney and the afore-mentioned Sean McCormick.

"It was always great craic and I produced two or three of the plays we did. And then there was the Pantomimes with Tommy Sweeney, Frances Walsh and the likes."

And his involvement in the Rotary and Probuss clubs and the Knights of St. Columbanus also brought him the benefits of belonging.

Now 90 years of age and still as alert as he was during that varied working career, Peadar has no hesitation – backed up by his wife – in repeating: "Letterkenny has been good to me." And he and Maureen, and their family, to it.

**"I had never been in Donegal before so it was going to be a completely new start for us all."**

*Peadar Murphy when he first arrived in Letterkenny.*