



- MEET A TOWNIE -



MARGARET'S MEMORIES AND THE CHANGING FACE, AND FACES, OF THE PORT ROAD

To sit with Margaret Tinney and hear her reflect on her days growing up on her native Port Road and involvement in the coal and drapery business that grew in tandem is to share in a segment of social history.

By Paddy Walsh

A woman of profound faith, her early memories circulate through her school days and making her First Communion and Confirmation in the Cathedral she attends on a regular basis and the anecdotes that marked them out as significant times in her young life. Her parents, Paddy and Ceila, both hailed from Drumkeen – they had got married on the day the Second World War started in 1939 – her father's family moving to Lismonaghan when he was thirteen years old.

He worked in Sam Roulston's coal yard for a period – starting up his own coal business for which he became synonymous in Letterkenny and beyond, in 1938.

"He bought this house the following year," Margaret sweeps a glance around her home. "Johnny Boyce put the windows in, a great character, he was." It was in the house on the Port Road that that she and her brothers, Charlie and Eddie, saw their first window onto the world. "Nurse Gildea from the Oldtown delivered us."

"I went to the girls' school at the Parochial Hall. I remember the teachers were Miss O'Gara, the two Miss Doherty's, Miss Robinson and Miss Cannon. And Mother Angelica was the Principal and there was also a Sister Cecilia and not forgetting Peg O'Donnell."

An early memory: "Mamie Callaghan, a neighbour, took me to school on my very first day. I was four years old."

And she, Margaret, making her First Holy Communion in St Eunan's Cathedral in 1947. And a lifetime away from the trappings of today. "We went to the Convent for breakfast. A boiled egg and some bread."

First Communion

Thanks to the persuasive powers of their father, the three young Tinneys, Margaret, Charlie and Eddie, were all able to make their Confirmation at the same time. "The boys got new suits for it and I thought I would get a



Margaret Tinney outside what used to be the old family drapery store.

new dress but it didn't work out that way. Ms. Callan said she had her Julie's dress which she could give and I was given it to wear. And aunt Teresa said you'll look as good as the rest."

The young Margaret spent two years at the Tech where she learned cooking and sewing,

shorthand typing and bookkeeping.

But tragedy was to invade the Tinney family in 1950 with the passing of her mum. "She had a stroke on the Monday and died on the Saturday, I was about ten at the time. It was a terrible shock."

Separation?

It could have meant separation for the young siblings but an aunt, Teresa Gallagher, opted to look after them. "We would have ended up apart otherwise."

As the coal business continued to flourish, it helped fuel an expansion in the family enterprise with the opening of the drapery store on the Port Road on October 8th, 1954. "Peg Allison, who was the bookkeeper for the coal end of things, and Mary Doherty ran the shop. And I worked in it until it closed in 1991." The businesses not alone provided an income for the Tinneys but also, as Margaret points out, represented a social outlet. "You got to know so many people. Met so many through the coal and drapery."

Meanwhile, her father, enterprising to the last, took over the foundry at Lower Main Street from Sean Ruth.

The younger Tinneys would carry tea down to their father and were interested observers to the ongoing casting and welding operations and the shoeing of horses.

"Daddy ran it and then rented it out to Joe Bonnar." Another business destined to be cast to greater things.

Margaret remembers, too, she and her brothers herding cows to and from the small family farm down to the Isles.

Recalls the day she and Charlie were attempting to get the cows out of the field and a horse insisting it wanted to go as well. "We couldn't get the cows out and I started to cry." And the frustration building up, until Patsy McCaul came along and helped them solve the problem.



The first Oatfield sweets were made in 1927 at the old building on Port Road before the family drapery store opened in 1954

And then another recollection, quite literally, lights up in her mind. The day Charlie's coat caught fire and he running out of the house before Dermot Rainey and Barney Winston managed to get the coat off him.

The young Tinneys going on holidays to Stralongford near the Bullock Park to their granny, Teresa Gallagher's house. And Margaret and Eddie staying for a few days with their aunt, Cassie, in Correnagh. And going to the well and carrying the water back to the house. And on other occasions digging the potatoes. Or helping with the hay.

"Working holidays, they were. Daddy always believed you should be doing something and that idle hands were up to no good."

Not that it was all work. She recalls the amusements and fun fair that would occupy Callaghan's Field and the circus coming to town and the thrills that it brought along.

Another memory sparks into life. Margaret as a young girl being put on the bus at the Market Square to go to her granny's house.

"The conductor was told to drop me off near the Bullock Park but didn't he forget. And it was when the bus was close to Rosie Bonner's pub that he discovered I was still on it. But he had to drive on to Ballybofey to leave the passengers off and pick up others and then he dropped me off on the way back.

"I remember my aunt was at the half-door asking me why I so late. But I was only eight at the time and very shy and I couldn't say anything to the bus driver. But it was one day I got a run for my money," laughs Margaret.

"The boys used to say afterwards to put a big label on me to say where I was going!"

Memories of former times. A time when she could name every family in every home on the Port Road. "We had great neighbours. Jimmy and Frances Kelly and the Callaghans, Annie, Patsy and Lizzie, all of them very good to us. "It's changed times back then in the forties and the fifties. A changed place. I could hardly name anybody now on the Port Road."



P Tinney & Sons drapery store, Port Road, Letterkenny in the 1950's.