



# - MEET A TOWNIE -



## NINETY-FOUR YEARS ON AND NELLIE REFLECTS ON DAYS OF DANCING AND LIFE IN DRUMANY

**On Sunday next, Nellie O'Donnell will celebrate her 94th birthday. For the Drumany woman, it will represent a day of mixed emotions, given that it coincides with the 21st anniversary of the death of her husband, Bobby.**

She'll mark the day quietly with family and friends and look back, as such occasions inevitably demand, with varying degrees of joy and sadness at the passing of time and those dearest to her.

There are still plenty of twinkles in those eyes and smiles of delight at many of those memories and when she sat down last weekend to talk of those times, she does so digging deep into her mind recesses to draw on the people and places of her upbringing.

Daughter of James Duffy and Maggie (Hegarty), she has lived a life where her father's outstanding courage on the battlefields of the First World War, which earned him the Victoria Cross, has played centre-stage, particularly in the past few years when that bravery was finally recognised in his home town, the latest honour comprising the unveiling of a special plaque at Castle Street back in November and the display of the Victoria Cross at the Donegal County Museum, both events attended by Nellie and her family.

But this interview takes her beyond that well publicised part of her life as she reflects on youthful days and the town she grew up in.

Given the catchment area it was no surprise that the young Nellie was directed to Lurgybrack National School for her primary education.

"There was Master Kelly, Mr. McCaul and Miss Nee," she recalls the teaching staff of the time.

And like many of her peers, she didn't follow up with a secondary education but instead entered the world of work. And again like those peers, that took her to the Hosiery factory on the High Road, place of employment for so many in the Letterkenny of her youth.

"A fair amount worked there, alright." Indeed over 130, mostly women, were employed there by the 1930's. And she lists off some of those fellow workers and friends who toiled there including her cousin, Kitty Wilkie, sisters Sheila and Vera Vaughan, and Gertie Green.

It was an income but, she insists, "there was very little money". Nevertheless friendships were forged and they enjoyed their time there.

There was, also, of course time for entertainment away from the manufacturing of stockings and cardigans and the like.

There were dances to go to including a specific one in Drumoghil where Nellie would meet the man who would become her spouse.

Bobby O'Donnell, originally from Corkey, Manorcunningham, was present in his dancing shoes. And those moves on the floor impressed Nellie.

"He was a very good dancer. He won cups for dancing." And ultimately won the heart of the

Nellie O'Donnell.



young woman watching him.

Love at first sight? "Not really," she says, "but I did enjoy him dancing."

They married in St. Eunan's Cathedral and marriage in those days meant an end to the working career for

women. But for Bobby he had found employment with Paddy Tinney, the coal merchant, and subsequently in Thompson's Seeds store where Gleneany House is now located.

"He was a hard working man, he was," Nellie

**"We had to walk into the town for the main messages. And we would get them in John Harris's on the Main Street. And there was McDaid's wee shop on the Main Street as well."**

Nellie O'Donnell

insists.

The couple went on to have nine of a family, five boys and four girls, including Noleen, James, Joe, Des, Margaret, Evelyn, Tessie, Gerry and Stephen.

Nellie enjoyed close friendships with Gertie Green and Maggie Wilkie and also nights in the Fiesta Ballroom and other venues.

"I went on the opening night, a big crowd at it too." And any room for dancing? "Oh, aye, we found room!"

The Capitol Showband performed on that opening occasion in 1962 and Nellie was a fan of many of the acts of the time. Had she a particular favourite? She pauses to ponder and then opts for Johnny McEvoy. "He was a great singer."

And seated right across from her as this interview is being conducted, another notable stage performer – her daughter Evelyn (Gallagher). And Nellie's face lights up when she highlights her favourite song "Silver Haired Daddy" as performed by her talented offspring.

She remembers, too, the dances in the Devlin Hall but there was also the big screen to look forward to of an evening. And the stars and films that arrived in Letterkenny via the world of celluloid.

"I enjoyed going to the pictures. Me and my friends. The La Scala cinema. We paid four pence to get in."

Dancing and singing were not the only memories offered by Nellie as she looked back on the Letterkenny of that era.

"I liked going to Susan Kelly's shop in Drumany. You could get sweets and bars there. And some groceries.

"But we had to walk into the town for the main messages. And we would get them in John Harris's on the Main Street. And there was McDaid's wee shop on the Main Street as well."

And for someone who liked cycling, there were visits, also, to John Ponsonby's bicycle repair outlet beside Curley's tavern. "It was the only place that fixed bikes in the town back then."

Nellie regrets the passing of an event that in its heyday drew thousands to the town. The Letterkenny International Folk Festival may have come and gone but for many townies there is still the abiding memory of those overseas dance troupes lighting up every corner of the town and the competitions and craic that went with it.

"It's a pity the town doesn't have it anymore. You couldn't move for the people."

Recollections, too, of some of the local personalities that were prominent in the town of her upbringing. J.P. McGinley for one – "yes, he was a good doctor."

And her involvement with the labour movement and attending meetings in the company of John Nugent, a Dubliner, who lived on the Cullion Road. And ninety-four years on from that day Nellie Duffy emerged into the world, she, even as that significant age catches up, still manages to conjure up images as prevalent and bright as any ever screened in the La Scala Cinema.

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