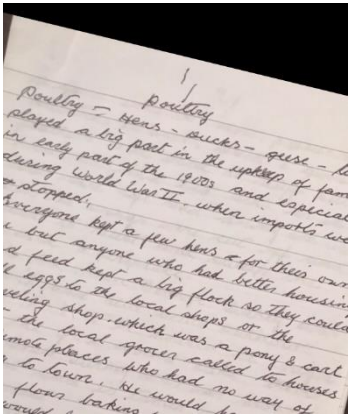
Memories of Bygone Days

A collection of writings and interview transcripts from Nancy Cunningham, Baskin, Drumraney, Westmeath, Ireland with Sarah Slevin in 2011.

Chapters



Rural Ireland

As we entered the 20th century, rural Ireland was at a very low ebb. Landlords had taken over most of the good land. The "big house" as it was then known might have from 500 to over 1,000 acres of land. A lot of the very small holdings had been taken over during the later part of the 1800s and homes demolished because they were not able to pay the high rents demanded. During the famine, families were wiped out with hunger, disease, and poverty, and the landlords prospered. The big house employed house staff and a lot of farm workers as there was no machinery. Some were lucky enough to have a gate lodge or herd's house on the land and others lived in old badly run-down thatched houses. The middle-class farmer was able to support his family reasonably well if he worked hard and used all home-produced food.

During the early 1900s there was a lot of emigration to the USA and they helped to support those that remained at home. At the same time, the landlords were getting it hard to keep up their high standard of living and in some cases had no family to carry on so had to sell off their land. The Irish Land Commission bought up large tracts of land during the 1930s and divided it out to small farmers. The system was to pay rent to the Land Commission and over a number of years, those who kept up the payments became rent-free owners. This was a great help because it enabled them to keep some cows and a donkey or horse to work the land. Later on some houses were also built. Mostly families got those farms and there might be anywhere from 10 to 16 people living in one house. By all working together they could be doing all right.

Also we were importing things like tea, tobacco, oil, and rice that we could not produce here in Ireland so progress was being made. In 1939, World War II started and that was a bad blow to Ireland. No imports were available because ships were unable to travel as explosives were placed in the seas around us and even though we took no part in the war it affected us badly. At that time, cars, motorbikes,

and machinery that needed oil were beginning to be available to the less well off. Petrol was rationed and only doctors, vets, and priests were allowed a small ration. Tea, sugar, bread, and other necessities were also rationed so it was back to the land for food. At this time rural electricity was not set up, so as there was no oil for lamps candles were used. They did not give much light and of course the tea and tobacco were sorely missed. The cup of tea and a smoke were a big part of social life at that time.

A period known as The Emergency started in 1940 and continued onto the early 1950s. In order that everyone got a fair share of food, ration books were issued for food and clothes. The allowance was a half an ounce of tea per person per week. As everyone drank tea and liked it pretty strong, the ration could be used up in 1 or 2 days. It was eked out by not giving children any and also by using very weak watery tea which most people disliked. Some went so far as drying whitethorn leaves and crushing them but these were a poor substitute and with only a small amount of sugar they didn't replace the steaming mug of hot tea with 3 or 4 spoons of sugar. As in all scarcities, there were people ready to cash in. What was known as the "black market" became common and people paid exorbitant prices to the black marketers for tea, tobacco, and other foods. Country people were not so bad – they had home-grown crops so didn't go hungry.

Church and school days (as children)

The Roman Catholic church and National Schools were closely united in the upbringing and welfare of children. They were usually situated close to each other. The parochial house was beside the church while the teacher's residence was usually in the school grounds. The Parish priest was often aged so had a curate to help. He lived with him as did the housekeeper and a kitchen maid and the priest's boy or man who looked after the church grounds and the priest's horse, the garden, and provided fuel and water to the house. The teacher's residence was more of a family home. Often a married couple with a family and a housekeeper and sometimes an assistant teacher would live with them.

Children were usually 6 years of age before they started school. They had to walk as there was no transport. It was a big day for most of them as they got new shoes and clothes. Up to that it was cast-offs that older members of the family had outgrown. Religious instruction was a big part of their first year as they made their communion at 7 years. The parish priest was a regular caller to the school. He would take over the class and question the pupils on prayers and the sacraments and could be very cross if he didn't get answers. When he left, the teacher would have something to say to those that failed. Also, if the parish priest met the scholars (as they were called then) on the way home he would get them to say their prayers.

Confessions were held after school every 3 weeks on Friday evenings for 8 o'clock mass on Saturday morning to receive communion (fasting from midnight on Friday night). By the time they got back from mass it would be 10 o'clock and small children often were faint from hunger by the time they got home. Confirmation was in 7th class when they were 14 years and about to leave national school. Children looked forward to the day they were free from school, even though the

chances of getting paid work were slim. Everyone helped their neighbours so there was plenty of work but very little money.

Apart from church and school rules, young people enjoyed great freedom in their own locality. Where there were larger families, the older ones would leave school at 11 or 12 years of age not having got confirmation and might be brought back at a later date before the bishop and could be 16 or 17 years old before getting confirmed. They would work in places where they would get free board and food until they were old enough to emigrate. Large areas of England's cities were destroyed during the war years. The Irish were employed building roads, railways, hospitals, and general housing. A lot of Irish girls trained as nurses and did very well, which helped those at home. In the early 1900s most of the emigration was to the USA but from the 1950s onward, England was closer to home and the money was good so thousands of our boys and girls made their home there.

During the 1900s large numbers of boys and girls gained religious orders. Nearly every parish had a parish priest and a curate and in built up areas with dense populations maybe two or three curates. Most of the secondary schools were staffed by nuns, with very few lay teachers until the later half of the century. Thousands of priests, nuns, and brothers went on missionary work all over the world. Many of them lost their lives for their faith. Nearly every family would have two or three or more members in a religious order and photographs of those would be hung in a prominent place in the home. It was considered such an honour to be involved with the Church.

Photo after the wedding of Nancy McGann to Michael Cunningham at Drumraney Church in November 1959 with Grett Cunningham (Bridesmaid) and Jimmy Slevin (Best Man)

The Mission

Most rural parishes had a mission every 4 or 5 years. Everyone looked forward to it even though it was a very busy time for everyone. It went on for 2 weeks in Spring or early Summer so with haymaking and turf cutting people had to get organised for time off. The Parish Priest would be looking for volunteers for a big clean up and painting around the church, the Parochial grounds and his house. There would be 2 or 3 missioners – they were kept in the Parochial House. Farmers wives would donate eggs, chickens, homemade bread, butter and veg to help and during the mission would help with the cooking and cleaning, etc.

The Mission would be opened at Sunday Mass. Back then Saturday Mass wasn't heard of in rural churches. Sunday at 8 am and 10 pm or 11 pm was the usual time so people would have a chance to see what the missioners were like but, of course, they were very nice and praised the parish church, the people, alter boys and everyone and prayed that the attendance would be good and that all would benefit spiritually by doing the Mission well. That would all change by mid week.

It would be two weeks when everyone started out with great intentions but after one week they would look forward to the closing night. The program was 7am mass for workers and those who were busy during the day. Then 9am for the school children on their way to school. There would be sermons at these masses. Then at 8pm there would be prayers for everyone and everything – the sick, the living, the dead, the missioners etc. Then the sermon, The Pounding of the Pulpit with the preachers first, the shouts about Hell, the Devil and Damnation would be heard outside. Of course, there were no microphones and very dim candle light. That took about half an hour or maybe more depending on the subject, you could hear a pin

dropping there was such silence in the Church. Finally, the Rosary and Benediction would close that day.

Later in the week Confessions would be during the afternoon and after the night Devotions to give everyone a chance to make a good and full confession. Anyone who had lapsed in this respect was urged to come along and make their peace with God. This might be easier said than done. There would be several seats filled with people waiting but that didn't stop the priest going into everything he was told in detail. You had to be very truthful about how long since your last Confession and that left a lot of questions as to why you didn't go more often especially if you had lapsed. Everything had to be explained in detail especially if you were in a relationship with the opposite sex, 'sins of the flesh' - they were called then – were most serious and often the priest would raise his voice so people outside would know what was going on. When he was satisfied that he had all the information he would give you absolution, but if he thought you did not give the whole truth he would refuse and tell you to come back in 3 or 4 days before the Mission was over for forgiveness.

There was the story of the man who hadn't confessed for years but decided to do so at the Mission, when the priest heard this he gave him an awful grilling but wouldn't give him absolution, told him to come back before the weekend and have his list of sins and be ready to repent. The man knelt down at the back of the church to decide what he would do. Then he noticed another priest hearing at the other side of the Church. In he went and the priest was in a rush and said "How long?". "About 10 minutes ago" he replied and was given absolution immediately and went home happy.

The stalls arrived during the first week with their display of Holy pictures, statues, Rosary beads, prayer books and medals for every Saint on the Calendar of Saints. Everyone was urged to stock up with all those items if they hadn't them already. On the closing night of the Mission, all would be blessed and everyone was enrolled in Scapulars, Red for the Sacred Heart, Blue for the Blessed Virgin, Black for a Happy Death and lots more. The Missioners also called on the sick and Housebound, and if there was any able person who didn't attend the Mission, they were visited as well and sometimes there wasn't much welcome for them.

Farming

When small farmers got back the land they were evicted from in the late 1800s they had the task of making a living on it. The first priority was a cow. She produced a calf each year, provided milk and butter for the house, reared her calf – fed cats and dogs etc. After churning, the buttermilk was used in bread-making, the calf was then sold on if money was needed at any time. It was the start of building up a herd. Hay had to be provided for winter feed with very basic tools – this was hard work. The scythe was used to cut the grass, the fork and wooden hand rake were used to turn the grass until it was dry. Then it was gathered in small cocks - later when thoroughly dry it was put in a larger rick near the cow shed and used during the winter months.

The farm was usually fenced off in small paddocks – grazing area, meadow and tillage fields. The farmer's wife kept a few hens and ducks to keep the family with eggs. If she had more than she needed she sold them to a neighbour. The tillage was a great help also with potatoes. The main food ate was oatmeal made from a small bit of corn sown and also some cabbage and turnips. The hens were fed on potatoes and corn as were the dogs and pigs. So now we have bread, butter, milk, eggs, porridge, potatoes and vegetables to keep the family fed along with the dog, the cat, the pig and poultry. It was a sort of a factory, but it was long hours of hard work. The farmer and his wife and the children, from a very young age, all had their jobs to do but families were large and most of the time was spent outdoors. Everyone helped with haymaking, harvesting crops and turf-lifting which took a lot of time with very poor tools. Most of the crops would be gathered in the wheelbarrow.

Later, the donkey and cart took the place of the barrow. The children loved rides in the donkey and cart. It was also used to take older people to mass and maybe once or twice a year to town and was considered a great improvement from having to walk and carry

baggage in the hand or if it was heavy on your back in a sack. The turf also was brought in the donkey cart.

Now the donkey had to be shod and iron hoops for the cart wheels provided so here the blacksmith had a job. The country forge was a very sociable place to meet. There were always people calling to have tools mended and sometimes remodelled to make them easier to use. There was always a bright coal fire in the forge which was quite a small building and the blacksmith hammering iron on the anvil sent sparks flying through the air. It was great on a cold wet evening to go into the forge, watch the smith at work and get warm and dry at the same time and listen to the old men telling stories (mostly lies). School kids always called into 'the Forge' – it was a place of entertainment as well as a business.

Food Storage and Pests

When small farms became self-supporting, they were able to store food enough to feed the family and animals over the winter. The turf would have to be kept outside in a clamp covered with straw and pieces of canvas or old sacks to keep it dry. Usually this clamp would be on the sheltered side of the dwelling house. Potatoes, vegetables, turnips and mangolds for animal feed would be put in pits and covered with clay to keep the frost off.

Problems started immediately when cold weather set in because rats and mice built their nests under the turf and raided the pits for food. If you didn't check on your pits often you could find half your food eaten and the remainder unfit for use.

All sorts of methods were used such as tying the dog close by as a deterrent or keeping a small terrier as some of them would kill off small rodents. Mesh wire would be placed around the pits and strong-smelling substances such as soot or tar would be placed in the area. Home-made poison as in bluestone mixed with lard or oil would be placed on the entrance holes. Traps were also used but you would often find just the rat's leg in the jaws of the trap and a three-legged had ran away. The mice were much more tame. They were in most dwelling houses so food had to be stored in tin boxes or in bags suspended from the ceiling.

Cats were kept everywhere and helped to keep vermin away but they caused trouble. Milk, butter, and meat had to be kept out of range form them. This wasn't easy as space was limited and buckets and earthenware pots were used for storage. Many a housewife would find a mouse drowned in her cream bucket that she was ripening for churning into butter.

Birds were also a pest. Crows were the worst enemy a farmer could have. They took the growing potatoes or corn from the tillage fields. They nested in high trees and reared their young so high up it was difficult to deter them. Some farmers if they had a shotgun would try to shoot them but they would fly off making cawing noises and would be back next day again. They would clear an apple crop early in the morning before people got up. When the corn was stacked near the house, that would also be robbed. The wood pigeon would eat the cabbage and green vegetables. Strings of bottles or jars or shiny objects would be hung over the vegetable plot. Also if a crow happened to get shot, he would be strung up on a pole in the field as a warning to the rest of the flock. The scarecrow was dressed up like a man with a gun but didn't work great either.

Poultry

Poultry – hens, ducks, geese, and turkeys – played a big part in the upkeep of families in the early part of the 1900s and especially during World War II when imports were stopped.

Everyone kept a few hens for their own use but anyone who had better housing and feed kept a big flock as they could sell eggs to the local shops or the traveling shop, which was a pony and cart that the local grocer called to houses in remote places who had no way of getting to town. He would have tea, sugar, flour, baking soda, tobacco, etc. Eggs would be sold to pay for those necessities. Also chickens were reared and use at Christmas or Easter or special occasions and a few would be sold when money was scarce.

Ducks and geese were popular as they would be let out through the fields where they had water and grass so only a small amount of food was needed for their upkeep. A goose was the most popular Christmas dinner. Duck and goose feathers were used to stuff pillows and cushions as they were soft and downy and warm. Their wings were cut off and used to dust the hearth and fireplace.

The American bronze turkey was black and did better outdoors but had to be housed at night or the fox would take them. The white turkey was more recent and is tamer and better for meat. It wasn't unusual in the spring and summer at nightfall to see people trying to coax turkeys off the top of big trees where they would try to roost. The danger there was the fox as they had to be housed.

The farmer's wife looked forward to the Christmas market when she would sell a few turkeys. The Christmas market day was the highlight of the year for the farmer's wife. From November onwards the turkeys would be hand fed so as to be sure they were nice and plump. If the weather was frosty, the donkey or horse had to be taken to the forge to have frost nails put on so that they could travel safely on slippery roads. With no fridges, turkeys would all be killed a week before Christmas so there was only one big market in mid December. On that day people had to be in town at daybreak in order to get a good position in the market square. The noise of cackling fowl, carts, and loud talk would be deafening by daylight. Then the townspeople would arrive and do the rounds to see who had the best birds and by midday, all would be sold.

Then when they were paid, the country people did the shopping known as Bringing Home the Christmas. The draper's shop would be their first call. Clothes, footwear, and household goods could be bought there. The man of the house usually got a pair of boots and a new hat while his wife would have to get children's wear and shoes. If she had some money left she might get a hat or some material for an apron or some lace window curtains.

Then the grocer was the next call. Tea, sugar, and maybe jam or rice and some currants for the Christmas cake and pudding and a drop of whiskey in case someone might call to the house during the holidays. The grocer always put in a big red candle as a gift to his customers.

Nancy with her mother Kate in the late 1940 and in 2019

The Delph Woman

In the early part of the last century, most people used enamel mugs, plates, saucepans, etc. These were long lasting and could be used in the meadow or bog as they wouldn't get broken. Also every house had an enamel chamber pot, mostly for older or sick people. Younger and active people took to the woods for toilet business.

Later the Delph woman came along in a pony or donkey cart with a selection of delphware – mugs with coloured bands around the top, plates to match, sugar bowls, etc. But the highlight was the delph jug with flowers painted on the side. Every time she came by, the woman of the house would buy one for her dresser until she had a row of jugs on the lower shelf. It was the pride of any house.

The delph chamber pot was an improvement as enamel or tin was used. The more expensive one had a flower on the side of it. When people got better off, they went to town so the "delph woman" disappeared.

Travellers

As children we were fascinated when 'The Tinkers', now known as Travellers, came to the area. Large groups lived together, sometimes three, or maybe four generations, and all had big families. Their main way of travelling was horse-drawn vans, with followers of donkeys, dogs, goats and maybe a few hens. They would arrive around mid-day, having gathered their tents and cooking utensils from the previous site and travel a few miles to their next stopping place. The same families stayed in the same area maybe three or four times a year, so local people got to know them by name. Some were tin smiths and sweeps, while others dealt in horses and sold household items using baskets and going door-to-door.

They choose where they would set up very carefully. It had to be a wide grass verge with trees for shelter and it had to be near some farm houses so they could collect their needs. It was quite a sight to see; carts with the older people and their belongings, followed by their various animals, and the women and children bringing up the rear. They would be begging at houses as they went along, and so, the whole entourage could be a half mile long!

On arrival, they undid the horses and secured one or two of them to a bush or post. The others would not go far away. They then put up the tents; framework first, then put the canvas on and maybe some covering on the grass underneath. A boy or man would then go to the nearest farmer for a bundle of straw to make a bed. Meantime, a few more would go collecting fuel. Many a time a farmer would have to repair his fences when the travellers moved on, as they would take anything that would burn. Once the fire was going, the smell of wood, smoke filled the air, followed by the scent of frying eggs, bacon and whatever else they got during the day's travels. With the fire burning strong, a boy was usually sent to the nearest pump or well for water. They would also borrow knives, scissors, needles, thread and various other items they required.

In the evening, as people walked past they would be sitting around in the firelight, eating, laughing and chatting. Of course, there would also be the occasional fight but everyone steered clear when that happened and it would be all over the next day.

The tin smith would be at work early next morning. People would be waiting for their arrival to have buckets and cans bottomed and maybe buy some new ones. The women usually did the door-to-door begging. At night fall, when the landowners would be gone home after their day's work, a few horses would be slipped into a good pasture and taken out the next morning before the farmer got up. The basket-men or women would go from door to door selling all sorts of bric-a-brac; pins, needles, brushes, combs, odd pieces of delph, jugs, vases and some would have paper flowers. In those days, when country women only went to town two or three times a year, they would get their requirements from the travellers.

The children did not get much education as they were on the move all the time. IN some families, the council might give them a terrace house for the older people but the mostly they preferred to stay on the road. Nowadays these people have covered wagons and cars and are provided with serviced sites. They also deal in scrap iron and various items that can be sold on for money and of course horse trading is very lucrative. They also qualify for pensions, children's allowance, housing, and special classes in some schools. So the day of door-to-door begging is over.

The day of the lone beggar man in the countryside is also gone. They would be homeless – some lost their family and home through poverty and the result of evictions. They were always made welcome when they called to rural homes. They had a meal with the family and some tobacco from the man of the house. If they had any skill, they might help the farmer with some work on the farm for a few days doing some repairs or saving crops.

During their stay they would be allowed to sleep in a shed where a temporary bed would be set up for them. Most of them travelled the whole country on foot and when they grew too old they would be

taken care of in the county home which was part of the hospital at the time.

As time went on and people got a better standard of living the odd traveller began to steal and damage property which gave them all a bad name so people had no welcome for anyone they did not know. So the day of the Beggar Man in Ireland is long gone. Also, they qualified for pensions and unemployment benefits so were expected to look after themselves.

Sayings

The old dog for the hard road.

Great minds think alike, fools seldom differ.

It's a long road that has no turn.

Murder will out.

The nearer from church, the further from God.

You never know the loss of water until the well runs dry.

The road to hell is paved with good intentions.

Never put off til tomorrow what you can do today.

A stitch in time, saves nine.

Empty vessels make most sound.

All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy.

No point locking the stable when the horse is gone.

A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.

Mind the pennies and the pounds will look after themselves.

One swallow doesn't make a summer.

The early bird catches the worm.

The early morning sun carries gold in its mouth.

Early to bed and early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise.

A wise man never found a dead man.

The wisest hen often lays out.

As noisy as a haggard of sparrows.

As wise as an owl.

As cute as a fox.

As cross as a weasel.

Never get too friendly with a priest, a peeler, or a postman.

It's like two pence halfpenny looking down on two pence.

If the cap fits, wear it.

Far off hills always look green.

Far off cows wear long horns.

The proof of the pudding is in the eating.

That one would take the eye out of your head.

Back carriage pays the carman.

Anyone who was a bit simple was said to "have a slate off"

If it came on a hare's back, it wouldn’t be fast enough.

God's mills grind slowly but they grind surely.