

Abbeyfeale Reminiscences: Jerome Murphy and The Sport Murphy

Jerome Murphy, Tallyman

"A tallyman is a man who hawks clothes from door to door and goes to fairs to sell them too. It was very popular in the nineteen fifties and nineteen forties. I was at it myself in the late nineteen forties. It was hard work. You would have to get up early, about five or six o'clock in the morning to go to the fairs with your load of second hand clothes. Second hand clothes were in great demand in those times as the people did not have the money to buy new clothes. You'd have a stand at the fair, a special place where you would sell. Otherwise you'd have opposition. And anyway you'd be in the wrong place.

But you needn't open your stand until nine or ten o'clock. You wouldn't have many coming to the stand at that stage. They would be selling their cattle. Your busiest time would be when the cattle were sold.

Take for instance the town of Abbeyfeale. That was one of the greatest market towns in the south of Ireland. It was the greatest calf market. Always on a Monday, it was a very early market. It would start about five in the morning. They would be

Interviews with Pat Feeley, 1978

bringing in the calves then. And they'd have them sold, maybe at 8 o'clock. They would go home and milk the cows then. And himself and the wife would come back in to do a bit of shopping. They would come to your stand about 12 o'clock. Twelve o'clock until three o'clock would be the busiest time. You'd always have a good line for the streets. You might have a line in overcoats. These would be good sellers in Abbeyfeale, before the Listowel races in September. There would be a fair in Abbeyfeale before that and they would be buying overcoats for the races in Listowel. And you would have a line. There were belted overcoats at that time and these were popular with the country people. My line would be: "Lovely overcoats selvedge bound, patched pockets and a belt all 'round". You would sell a lot of overcoats before the races. You would have second hand police trousers and army jackets. We did not carry a lot of boots. But I had a shop in Listowel where I used sell a lot of army boots.

I remember buying 5,000 pairs at one time in Collins barracks at two shillings a

pair. Some were good. But more were needing repairs. I repaired these and I sold them in country places, a lot of them anyway. At that time country places like Scartaglin, Ballydesmond and Castleisland were, at that time, great country for army boots.

We would bring across police trousers from England. But it was difficult to bring them across. You would have to have a certificate of order and a certificate of fumigation for second hand clothes, like these from England. At other times we would be selling shirts.

You would have tallymen from all over Ireland at the fairs. I remember in Newcastle West there were fourteen stands in the Square selling clothes. It was like Petticoat Lane, with dealers from Cork, Clare and Mayo. There would be a certain rivalry between us as to who would push his stuff the best and who was the best speaker. Of course, in your local town of Abbeyfeale, you could afford to sell cheaper than if you had to motor to Knocknagree, or Dingle, or some other distant town or village.

We also had what were known as gambles in my native Knocknagoshel. The people of the house would raffle something like a greyhound pup, or a bonham,



Main Street, Abbeyfeale, postcard by Hely's Ltd., Dublin, c.1910

(Limerick Museum)

or a bicycle. There would be a card game to win what was being raffled and there would be a dance and a supper. The admission charge at the door would usually be about a shilling. They were greatly enjoyed by the people of the district at that time. I remember in particular one raffle in Gortroe. It was in McKenna's house, then called by the Irish form of their name Mac Ginea.

That night I went to the village of Knocknagoshel for a drink and I heard of the gamble. There were two of us and we went to a nearby field where we knew there were two ponies and we took these out of the field and rode them bareback to the gamble.

We were charged a shilling admission to the gamble. There would be six playing at some tables. And eight or nine at other tables. If you lost at the cards, you could come down to dance in the kitchen. But if you were winning at the cards, you would stay on playing. The supper was at midnight. Butter and tea were rationed during the war years. But there were five or six earthenware crocks of mixed fruit jam there. They would have bought these for about 2/6. Currant bread and tea was supplied. It would be a great night of set dancing with polkas and sets. The dancing took place in the kitchen and the music was played by local musicians. There was hardly any drinking at the gambles because the people of the house could not afford to supply drink as they were poor people and the drink was too dear. In later years, there were 'wran nights' where there was considerable drinking, not only throughout the night, but well into the following day.

I remember a pet bonham being gambled. A pet bonham was the fifteenth bonham in the litter. The sow had only fourteen teats so she could only feed fourteen offspring. The fifteenth was fed by the small farmer with a bottle, or he was given to the family next door to feed. He became so accustomed to living in the house that he ran up and down the floor like a dog or a cat. The bonham would be taken home by the man who won him in the card game who would fatten him and sell him.

The gambles usually took place in winter time. They started in September or October and went on into March and April. They would cease to be held after Saint Patrick's Day. Saturday night was a favourite night for them as those who attended would then have Sunday to lie in. During Lent there were usually a lot of them as the Catholic Church forbade dancing during Lent and all the dance halls, with the exception of Dan Paddy Andy's, were closed. I bought a melodeon for £1 5s in Roche's shop in Abbeyfeale in the late 1930s. I learned to play *Kruger's Daughter* for the dances. But I never got much farther beyond that.

People of all ages came to the house dances. It was a neighbours' gathering. Old men in their seventies and eighties would dance. The kitchen would have a flagged stone floor or a cement floor. The

dancers would have nails or tips on their shoes or boots. And there would be a great pounding and ringing. The flags especially would ring from the nails and the tips on the shoes. Anyone who could play would be invited to do so, accordion players were especially sought to play for the sets. The young people showed little interest in the cards, with the exception of the occasional young man. They all wanted to spend the night dancing. The young would cycle ten or twelve miles to a gamble.

I had a narrow escape the night I went to McKenna's. After the night of dancing and card-playing was over, we set off on our ponies across the countryside. We rode them through a stream and across country. We came to a lime kiln and the pony jumped it. It was about ten feet deep and if I had fallen into it, I was dead.

I always stood on a platform and addressed the people. Good speaking was important. I would have a spiel: "This beautiful coat is lined with rams' wool and bulls' wool, spun by the niggers, woven by the blacks and made in Dublin by the boys from the county Wexford. A woman might ask you: 'Is that coat lined?' And you would say: 'It's lined with ram's wool and bull's wool, you've the ram and the lamb and part of the puck'.

I would have another type of spiel when selling shirts. I would open out the shirt and say to the prospective customer: "A fine shirt, wide in the shoulders and long in the front. You won't need any blind in the window going to bed".

I would offer two shirts for say 18 shillings and eleven pence and two more for 22/11. Then I would clap my hands and say "To hell with poverty. The lot for £1". And I would throw in a few pairs of socks. You would sell every shirt that you had that way.

The most colourful tallyman that I met was a Frawley man from Limerick. He sold suit lengths and he was very good at it. But my brother, Seán, was very good too. You would have to have the gift of the gab. It was a hard day's work from 11 in the morning to 4 or 5 o'clock in the evening.

The 29th of June fair in Abbeyfeale was the biggest fair in that part of the country. It was a holiday of obligation and a great holiday. Men, women and children came from east Kerry, west Limerick and north Cork. The town of Abbeyfeale would be black with people. You couldn't walk the streets. I was from Knocknagoshel and there was an advantage in being known. If you were from the area, it was easier to sell stuff because if they purchased a garment and it didn't fit them, they could go with it to where you lived and exchange it for another that did fit them. But if they bought an article of clothing from a tallyman from Limerick, or the west of Ireland, they would not be able to exchange this, if they so wanted, as they would not know where to find the seller.

The calf markets in Abbeyfeale were held very early in the morning. The calves were brought in as early as 5 am. And the

market would be over by 8 am. If there was a fair on the same day, you would have a great day. The calves were brought in carts and it could be a great day for the tallyman. The tallyman did not make great money because he had to have a lorry on the road. Sometimes he could have a very bad day when he wouldn't make the price of his dinner.

I always did good business at Knocknagree fair. I had customers 'built up' there. There were lively people in that part of the country. There was a fair field in Knocknagree. But in the evening, it could sometimes get rough. The men would get drunk and they would want to take a pants, say, at half price. They would say that they would pay you at the next fair. But of course, if you gave them the garment, you would never get your money. They could become quite aggressive. But you would only give them the article of clothing if you knew the person. They would pinch stuff too, trousers and such like, and you'd need eyes on your pole.

The old women used annoy my brother Seán. An old woman came to our stall one day in a donkey and car. Her shawl was covered in splashes of dirt off the road. She asked Seán for something. He didn't have it. And she started giving out to him. He looked at the mud-splattered shawl and said to her: "Missus, what you need is a mud splasher".

There was a tallyman from Dublin called Mickie Hannon. At the time in question, James Dillon was the Minister for Agriculture. Hannon would shout out this cant: "God made the bees. The bees make the honey. The farmers do the work. And Jamesy Mary Dillon makes the money". This was always well received.

You would build your shop early in the morning from about nine to ten o'clock. There was a canvas cover or canopy over the body of the lorry. Some of the hawkers, like Freynes of Mayo or Smiths of Dunmanway, had thirty ton trucks. You'd have to hand the stuff down from the body of the truck to the customers in the street. You would draw them with the gab. And there would be good days and bad days. I got very fond of the road, going from town to town. It was like being a commercial traveller, you'd get used to going from place to place. Sometimes we'd take an early shot of whiskey in the morning before facing into the tangles and jobbers. It was a roving life, a life you'd get fond of. I used find it very hard to stay at home, after being out on the roads.

You'd need to buy cheap and sell cheap. I used buy in England and in Dublin from two Jewmen. At times, it was difficult to get nice, clean secondhand clothes. In Listowel, the town that I now live in, you'd only sell good secondhand stuff. A good second-hand suit would then cost you from £9 to £10. A new suit would cost from £25 to £30.'

The Sport Murphy

All that I describe was in the period 1940s to 1950s. During and after the war, people



1930s Milton postcard showing the Square, Abbeyfeale

(Limerick Museum)

were very poor and they used go out and kill the rabbits. And you would have nothing tastier than a roast rabbit. And the young one was a lot nicer. A lot of people lived on rabbits as they did in England as well.

You have to have these small nets. You clear the ditches all around and take the briars away. You would block several holes in the ditch. You then put the nets at one hole or burrow and you put the ferret in the other hole. The ferret will drive the rabbit through the hole out into the net and there will be men there to catch the rabbit.

You might take two ferrets on a days ferreting because you might lose one. He would stay inside. If he killed a rabbit in the burrow, he might stay inside a day or two and you'd have no way of getting him out, except by rooting the ditch. He would eat the rabbits inside in the burrow so that you would need 'a spare wheel.'

When we used go ferreting, there was a lot of money involved so that you would not take that many with you, for if you did, you'd have 'no profit'. You were better off with two. You'd need two. The rabbit was 4/6 at that time in 'old money.' So it wouldn't be worth your while. Rabbits weren't as plentiful that time, but now there are a lot of them again.

You would get the ferrets from the people that breed them. I got them in Limerick at £2 each. You would get them in various colours. Black and brown and white and combinations of these. They were very vicious. If they put their teeth on you, they would bring the blood. And you couldn't loosen their grip. They were dangerous to children. You'd have to keep

children away from them. You kept them in a special little house that was all wired in. They were so small that they could come out the smallest hole. You could feed them milk and bread or you could give them tea or any nice little bits that you would have. I usually kept two ferrets.

I frequently went out on a Sunday and on an average day we would kill 20 to 30 rabbits, especially if we got a clear, open ditch. If you had to take briars and vegetation off that could take a long time. There would be people going around with little vans, buying fowl. They would buy them at the crossroads. They would pay around 4/6 for a rabbit. They would be sent out foreign then. The ferreting was popular during the war years and a lot of people made money from the rabbits. But the people that were catching them did not make that much. They got perished going through the country. And then again you had people who wouldn't want you to ferret at all because if the ferret stayed in the burrow, the next thing that would happen, people had a lot of hens at the time. And if the ferret got into the fowl house, they would cause a lot of trouble. They'd be hens clattering, anyway, a lot of dead hens. That's why they didn't want them at that stage. But you'd do it in the quiet. You wouldn't want to be seen at all.

When a rabbit came out, you'd be fast enough to take him. You'd block the hole then and put the ferret in another hole. Sometimes too, you might be in hard luck. For if he caught a rabbit inside, he could stay there for days. He could fall asleep. That's why you would need a second one.

You wouldn't want to make bold at all on the ferrets. If you had a rabbit in your

hand, he might think that your hand was the rabbit and he'd make a dive for it. And once he had taken hold of it, like the badger, he wouldn't let go. You'd have to put something into his mouth to force him to let go. To prevent being bitten by them, they would sometimes pull their teeth, or cut off their teeth with a cutters, so that they couldn't catch the rabbit in the burrow. That, of course, was a bit of cruelty. But I used to do it. I kept the ferret in a small wooden box about a foot square. And I never knew how long a ferret would live. But I think a young ferret would be the best.

Whoever brought in the myxamatoxis, it was a downright shame. The first thing that you would notice was that the eyes would come outside their head. And the rabbits would get pure blind, and pure white, snow white. And they'd be staggering like they'd be drunk. I'd say give them a week and they'd be dead. It was a terrible shame to see them around the fields, to see them trying to pick a bit and them stone blind. It was a downright shame whoever brought it in and its still there, even at this time.

For a time, they thought that they would banish the rabbit. But they never did. The rabbits got immune to it. And I am delighted. For what the rabbits did for the poor and the hungry people, they kept them alive. And it was a great shame for those who did it to come and try to destroy them with the myxo. I don't think that there would be any luck following the people that did that. The rabbit was the friend of the poor people.

You'd go along through the fields and you'd pick out a patch. When you'd

examine the ground carefully, you'd see where he jumps from one spot to another. And the rabbit he'd give a jump of about two feet maybe. And you'd come along with your snare, then, tied on to a bit of a stick about seven or eight inches long. And you'd drive that down in the ground. Then you'd get a small little twig with a little fork in it. And you'd open your snare. You'd see the patch on the ground where he doesn't jump at all. And you'd keep it up, just about a foot from the ground. And you'd keep it firm that way. And when the rabbit jumps from one spot to another spot, he jumps through the snare. And he's caught. And I suppose cruelty again. But he wouldn't last long anyway, he'd choke. But if you were there in time, which we were, you'd hear a screech, you'd go and take him out of it and that was it.

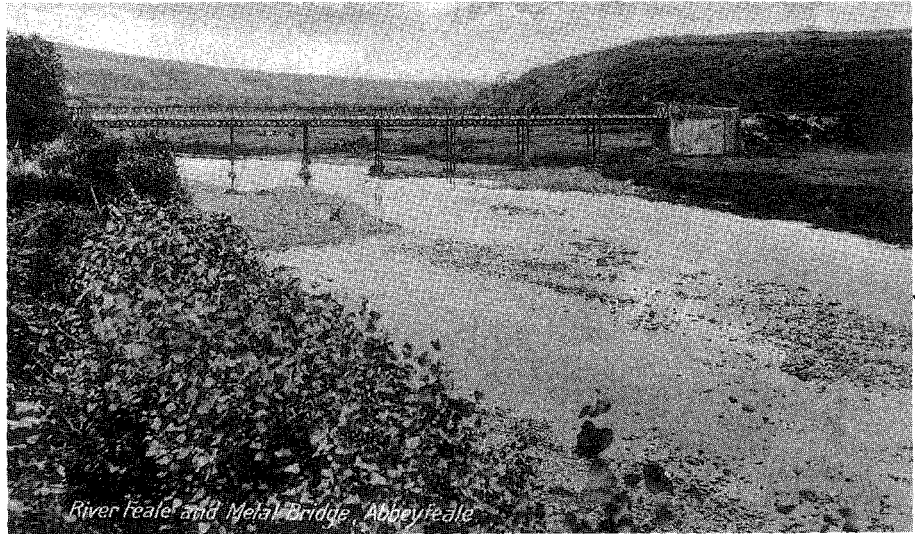
Poaching Salmon

I often see fellows along the river. At first I didn't know what they were doing. You'd see them there along the banks on a fine day. Of course times were bad in those times and everyone was trying to make a few bob.

The first thing that you might see is a splash of lightning coming out of the river and up on the bank. A salmon thrown out with the gaff. You had the river full of salmon that time. Not like now. You had Spring salmon that time, hundreds of Spring salmon. They're gone too, and its worse its getting.

You'd walk along the bank of the river on a fine sunny day. The salmon will see you and he'll go to cover, under a sally tree or under a big rock in the river. The water-keepers weren't that plentiful at that time, and they weren't that hard on you either. If you had a license, they would give you the chance to make the cost of the license anyway. The license was something around £2 that time. A fair bit of money then. And if you had a big family they would know that and they would give you the chance to make that anyway.

On a sunny summer day, they would use the 'strócáil' to stick the salmon. The 'strócáil' was a slender piece of iron with three hooks on it. A piece of lead would be put on it to sink it. The salmon would be lying in the shadow of a sally. And they would stick their salmon. So long as he was stuck by the 'strócáil', there was no hope of him getting away. So long as he wouldn't break the line, which he sometimes used to, as at that time, it was only 10 or 12lb breaking strain. This was not strong enough, as one sweep around the river and it was gone, broken by the salmon. It was brown line that they used at that time. You would have to throw the 'strócáil' well out from the fish. If you dropped too near him, he would swim off like a flash. You'd put a bit of silver paper close to the 'strócáil' and you'd pull it little by little until you'd bring it right up to his body. Then you'd give a sharp pull and he would be stuck. It was great fun to see him flying up and down the river with the hook



River Feale and Metal Bridge, Abbeyfeale

River Feale and Metal Bridge, Abbeyfeale, c.1910. Milton Postcard

(Limerick Museum)

stuck in him. Great sport. Better than fowling. Great fun.

Tailing was an art. Because when a salmon is lying in the river, and his tail is flat on the bottom of the river, it could be up on a stone or anything. It was often hard to get the tailer around the tail of the salmon. We sometimes used a little twig to push the snare down into a soft place and in that way to get the snare in over the tail. We would pull the snare out to the small fin in his back and when we would get it over the fin, we would give it a pull. It was the same wire snare that was used for catching the rabbits. It was flexible and when it was squeezed on him, he was caught and there was no escape.

I saw this man, he was out on a big rock in the middle of the river. He was watching this big salmon, 13lbs. anyway, but he had no way of getting him out. He was sitting on the rock and he had a clothes line. There are nine wires in a clothes line. He got the line around the tail of the fish and by the time the salmon was played out, there was only one strand left. The salmon had broken the rest wriggling on the wire. He got him and he was a real beauty. The salmon was worth about £5.

In winter time, men went out poaching the rivers who had never fished in their lives. At that time, the fish would have spawned between the tenth of November and the 20th of November. The spawning now extends into the month of February. But in the past they would be out in the darkness of the night with gaffs and pikes and lighted sods of turf on pikes. They would search out the river beds for the salmon. The salmon would often lie in a sandy place and when the light of the burning sod shone on him, he was immobilised. The poacher would move in close to the fish and stick him with the gaff or with a pike and throw him out on the bank. The fishermen would bring a gaff to the river but the non-fishers would not have one so they would use a three prong pike. Some of the fishermen would not kill the hen salmon, as they knew that they were carrying the eggs and they thought it wrong to kill them when they

were bearing their young. They would know the hen from the cock. But the others would kill salmon of both sexes.

Sport Murphy said that a lot of the people were very honest and they would know the hen from the cock and they wouldn't kill the female fish at all. The cock was hardier and firmer. They would use the gaff on him, as the pike would be too awkward. The salmon will come to the light and you can blind him and walk into the water and kill him, it was easy work. They did kill a lot of salmon that time and they would salt and pickle them in barrels and they would have good feeding.

The water keepers had no cars that time, only bicycles. And you couldn't be out on a bad night on a bicycle. No blame to them.

The poachers also had a yoke called a triad. It was like a four prong pike. But the prongs were flat and you had a beard coming up on both sides. When you put that down on the head of the salmon, there was no way he would come out of it. No way. They also had a spear but the fish would have to be stationary for that. They would stick it down on his pole. There was a point on it like a lance. And he was dead in a shot. His heart was in his head and if you hit him in the pole, he was dead shortly.

I lived off the Feale and fed my family off the river. And there were lots of people who were dependant on the river at that time. I worked for 1/6 a day. And it rose at the end to three shillings in old money. For an eight or nine pound salmon, you would get £2. They were around 2/6 a pound at that time. But it was hard to sell them, as you would have water keepers looking for marks on the fish. So sometimes you'd be better off to pickle them. But the £2 was very good, you'd bring home a rake of stuff for two quid. At one time, I had £80 from the salmon rolled up in my pocket. In the 1940s, I built an extension to my house with the money from the river. Good men like myself, we caught them fair and foul. We were good fishermen too, as well as doing the blackguard, poaching and snatching".