

No. 155—DAN MURPHY of Shamrocks

(By Seamus O'Ceallaigh)

IF you asked a hundred Limerick City hurlers and footballers what name they associated most with the development of Limerick Gaelic Grounds, I'm sure ninety-nine would answer without hesitation, "Dan Murphy."

Dan was a worker in the cause of Limerick Gaeldom before many of us were born, and was a founder member of the old Shamrocks Hurling Club—a combination that was later to form the starting off base for the formation of the Young Ireland Club, with which Dan was also long and honourably associated.

When Shamrocks were revived after a lengthy lapse, Dan Murphy was one of the first of the old timers to rally to the assistance of the young blood, who promptly elected him to the position of Chairman, a post he held with real distinction. This was not gained by any feasts of oratory on his part, rather by a sincerity and devotion to the fine traditions that were such a hallmark of the genuine Gaels that kept the Shamrocks' flag floating for many years, despite tremendous odds.

MORE THAN A MENTOR.

Dan was to Shamrocks more than a mentor. He encountered triumphs and failures, at times the cheers of the multitude, again, disillusionment and despair; but the vicissitudes of the passing day never altered his outlook or weakened his determination to advance the Gaelic cause by every means at his disposal.

When the stress of the times, and the difficulty of keeping a hurling combination going in the district, again put the famed old Shamrocks jersey back in cold storage, to await happier days, Dan Murphy once more threw in his lot with Young Ireland and continued a faithful member of that Club right to the day when it, too, reached the journey's end—and yet awaits the resurrection.

Great, however, as Dan Murphy's work was for club hurling by the Shannon, the immense contribution he made as groundsman at the Gaelic Grounds overshadows all his other activities, and leaves a debt that cannot be repaid.

A HAPPY DAY FOR HIM.

Dan lived through a period when the G.A.A. had little material resources, and scarce a field anywhere it could call its own. He experienced the difficulties of finding a place to play even the limited programme of games possible under the old order of things, and it was a happy day, indeed, for him when the news was flashed around that the late William P. Clifford had purchased on behalf of Limerick County Board a parcel of land at Coolrairie, suitable for conversion to a playing pitch.

Many were critical of the location; others felt it would never make a satisfactory venue, but Dan only felt an overwhelming pride that at long last the obstacles had been surmounted and a Limerick Gaelic Ground was in the making.

The purchase was completed in May, 1928, the property then comprising an area of twelve acres, thirty-six perches, and the total cost was £1,120 9s. 0d.

NO BOUNDARY WALL AND UNEVEN GROUND.

No boundary wall of any kind existed, the ground was very uneven. But a start was quickly made. A timber hoarding was erected along the roadside, and the first revenue came when this was let for billposting and other advertising.

This hoarding, plus a good share of corrugated iron, was used to enclose three sides of the grounds, and the part where the present long bank is erected, then bounded by a rather uneven hedge, was enclosed with barbed wire, which faithfully followed the many "ins and outs" of the hedge and bank. A paling was provided round the playing pitch, and a few rows of sideline seating, in timber, were laid down.

There was no bank of any description along the far sideline, just a few little hillocks, and many of those familiar with the early days will recall seeing teams oftentimes at training there, and glad of the opportunity of using it despite the uneven nature of the surface. The main entrance consisted of an ordinary farm yard five-barred gate, which continued to give service until 1931, when the first big concerted move towards field development was made.

START OF IMPROVEMENTS.

The organisation of the great Aonach Kincora that year attracted a total attendance of 17,324, with receipts £1,361 17s. 6d. New entrances were erected and plans prepared for levelling the pitch. A little later on, the barbed wire and hedging was removed, and agreement reached with an adjoining landowner that permitted a uniform boundary line.

The levelling of the pitch was the big job that cleared the way for the great development of after years. This was no easy task. Faith in the future was not as pronounced then, and bankers were slow to advance money to the Gaelic Field Committees. The modest sum the Limerick Grounds were able to borrow had to be secured three or four times over by local business people, and when that was exhausted original plans had to be modified and certain debts contracted in order to finish the laying of the new pitch. It was a hard fight to clear the cost of that work, and it took many heartbreaking years. Some despaired of ever seeing a great field in Limerick, but a faithful few kept slogging away.

When Dan Murphy took over the job of Groundsman the pitch gained a great friend, and for the rest of a long life he tended it with loving care. Carefully, steadily, he perfected the sod, learning all there was to know on the subject, and putting into practise the methods recommended by the experts.

HIS HEART WAS IN THE WORK.

The equipment at his disposal was antiquated and out of date. This he repaired and remodelled many times over, but the best he could do with it did not save him walking the best part of a dozen miles a few times per week in the struggle to build the good playing surface that was eventually to attract the great games of the Gaelic year to the once despised Limerick grounds.

Down along the years he worked in every kind of weather. Shortly after the dawn he was oftentimes to be seen feverishly preparing for a big event; frequently he was still there at eleven o'clock, waiting to "lock up" after a juvenile or minor match, during the long summer's evening. Many of us tried, in vain, to relieve him of some of the work. But it was no use. He insisted on being "first in and last out" on all occasions, and nothing would shake him of that resolve.

Hundreds of improvements were his handiwork. He cut and mowed, he painted and decorated, turned carpenter when a door or gate needed renovation, and could, for all his eighty years, chase an intruder with a determination that many a man half his age would be loth to muster.

SERVICES COULD NOT BE ESTIMATED IN MONEY.

His value to the Grounds could not be valued in any currency. But money matters never worried Dan, as far as the field was concerned—and it was just as well, for I doubt if he could have got even in shillings the pounds he was unquestionably worth. Actually, if the truth were known, he must have financed many a job out of the humble pension he received from the Corporation. Certainly, some of us discovered, on occasions, that the new Tricolour so proudly flying on the flagstaff, or some of the flags the umpires had, were provided by Dan from his own resources, so keen was he to ensure that everything looked spick and span for a big occasion. And it was a delicate task to try and repay him. Dozens of other replacements must have passed un-noticed, and certainly Dan never spoke of them.

Limerick Gaelic Grounds, and Gaeldom in general, lost a great friend when Dan Murphy passed to his reward, two years ago this month.

LOVED AND LIVED FOR THE GROUNDS.

Dan loved and lived for the Grounds. Of that there can be no possible doubt whatever. And I would say that many an old timer must find the field a lonesome place without its faithful guardian. The warmth of his homely greeting, the deep sincerity of the man, the transparent honesty of his every action, marked him as a figure that it would not be easy to duplicate.

Any of us who were lucky to count ourselves amongst his friends, miss his cheerily "good luck and may God bless you," which was the worst he ever wished any man. That he is enjoying in Heaven the fruits of a lifetime doing good for others is the earnest prayer of the many friends who were surely the poorer by Dan Murphy's passing.