

Two Children Die in Caravan Fire Horror

I WAS BEATEN BACK BY THE FLAMES Father Tells of Vain Rescue Bid at Inquest

FOUR children played happily on the floor of their caravan home on the roadside at Brierfield, about three miles from Barnadery, on Monday evening. Their mother had gone to a local shop for groceries, their father to a farmhouse to get water for the evening meal. Danger seemed far away as these little children of the roads passed the time in the carefree fashion of their kind.

Suddenly, flaming death reached out eagerly for the lives of these innocents, and terror paralysed them as fire swiftly turned that gaily painted home on wheels into a death-trap. One six-year-old boy jumped clear of the flames; his three-year-old sister stood panic stricken in a ring of fire; a five-year-old boy and his twenty-months-old brother ended their young lives in a searing horror that must have been mercifully brief.

The two children who perished in that awful holocaust on a quiet country roadside were Myles (5 years) and James (20 months), sons of Edward Connors, a 28-year-old itinerant horse dealer from the Gorey district of Co. Wexford.

With his wife Elizabeth and their five children, Connors had been in Co. Galway only a few days and had come from Mountbellew at about 4.30 that evening to make camp for the night at Brierfield, a few hundred yards up the Monivea road from Scarry's cross. Two other families, Thomas Connors (a cousin) and Patrick Donovan, who travelled in a three-caravan convoy with horses and the impedimenta of the travelling folk, were parked too at this resting place so soon to be the scene of a gruesome tragedy.

While his wife went shopping with her six-year-old daughter Bridget, Edward Connors stayed with his four other children and then left to get water at a farmhouse. A few minutes later, on his way back, he saw flames and smoke rising from his caravan. Dropping his buckets and kettle, Connors ran over 170 yards and leaped into the blazing caravan to snatch his daughter Johanna (3) from death.

A second time he tried to go in for the other two children, but the roaring blaze beat him back with his face and hands badly burned.

A few minutes later, as Connors made frantic efforts to put out the blaze, Mr. Patrick J. Kenehan, of Glen Ora, Oaklands, Salthill, Galway, came on the scene in his car and, after giving what assistance he could, drove for help, meeting

a Garda patrol car on the way to Moylough.

When Mr. Kenehan returned with Garda Michael Geary, Athenry squad car driver, the Connors caravan was completely enveloped in flames. In a short time it was a burned-out wreck, and underneath were the charred bodies of the two children.

Sergeant W. T. Harhen and Gardai from Barnadery were soon on the scene; and Dr. T. O'Colmain, M.O., Abbeyknockmoy, and Rev. Fr. Shanahan, M.S.C., Moyne Park, were also called. Connors was driven to Mountbellew, where his burns were dressed by Dr. M. G. Mellotte. His wife, who was in a very shocked and distressed condition, was comforted by her cousins and friends.

Later that night, Supt. M. Gonigle took the injured man to the Bon Secours hospital in Tuam, where he was attended by Dr. M. B. Farrell. The children's bodies were also removed to the hospital mortuary.

When I spoke to Connors at the hospital on Monday night, his eyes filled with tears in his swollen and burned face as he told me of his unsuccessful efforts to rescue his five-year-old and infant sons. He comes to Galway every summer or so, he said, to buy donkeys, and this long journey from Wexford was made during the weeks of snow and frost.

The caravan lost in the fire would cost about £200 to replace, his cousin Thomas Connors said, but they were not concerned about that—only the terrible death of the two innocent children.

Connors, his grief-stricken wife and family, with their friends and relatives, left Tuam on Tuesday evening, bringing the two tragic little coffins for burial in their last resting place at Gorey.

THE awful story of the tragedy was told at an inquest held by Coroner J. P. Glynn, solr., and a jury at the Bon Secours hospital on Tuesday, when the children's father, Edward Connors, related how he was beaten back by the flames when he tried to get into the caravan a second time after rescuing his little daughter.

Dr. T. O'Colmain, M.O., Abbeyknockmoy, who arrived at the scene around 6 p.m., said that he saw the body of one child lying on the charred debris of the caravan. The older child's body was lying on the other side of the road, and he was told that both bodies had been moved. The two bodies were extensively burned, the younger boy, James, even more so than his five-year-old brother, Myles. The bodies were those of healthy, well-nourished children. In his opinion, death was due to shock and asphyxia as a result of extensive burns.

"BLAZING INFERNO"

Patrick J. Kenehan stated that it was about 5 p.m. when he came to the itinerants' camp on the roadside at Brierfield. There were three caravans, and one was "a blazing inferno" when he came on the scene. He stopped and saw Edward Connors in front of him on the road, in a very excited and distressed condition.

Mr. Kenehan said that the fire had got a good grip on the caravan at that time and there was a strong east wind blowing. He gave all the assistance he could to extinguish the fire, and saw the body of one child on the ground where the caravan had been. The other body was in the burned-out framework. Witness left to summon help, and on the way to Moylough met a Garda patrol car and reported to them.

Garda Michael Geary, Athenry, gave evidence that it was about 5.10 p.m. when he got the report from Mr. Kenehan. He went to Brierfield and saw Edward Connors in a very distressed condition near the burned-out caravan. There were three caravans, with three different families, all parked on the same side of the road. Connors' caravan was first and the other two were behind it.

The fire was spreading along the furze on the fence, Garda Geary said, and he had to get the second caravan removed for safety. He assisted in putting out the fire and then saw the body of one child falling through the bottom of the caravan. He moved the burned caravan away and then saw another body at the back of the framework. When he got to the scene, the caravan was entirely enveloped in flames, and a rescue attempt was impossible.

COMPLETELY BURNED

Sergeant W. T. Harhen, Barnadery, who arrived at the scene at 5.45 p.m., said that at that time Edward Connors' caravan was almost completely burned out. He later saw the bodies of the two children. Some time afterwards he met the father, who had been taken to the doctor at Mountbellew to get treatment for the burns he received.

The Sergeant said that Connors was unable to give any explanation for the fire. Witness saw a stove on the ground near the caravan, and also found part of a primus stove in the framework. He notified the doctor and sent for the priest.

Edward Connors, the children's father, said that he was travelling around the country in a horse drawn caravan with his wife Elizabeth and their five children. They left Mountbellew on Monday and arrived at Brierfield around 4.30 p.m. Two other families, Thomas Connors and Patrick Donovan, travelled with them in their caravans, and they all pulled up at the same place. Witness had five children: John and Bridget (twins aged 6 years), Myles (5), Johanna (3) and James (1 year 8 months).

When they arrived at Brierfield, Connors said, his wife went to the local shop for groceries and took Bridget with her. He was in the caravan when she left, and there was a small bit of a fire in the stove, not even lighting right. The stove was to the front of the caravan, and there was an empty primus stove but no paraffin. There was also a tilley lamp

but it was at the back in a position where the children could not reach it.

Connors said he decided to go down to the crossroads for water, and took two cans and a kettle. He left the children playing on the floor of the caravan, and went to a house a few hundred yards away where the woman filled the vessels at the tap. On his way back to the caravan, when about 170 yards away, he saw the smoke and flames coming from his caravan.

LEAPED INTO CARAVAN

"I dropped the vessels of water and ran," he said, "and when I got to the caravan I saw John outside on the ground safe. Johanna was in the middle of the flames inside, and I couldn't see Myles or James. I leaped into the caravan and picked up Johanna. The top of her hair was burned, and I got badly burned myself. I tried to go in but the fire beat me back. I heard no cries from the other children and I didn't see them."

When the fire was burned out, he saw the bodies of Myles and James, both badly burned. There were no loose papers or matches in the caravan when he left it to go for water. He left the door open and it was still open when he came back. He was only about five minutes gone, he thought. All the children were strong and healthy, and the baby James had just started to walk.

SPARK FROM CHIMNEY?

Asked if he could offer any explanation for the fire, Connors said: "I think it might be a spark from the chimney that got on to the dry furze beside the caravan."

This concluded the evidence and the Coroner commented that all the evidence was that the children's tragic death was due to an accidental fire. It was a very sad happening for Connors and his wife, but it also drew attention to the dangers of leaving young children exposed to open fires. No blame attached to Mr. Connors, and indeed everybody felt very sorry for him in this terrible tragedy.

Supt. M. Gonigle, G.S., joined with the Coroner in tendering sympathy to the Connors family, and Mr. Peter Kelly (foreman of the jury) said that they should also commend the father's heroic action in trying to save his children and suffering severe burns in his efforts to do so.

The jury returned a verdict in accordance with the medical evidence, that death was due to shock and asphyxia as a result of an accidental fire.

The Coroner expressed thanks to the Bon Secours nuns for providing facilities for the inquest.

Monivea Ploughing Results.

There were eleven competitors at Monivea ploughing match on Friday last which was held in ideal weather conditions. The standard was very high and there was keen competition in both tractor and horse classes.

Rev. J. McHugh, C.C., Monivea (President of the Society), presented the prizes to the winners and complimented them on their work. He also thanked the judges and Mr. Cooke for providing the fields for the match.

RESULTS.

Tractor (open): 1, Mattie Treacy, Ryehill; 2, G. Dolan, do.; 3, J. J. Cooke; 4, E. Treacy; 5, F. McGrath.

Horses (open): 1, J. Gilligan, Doonane; 2, J. J. Cooke, Ryehill; 3, M. Treacy; 4, F. Loughnane; 5, P. Nohilly.

Special prizes (under 21): M. Treacy and G. Dolan. The committee in charge of the competitions was J. McGrath (chairman); J. Murphy (treasurer); W. Murphy and M. Mannion (joint secretaries), and members of Ryehill Macra na Feirme.

The judges were Mr. E. Scannell, E.Agr.Sc., J. Finn, Athenry, Eddy Collins, Co.C., Menlough (chairman of the County Ploughing Committee).

£2 FINES FOR WANDERING HORSES.

Martin and Bernard Ward, two itinerants, were fined £2 each at Tuam Court on Friday for allowing their horses to wander on the public road at Ardacong on February 2nd. Tom Ward was fined £1 for a similar offence in respect of one horse. Garda T. Cosgrove gave evidence in the cases.

Water Supply Scheme Protest.

Over a hundred people from the Abbeyknockmoy area attended a public meeting in the Parochial Hall there on Tuesday night to protest against the proposed introduction of a regional water supply scheme for the area by the County Council.

Mr. Padraic Rafferty and Mr. Martin O'Donnell, County Executive N.F.A., spoke on the disadvantages of a regional scheme, and said that only a fifth of the population would benefit from such a scheme. Group or private schemes were more economical, and would not be levied on the rates.

Very Rev. T. Morley, Adm., Abbeyknockmoy, presided.

"ARREST ME," HE TOLD GUARD.

"Arrest me if you want to" was what Bernard Ward, an itinerant, told Garda M. McCarthy when he was advised to go home on January 30th. Bernard, who had been ejected from a public house, was drunk and disorderly at Shop Street, Tuam, and was fined £2 for his conduct at Tuam Court on Friday.

ABBEYKNOCKMOY PLOUGHING MATCH.

Despite the frozen condition of the ground there was a high standard of work at Abbeyknockmoy Ploughing Society's match on Thursday last.

The competitions were held on the lands of Mr. P. J. Donohue, and there was a good entry in all classes. The following were the results:—

Senior horse-plough (open): 1, Jack Gilligan; 2, Jim Burke; 3, Peadar Keane. Tractor class (open): 1, Edward Treacy; 2, Frank Kelly; 3, V. Burke. The judges were Mr. E. Scannell, B.Agr.Sc., and Mr. Michael Connolly.

MINISTER'S REPLY TO DAIL QUESTION ON TEXTILE MILLS

THE closing of the Weir Textile Mills at Tuam, and the prospects of a re-opening in the near future, was again raised in the Dail on Thursday last by Deputy M. F. Kitt (F.F.).

Deputy Kitt referred to a report which appeared in *The Herald* on February 9th, and asked the Minister for Industry and Commerce (Mr. J. Lynch) if he had any statement to make on the matter.

The Minister in his reply said: I have seen the report to which the Deputy refers. The factory at Tuam was facilitated by a grant from An Foras Tionscal, a new manufacture licence and duty-free licences for the importation of raw materials required for production for export. As indicated by me in reply to a question on 11th December last, the firm's main problem appears to have been one of difficulty in obtaining export markets for their products.

The Industrial Development Authority have, I understand, with the firm's agreement, brought the closing of the factory to the notice of certain external interests who it thought, might be interested in

taking it over. There have been no positive developments in any of these contacts to date, but I can assure the Deputy that any sound proposals submitted to me for the re-opening of the factory will receive my most sympathetic consideration.

Deputy Kitt asked was the Minister aware that according to a report in *The Herald* on February 9th last a spokesman for the Mills was reported as having said that unless there is a change in the attitude of the Department he could not see any prospect of the Mills in Tuam being re-opened? In view of the fact that there are 72 workers unemployed there since December 1st would the Minister now clarify the conflicting report?

Minister: I think that is the same report to which the Deputy referred in his original question.

Deputy Kitt: That is the report. Minister: I saw the remarks of the spokesman of the company saying certain things could be done if the Department changed their attitude. I can apply that only to an application by this company for an amendment of their new manufacture licence. As I said, this company got many facilities, including a substantial grant and a new manufacture licence in respect of other goods which enabled them to produce these for sale on the

Irish market. Before I can grant or extend, a new manufacture licence, I must be satisfied that the goods proposed to be manufactured are not already being manufactured to an adequate extent by existing concerns. In this case the application for a new manufacture licence referred to cloths that were already being manufactured by existing private Irish concerns which were in no way assisted by grants when they were set up. If the licence were amended, as proposed by the company, it would mean that the company could make goods for sale on the Irish market and would thereby affect the mills already producing similar goods.

Mr. J. McQuillan: This is the free trade he is talking about.

Minister: I am bound by Statute to have regard to these factors. In the circumstances, the law did not permit me to extend the new manufacture licence as requested. I should like to say generally that the purpose of exporting the type of cloth they now want to sell on the home market, and there is no room for it here.

HELD OVER. Owing to pressure on space we are obliged to hold over a number of reports.