

RACE WEEK IN 1888

MEMORIES OF THE PAST

BY AN OLD
GALWEGIAN.

The days when the cobbled streets of Galway re-echoed to the sound of clog-shod feet were recalled by Mr. John Griffin, master baker, Cross-street, Galway, often referred to as "the grand old man of Galway." when interviewed by a "Connacht Tribune" reporter at his home on Monday. Mr. Griffin, who has reached the ripe old age of 83, had many interesting stories to tell of Galway "in the good old days."

He amazed his interviewer by stating that he remembered a time when, besides a clog factory in which 300 men were employed, the following industries flourished in Galway: Fifteen flour mills, four oatmeal mills, four Indian meal mills; two distilleries, four brush factories; four foundries, fifteen farriers, twelve nailers (only one of which now remains at O'Brien's Bridge), twelve coopers, two hatters, one tannery, four coach factories, one paper mill, one tuck mill, one iodine factory, one silversmith, one copper-smith, four candle factories, four tobacco factories, and three soap factories.

The working hours in those factories were long, he said—as long as sixteen hours a day. The rate of pay was between 7s. and 8s. per week. "Imagine," he continued, "asking the boys and girls of to-day to work that long for such small pay! The highest paid man in any factory known that time as a 'walking ganger' (a foreman or supervisor) was paid £1 per week. The workers got no annual holidays. The only free days they got in the year were the Church holydays."

Asked if the workers were contented, Mr. Griffin replied that after the terrible experience they had in 1847—the year of the famine—they were "pleased with anything."

St. Patrick's Day, he said, was looked forward to more than any other holiday, because that was, in reality, "workers' day." On St. Patrick's Day a big procession was held through the town. The procession used to start from "The Green" (Eyre Square), go through the main streets and return to "The Green" via University-road. The procession was headed by St. Patrick's Brass and Reed Band and included all the workers in various sections. That night "The Big Ball" was held in Black's Hall, where the Royal Hotel now stands, and was usually attended by over a thousand people. At the ball was seen the most representative and distinguished gathering of the year. The ball was very well conducted, and it was a grand thing to see the good manners of the young and old people at those dances. There was never any rowdyism or unseemly conduct that one hears so much about in connection with present-day dances. "Of course," added Mr. Griffin, "all the young ladies in those days were chaperoned."

En Fete.

Asked about Race Week, Mr. Griffin said that it was "the only week" in Galway fifty years ago. There was little or no work done that week. "As a matter of fact," he said, "the whole town used to be en fête that week." It was wonderful to see the jollity and good humour which prevailed everywhere. Galway was "one big happy family," and thousands used to pour into the Capital of the West from all parts of England and Ireland on picturesque coaches, sidecars and wagonettes. "I remember the Race Week of 1888 as though it were last year," he added. "That was the year that the Galway Races reached their peak-point. Galway never catered for a larger crowd than it did that week." It was not, he said, a two-day affair in those days. The jollity lasted all through the week and money was spent freely. It was a wonderful week for the hotels and boarding-houses. The coach-builders, too, used to do tremendous business that week, and despite the fact that there were fifteen smiths in the town at that time, all used to be kept busy.

Mr. Griffin recalled that it was shortly after that peak year in Galway that the first English and foreign fishing trawlers were sighted in the "roads," and a "war" which lasted for some time was begun between the Claddagh fishermen, led by their King, and the crews of these trawlers. "There was terrible enmity between them," he added, "and no wonder, because they were taking away the livelihood of the poor, hard-working Claddagh fishermen. I saw a number of battles between them, in which pitchforks were actually used. Eventually, England found it necessary to send over two men-of-war to protect her fishing fleet from the embittered Claddagh men."

"On The Roads."

Mr. Griffin added that as a boy at that time he saw as many as forty fishing trawlers "on the roads" on one occasion. The port of Galway was a busy one at that time and was used by ships from all parts of the world, which brought in all sorts of cargoes and went away with exports of every factory in Galway. The windjammers from South America were undoubtedly the most picturesque of the boats to visit Galway port. Nobody thought in those days that magnificent and luxurious liners would take their place in eighty years' time. Canada sent a lot of wheat to Galway, and most of the timber came in Norwegian vessels. They brought away, in return, oats, barley, kelp, clogs and iodine. Trading was carried on, on a large scale on the river Corrib in those days and as many as forty boats used to travel between Galway and Cong every day.

Asked about amusements in the old days, Mr. Griffin said that the men spent most or all of their spare time in one or other of the three clubs in Galway. The clubs were: The Mechanics (which still remains); the Royal Institute (now the Galway Chamber of Commerce), and the County Club, at Eyre Square. The men whiled away the time in those clubs playing billiards, dominoes, cards and chess. There was no amusement provided for the women-folk during the daytime, and they spent most of the time walking. The favourite walks were along the Pierhead, the railway-line, and the Dyke. There was dancing every night, there being four dance halls in all. These were situated at Wood Quay, Shantallow, William-street West, and College-road. Dancing was carried on from 8 p.m. to 10.30 p.m., and the price of admission was 2d. These dances were well attended, and competitions were held once or twice every year. The most popular outdoor sport in those days was cricket. Gaelic football was also played a lot. Once or twice every year a theatrical company under the late Mr. Cooke used to visit Black's Hall (Royal Hotel) and there perform the various old Irish plays, the most popular of which was the "Colleen Bán."

"Yes," concluded Mr. Griffin, "Galway has certainly changed in many ways, but the friendliness of her citizens—that friendliness which makes strangers feel at home—is still the same as it was in the 'good old days.'"

Black Abbey Dairy, Adare. On breakfast table 24 hours after being made.—

J. Lenihan, Eyre Square, Galway.