

LAUREL HILL

BY MISS MINNIE AND MISS SARA SAVAGE

The following notes were written in the 1950s by the sisters Sara and Minnie Savage of Laurel Hill, Cullentra, Lissummon. The sisters, whose lives spanned almost the whole of the twentieth century, were very interested in preserving old ways and had, in their time, set up a little museum in a room in their home. The notes include interesting information on a range of topics including their home and farm, field names, Lissummon Tunnel and local folklore.



Laurel Hill

There was a dwelling on the site of our house dating from 18th century. When our grandfather bought the old house and some acres of land, in early 1850, it had recently been lived in by Rev. King, minister of Tyrone's Ditches Original Secession Church. The back part of this house comprising kitchen, bathroom etc was part of the old house and the gable is mud wall. The old barns round from the kitchen door and opposite the back door, latter with double floor for threshing with flails, were Rev. King's barns.

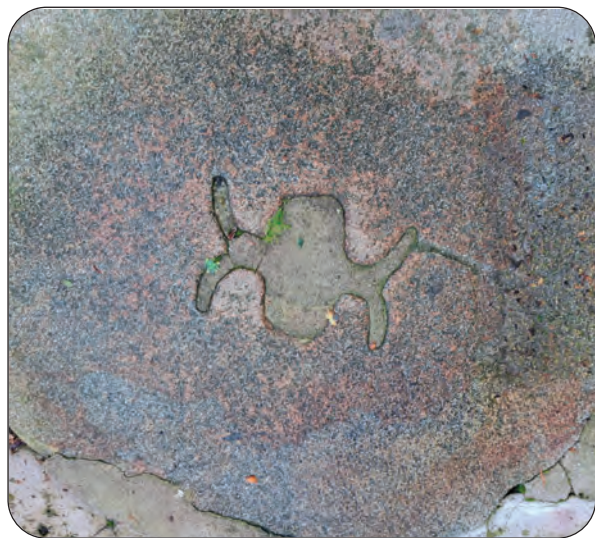
Grandad came here as minister of Ballenon



The Misses Minnie and Sarah Savage c.1930s

R.P. Church in 1849 from Ballylagan near Coleraine Co. Derry. He lodged in Wm. James Barker's, now Richard Hazley's, below Kelly's. There were sixteen children in Barker's, Mrs Barker was a Shannon from Four Towns direction. I believe building the main part of the house took around two years finishing around 1855-56.

The pink granite stone at the hall door was one of the grinding stones of a windmill. On the corner stone of the old shed up the road is a bench mark. Incidentally this shed was always called The Bone House because Grandad bought bones and stored them there. Some sort of



The Mill Stone at the front door

acid was poured over these in a large boiler and when it sat for some time the bones crushed easily to make bone meal for the land. Also he had a 'cess pit' behind the manure pit in the yard where liquid manure was collected being wheeled out in half-barrels with wheels to put on bare patches on land. (Much the same way as today's slurry).

There were several small-holdings around the countryside – small dwellings with seven or eight acres, three or four fields attached. The owners were farm labourers with very often a hand loom worked at night to eke out a living. The Industrial Revolution, with mass production, put an end to hand-loom weaving. Also an end of the wool trade in favour of Yorkshire. Irish wool trade was ended by Government in London to make way for Yorkshire's mills. As these little holdings were sold Grandad bought them and Father, his second son, and labourers took away the ditches making a large field of six or seven acres. All pick and shovel work. Sometimes the small houses were in poor condition ready to fall and the stones from them were drawn home by horse and cart and used to build out-offices around the yard.

I might add that Grampa being only a poor clergyman with around £70 per year stipend, and a large and growing family, borrowed most of the money to purchase land. At his death Father had quite a bit of this to pay back. Very often to our other Granpa.

FIELD NAMES

The fields made from these small holdings were usually called by the names of the previous owners. '*Bob Boyd's Hill*' etc. Two of the fields were called '*Number Six*' and '*Number Seven*'. This was because the Lissummon Railway tunnel ran underneath these fields. There were seven shafts sunk the mile and a quarter length of this tunnel, our two fields were No.6 and No. 7, the last, hence their names. Remains of heaps of stones still extant – though much has been drawn away for lanes and house foundations.

Note '*Lime Hill*' field had a built-in lime kiln. This about

most farmhouses of that time. Rock lime was drawn by horses and carts from kilns below Armagh City, Navan Fort. This was brought home after the crop was put in. The lime was heeled up into the round walled-in kiln and barrels of water were thrown over it. Soon it burst open into lovely white lime used for whitewashing houses, but principally for sowing on the land as fertiliser. It was said lime prevented cows taking milk fever or suffering from deficiencies.

Grandpa was said to have planted one hundred Alder trees along the bottom of the Lime Kiln field, by the Leish river, as they grow well with their roots in water.

The fourteen acres on the other side of the far road at Rafferty's - always the '*Far Land*'. The long horn up in the museum room was used for blowing the men home from the '*Far Land*'. Joe Mc Gailey, ploughman, told me that one of our big Clydesdales when ploughing or reaping out there stopped stock still when he heard the horn for dinner time, and wouldn't budge until he loosed him out to come home. Joe's Granddaughter Mrs. Maureen Rafferty over the road. All the family for three generations have worked here. Father hired Joe in Newry Hiring Fair when they were both 22. Joe married locally and settled here being from above Newtownhamilton. The next field on this side of the far road was '*Smart's Field*'. Some Smarts lived there and came, or went back to Newtownhamilton district. Coming on down '*Downey's Field*' was next, the ditch between Smart's and Downey's has been removed. I believe a hearth stone is somewhere in the middle. Father said Tom Downey was a widower with one daughter and when this girl was about to be married, she was jilted, and the shame made father and daughter rise and leave. They went out Co. Down way to Annabane. '*Bob Boyd*' long hill, the Boyds worked here at one shilling a day for Bob and ten pence for his wife. The low-lying meadow next the pit of stones always flooded, the next field with spring-well – all these were cut away in turf cutting time. One old man said that at one time our spring well was surrounded by a turf wall and turf steps up to it. Miss King the Minister's sister had to climb up these steps to lift a bucket of water.

RAILWAY TUNNEL

I have mentioned the Lissummon Railway as running under a field and a half of our land. The mouth of the tunnel comes out at our end. There were two large pits of stones on these fields, as is mentioned elsewhere. It was said that the tunnel was started at both ends and the excavators met exactly in the centre. According to official records, late in 1861 work began on the Lissummon Tunnel, some draining was done, there was much rock. There were four steam engines erected for the shafts being sunk. Also along the seven shafts on ground level there were '*jenerings*', horse walks built up so that horses could walk round and round much as churning was done about farm houses. The material was thus raised to the surface.

The decision to build the tunnel came after unsuccessful discussions with Col. Close. It had been hoped that by building railway through his demesne a tunnel would not have been necessary. The great length of the tunnel was to add considerably to the cost of the railway.

Hemans estimate of constructing the line to Markethill,

including the first tunnel amounted to £92,000.

Because of difficulty of debentures, Heman recommended the Directors to accept a cash contract of £27,000 for tunnel.

The above report dated 1.7. 1861 Newry.

Work on the tunnel continued throughout 1862 and '63. The miners employed for the task coming from various parts of Ireland and England to stay in the area with wives and children. We learn some of the miner's names from the entries in Drumbanagher Parish records under Baptisms and Burials. Without a similar record in the Catholic Church at Lissummon it is not possible to get a complete picture of births and deaths.

By the end of 1863 work on the tunnel was nearing completion. It was hoped by this report that the line to Armagh would be opened on March 1st 1864. The Engineers' report of 4th Feb. 1864 stated that the great work of the line had been satisfactorily constructed.

I may add that according to stories handed down through workers here there were very many very rough and ready bunks, chaff mattresses in barns, outhouses etc. as local people made a bit of money out of the miners, maybe for fourteen pence per week for keeping them. At one time it was said fever broke out among the workers and in one week miners were buried behind Lissummon Old Chapel. Indeed James Sands could have pointed out the railwaymen's graves. Shebeens also flourished. Large lanterns were used for light in the tunnel and where one man was chipping away by himself he had a tallow candle, made locally. The holder for this candle was a handful of red clay stuck or slapped on a stone while wet, with a hole in the centre. Bob Ferguson told how an old man, Anthony, went to Sands' meadow three times a week with a shilty and cart and he dug yellow clay and made it like cement, going round to various shafts with this as a supply for candle holders.

This old man lived over the ditch from our 'Downeys' field and it was said that some of his brothers went to America. While there, one dreamt one night that there was a pot of gold sovereigns buried in the garden at the gable of the old home in Lisnagree. At work the next day he told his dream to a neighbour who had also come from these parts. By and by this neighbour wrote home telling the tale. His people thought they would go at night in moonlight and dig for it, which they did.

As they dug, one struck an iron object with his spade and as they eased it round they found that it was indeed a metal rusted pot. As they brought it up they heard the rattle of coins in it. As the lid was prised up all that was revealed was half a pot of newly-hatched maggots. The fairies saw to it that none but the rightful owners would get the gold.

Hugh Mulholland or Maholum (as called locally), worked here when this house was being built and he told about being employed at the making of the railway, clearing the way.

It was said that at one point in the bog at Crieve below

Jack McKee's a vein of silver was found. This may have been lead or tin. The foreman on that stretch put over two buggys' full and sent for the GNR Directors to Dublin. By and by a carriage and pair arrived bearing these men and Hugh's son was paid to hold the horses on the road while the men inspected the suspect silver. It was said that the Directors instructed the foreman to tip this stuff in the bog and say no more about it, as if the Government heard of this find they might order work on the railway to cease and start silver-mining, and they, the directors, would lose their fortunes.

Along this same part of the bog near the Lough was found a causeway consisting of piles driven down and fir trees laid over to form a walk, this just underneath the level of the water. When Grandpa Irvine heard this he said it was most likely Redmond O'Hanlon's pad. He had been a notorious highwayman operating somewhere between Crankey and Loughgilly on the coach road. Somewhere along near Cosgrove's old house there was a grey stone building where horses were changed on the journey between Armagh and Dublin. There were many such stopping places. Along here Redmond made his raid. Many merchants, especially in the wool trade would have been on the coach. Soldiers (Redcoats) had often pursued Redmond but he always disappeared around the Lough area. So Grandpa thought he crossed the Lough and made up the Cobh Coy. It seems Redmond was not robbing for himself but to get money to buy clothes for the starving natives, and food as well. A sort of Irish Robin Hood. He was a member of a noble clan, one of the Irish aristocracy.

Tradition says that there is still a pot of gold hidden somewhere around the loughs. Willie and Rachel say it is supposed to be in some of their land. The outlaw was killed during the time it was hidden.

Speaking of the making of Lissummon Tunnel I forgot to say there was supposed to be a man killed at each of the seven shafts.

Also there is a vein of quartz somewhere in the tunnel. We have a couple of small pieces up in the museum room. These out of the tunnel.

Passenger traffic ended around 1932 or '33 between Armagh and Goragwood Junction. Goragwood station was a very busy one with passengers changing between Belfast, Dublin and Armagh trains. The great Goragwood Quarry owned by G.N.R. was working full stretch with blasting every day at 11.30.

WATER SUPPLY

There was always a great shortage of water here as we live on a hill. A well in the back yard, where the hop plant grows, was sunk at about seventy feet, two platforms in it. It was said a previous early well in same spot lost the water when the Railway Tunnel was sunk as the springs were supposed to be cut. The water holes for cattle and horses were at the foot of our orchard, no apples then, or Leish river on low side of the road. Mamma caught all the rain water she could for wash day. The clothes were divided out, cleanest, dirty, filthy. Linen underclothing, then men's shirts and drawers, last bag aprons (rubbers) and grey twill shirts. The dirty water was put over for scrubbing floors.

Many a time in dry weather Mamma, before her our grandmother, and a servant girl took a zinc bath full of washed clothes to be rinsed at Leish river, a field length away. It was dammed across and the girl handed up 2 quart tins full to be thrown over each garment.

It was quite common for a farmer's wife to rip out flour bags, treat the printing with washing soda, bleach them on grass for a week, and flour bags sewn together made a double bed sheet. By and by with laundering they became almost like linen.

Father heard of someone installing a Hydraulic Ram and he went to see it, and by and by decided to install one on our little river at the foot of back field, Leish River. I seem to remember that the problem of getting enough fall to drive the ram was a very real one

FOOD

Three or four pigs were fattened with boiled potatoes, yellow meal and buttermilk. When ready, a butcher was sent for, always local men with small farms. A great pot of water was boiled in boiling house or in a very big pot on the stove. Prior to that on the hearth fire. When the pigs were killed and dressed and hung up for market next day attention was turned to the pig to be cured for the house. The butcher cut it into suitable pieces, hams and so forth, then it was brought into the scullery and put on a bench where rough salt was rubbed into each part. It was then put into a wooden barrel and more salt packed round. Father smoked some of it with green ash branches burned on scullery floor.

After some weeks, perhaps months, the ham was ready to be taken out of the brine. It was rubbed with a white cloth and put into muslin bags and hung on cleats in the kitchen rafters to ripen. I well remember the lovely smell of the smoked bacon.

The pork pigs that were being marketed were put in the newly washed cart and a clean white sheet put right over the load of pork. The men started about 5.30 a.m. as it was a right step for a horse with a load of pork to be in the pork market at half seven when the bell rang. A man going in late was called a poor 'heathen crater' and no use of a farmer.

Wee Grannie Irvine 'The Wee Woman' was a very frugal woman. She was a good cook, making endless cakes of soda and wheaten bread, some yeast bread. A lot of apple jelly and apple chutney, apple jam with cloves and butter added. Sowans made from oat meal, corn was brought to the miller to be bruised and an occasional bag into oatmeal for porridge and oaten bread, this latter to set up before the open fire on a 'harnan stan' to be toasted. Grannie had a herb garden with chives, garlic, rue, caraway seed. This latter she used for mixing in a plum cake. The little vegetable garden was weeded and worked by Joe McGra, he was a simple old man who had spent most of his days around 'The Hollow' and was buried from it. He did little handy jobs, cutting sticks, watching the turkey when she laid away. He worshipped wee Grannie and would do anything for her, and was fond of Mamma. One time he gave her a little tin pin box in the form of a pansy face. Mamma would not have parted with it and it is up in my museum. Well worth its room.



Laurelhill front door showing the millstone

Grannie made cheese in the time of year when the cows were on the grass. Rennet in bottles was not commercially on the market I think, but she got Granpa to bring a bucket in the trap to Newry and he brought home calves' stomachs, which is rennet in the raw.

SPINNING

Wee Grannie spun all the wool for knitting socks and stockings for her large family. She took a clean sheep's fleece and washed it and treated it thoroughly to remove all the oil or grease, or 'eek' as she called it. Then when dry, she teased and carded it, combed out straight. At one stage it was dyed; she used whin blossom for yellow or saffron, and heather for mauve, and I think blackberries for dark colour. She brought the wool to boiling point and added salt or something else to make the dye fast. Then when ready she spun it on her wheel into yarn off the spinning wheel onto a large wheel which sat beside her. When an ounce was wound this wheel gave a crack.

As it was long before the Welfare State there was a lot of poverty, especially for old people, and granny made lots of broth with shin bones, and vegetables and young nettles. Mamma usually got the job of conveying these bowls or wee cans to the old folks. One woman lived right in the middle of a bog somewhere between Mervyn Agnew's and old road next Simms' garage. There was a path but if you left it you landed in 'slush of despond' as Mamma said. Aunt Nancy behind Keadymore Hill had to be attended and washed on a Saturday. Hugh Joe, their son, was delicate and short-sighted, but had a great brain, teaching himself Greek and Latin. Grandpa Irvine said that given the chance Hugh Joe would have become professor of Classics or Old Testament Literature. The Hugh of later days fulfilled this prophesy.