

FROM ‘THE KINGDOM’ TO GRANGE

By Jerry O’Riordan

Introduction

In many ways, he still considers himself a blow-in and talks of going “home” for a few days – so, almost 50 years after he first ‘immigrated’ to Grange, we encouraged Dad to write his memoirs for inclusion in the Grange Book. Yes, we probed with a few questions and sought clarification on a few points, but mostly we just listened. We have always been extremely proud of our father and mother, but even more so after having been reminded of what follows.

My Background

Well, I was born in 1939 in the townland of Lettir, about four miles from the village of Glenbeigh, which is on the Ring of Kerry between Killorglin and Caherciveen. I was the youngest of eight children, five boys and three girls, of which six are still living today, thank God. All of my siblings immigrated to the USA, and I still have a sister and two brothers living in Chicago, although my oldest brother, Paddy, returned home after a few years to take over the farm.

Growing Up

Even though I was born at the beginning of WWII, and I suppose it was tough all over, I don’t remember it being particularly so. Like all of our neighbours, we lived on a few green acres on the side of a 1,300-acre mountain that everyone had the common use of – much like The Ranch in Grange. All the farms were self-sufficient, growing our own vegetables. We also kept bees for honey, grew rhubarb and had an orchard of apples and pears. My mother baked two large cakes of bread – about 15 inches in diameter – every day. In fact, our only major purchases were a sack of flour every week for the bread, tobacco for my father and the newspaper.

Every house killed a pig in October and the odd fat sheep during the year. We fished from the summer to the end of December in the mountain streams and lakes. Every salmon and white trout coming in from the ocean to breed was on a one-way ticket! We also snared rabbits. When I was older and going to the Technical College in Killorglin, (think of Killorglin in terms of size and distance away, as

Kilmallock), you could get the equivalent of a day's pay for four rabbits – so that turned into a nice earner for the house.

We played sports while growing up

In my late teens, we played a lot of basketball and handball, and we had a boxing club, but it was mostly football that occupied our time. There was no soccer or rugby, and even though we were shown hurling in the Technical College, they didn't give us any hurleys, so that was the end of that. But I was always fascinated by hurling. As teenagers, large groups of us would take the train to Dublin on St Patrick's Day for the inter-provincial Railway Cup Finals, and I remember some epic battles involving Christy Ring and the Doyles for Munster and the Rackards for Leinster.

Football in my early years was all about the local rivalry. Imagine the Old Road taking on the New Line or Holycross, and then occasionally playing in a more serious tournament involving teams from Bruff or Meanus. There were no underage competitions, and I used to hear the old men discussing a promising young lad and wondering if "he will get the jersey". I didn't appreciate what that meant until years later when I played for the first time with a number on my back. I was 15, playing for Killorglin Tech, in Fitzgerald Stadium, Killarney, against the much larger Killarney Tech that our team had never beaten. I remember being formally handed a folded 'number 3' jersey, and then we sat down for the pep talk that consisted of... "Right lads, now go out there and don't disgrace yourselves". When we realised that they were no better than ourselves and won the match, it was major news for weeks afterwards.

My first pair of football boots

It was 1953, I had just turned 14, and the Tech were having a fundraiser at Grand National time. I bought a ticket and won £10 – which was the equivalent of about 20 days of work, or €2,000+ in today's money! A fortune to a 14-year-old.

Knowing full well that I would see little of the £10 if I brought it all home, I bought two pairs of football boots, shiny black leather – and not like the pinks and oranges you see today – one pair for myself and one for my brother, Paddy. They cost 30 shillings each or £3 in total – about €300 each in today's money. Just as well that they lasted many years.

I also bought a load of Scots Clan sweets – you could get a quarter pound for 6p – I handed up the rest to my mother as I now had everything I could ever want.

Playing for the County

I played firstly for the Kerry Technical Colleges in 1955, and it was only then that I realised how important football was to everyone in Kerry. We beat Cork in Mac-

room in front of a small crowd. Certainly there were very few Kerry supporters. With a team made up mostly of centre-fielders from the various Techs around Kerry, I was at centre-back, and my club-mate, Jim (we married two sisters later on), was left-half back.

The match was played on a Wednesday evening before a Holy Thursday, so there was Mass the next day, and when I walked out of Mass, I could sense that people were looking at me. It transpired that while no one had been at the game, there was a picture and detailed report in the *Cork Examiner* – to beat Cork at any level was always big news in Kerry.

Breaking into the County Minor team was another matter, though. The backbone of that team would be made up of those who played with the colleges (the secondary schools) like St Brendan's in Killarney and St Michael's in Listowel. Many of the top Kerry players were also on a Munster Colleges team that played in a Railway Cup-type competition against the other provinces.

In those days, there wasn't a lot of collective training sessions, but there were many trial matches, and it was there that you had to impress. When I was called in for my first trial in 1956, I was advised not to go for midfield, as I wasn't from a big club, so I went for centre-back instead. Of course, no one told me that all three lads going for the half back positions had played for the Munster Colleges side, so they were practically guaranteed to be in the starting fifteen. Somehow, though, I made the panel and the substitute list for the first round against Waterford.

A few weeks later, after playing well at midfield for my local divisional side, Mid Kerry, there was another trial. This time, however, I got some better advice when Jackie Lyne, an uncle of Pat Spillane [Kerry Football Star], told me to go for centre field as I was never going to oust the three in the half-back line.

That trial got me on to the team at midfield, where I played for the next two years. In 1956, we were beaten by Limerick in the Munster Final 1-7 to 1-5, but in 1957, we beat Tipperary in the first round and went on to beat Cork in the final. Unfortunately, we lost out to Armagh a few weeks later in the All-Ireland Semi-Final.

Breaking into the Senior Team

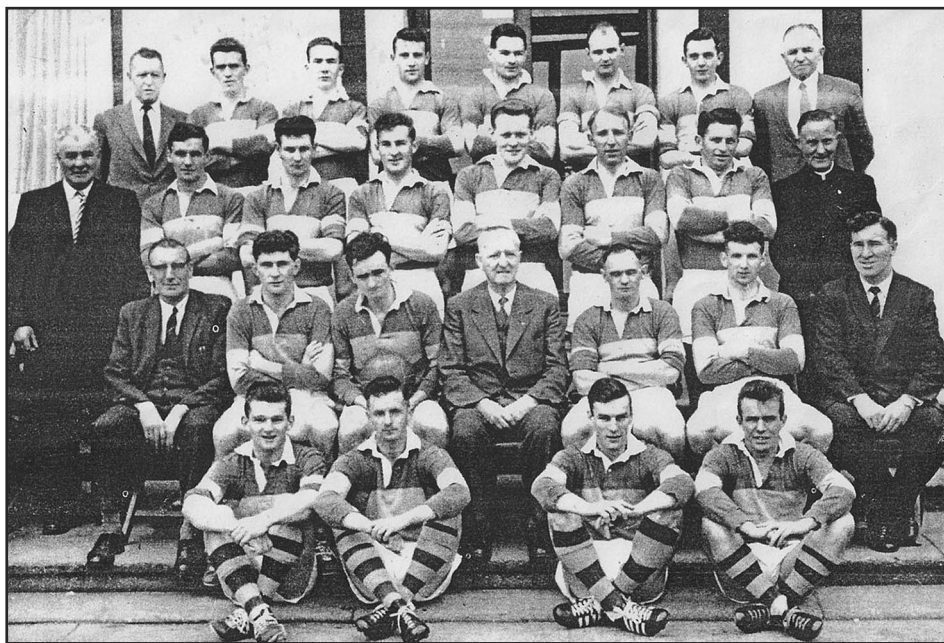
Kerry won the All-Ireland in 1959, but then went on to lose the next two finals to Down. Perhaps for that reason, at the end of 1961, a lot of that panel were discarded. In 1961, I played centre field on the County Junior team, which in those days was the 'County B team', and so the team included players from senior clubs. We beat Cork in the Munster Final. Later that year we were beaten in the All-Ireland Semi-Final by Louth. However, on foot of my display, I was called into the senior team for a tournament, the following Sunday.

In the 1961/1962 league, Kerry played just four matches, and I partnered Mick O'Connell at midfield for all of them. I was, therefore, disappointed not to

make the championship 15 in 1962. However, after we had a man sent off in the Munster Final, I got onto the team for the All-Ireland Semi-Final when we beat Dublin 2-12 to 0-10, and I held onto my place at left half forward for our 1-12 to 1-6 win over Roscommon in the final. All I remember from the start of that final was being told not to look at the crowd, “forget the noise, focus on the ball and whatever you do, don’t look at the crowd”.

In the 1962/1963 league, I had a great run. We won the league, and I played in all eight matches and went on to play at midfield when we beat Cork in the Munster Final. However, I then broke my collarbone and missed the semi-final defeat to Galway. Perhaps in too much of a rush to get back playing, I was back in action for the first round of the League, only to break the same collarbone again!

That second injury meant over a year out, so it wasn’t until the end of 1965 when I made my way back onto the senior panel. I played in the last few league



Jerry O’Riordan (*first player, third row*) member All-Ireland Football Championship-winning Kerry Team, 1962.

matches and won another Munster Junior title in 1965, and I was on the senior panel that lost out again to Galway in the All-Ireland Final.

Highlights of my Playing Career

Well, playing in Croke Park a few times and winning an All-Ireland, obviously. But also playing in places like Wembley – we played in front of over 60,000 people there on Whit Sunday of 1962 against Offaly and again in 1963 against Cavan, and I was able to enjoy the atmosphere!

But also, of course, playing for Glenbeigh in the Mid Kerry Championship

was special. We won that title in 1956, 1964, 1974 and 1975. All were massive occasions for the club. Another highlight was winning the county senior title with Mid Kerry in 1967 – one of only four in our history.

I Relocated to Limerick

Well, I tried 'immigrating' to Waterford first. In late 1955, with a big gang of others, I sat an examination for the opportunity to join Waterford Glass. I then had a great adventure going down there for an interview and staying in a hotel. However, I was still quite surprised to get a telegram one afternoon telling me to get the 3.45 pm mail train as I was expected to start work down there the following morning. What a place it was! In those days, health and safety hadn't been invented yet, so the kilns were wide open, and the heat was desperate. I had been taught a lot about hell in religion classes but whatever hell was like, it couldn't be this bad. As a young apprentice, my job was mostly to bring stuff to the master glass blowers, including regular bottles of Guinness to keep their lips lubricated. And they needed it to work in those conditions.

When my one month trial was up, I was offered a full-time job, but after writing home to my father for permission, I declined the offer and returned to the Tech.

In my early 20s, I met a veterinary surgeon from Grange, Pat Hartigan, who was working in South Kerry, and I started to buy cattle on his behalf. Then in April 1964, I made my first trip up with a lorry load of cattle with instructions to head for Grange, Kilmallock, outside "Bru"...something? – and to look for the post office in Grange.

My First Impressions of Grange

When we came to Bruree and saw signs for Kilmallock, we started to ask for directions. However, as someone who thought he knew nearly every farmhouse in South Kerry, not to mention how many cattle they had and the name of their dog, I was quite surprised to find that no one knew where Grange was. Worse still, I couldn't buy a pint of milk to make a cup of tea because I wasn't carrying my own empty glass bottle around with me to trade in. Not a great introduction to Limerick.

So we kept going towards Kilmallock and were eventually pointed towards Bruff where a man, who I later found to be Jimmy Nagle's father, not only trusted me with a glass bottle but he also directed me to the Grange PO, where I met the Bulfins for the first time.

And what fantastic friends and neighbours they turned out to be. Tommy, George and Breda never married, and Maureen returned to Grange when she lost her husband at a very young age. Breda ran the post office but was ably assisted by Maureen. Tommy would look after the farm for me when I went home at the weekends.

And George – what a character! He always had a terrier. Many an evening we gave trying to dig out a badger or fox that his terrier had grounded in the

quarry, only to have him admit, two hours later, that he might not actually have seen the fox or badger go into the hole.

In the beginning, when I was on my own, and later when Bridie and I moved up after getting married at the end of 1966, it was great to have such neighbours around.

I remember my first time going to Grange Mass and wondering where I should sit, and if I would be taking anyone's seat. I thought the best thing for it was to sit in the same position as I would have had back home, a third of the way up on the right-hand side. That turned out to be a safe enough bet.

In those early years, I worked Monday to Friday and rarely stayed in Grange for the weekend, so it took a while to get to know our neighbours. In fact, I met many of them for the first time while cutting the hedge or doing some other work, out front. And there was many a long evening where the hedge was left half cut as I chatted with some of the older neighbours like "Toastie" O'Connell about some footballer that I'd played with or against or some hurler I'd seen.

Of course, Bridie was recruited by the ICA early on, and all those ladies have been so good to her down through the years.

The Farm in Grange over the last 50 years

The Hartigans, who own the farm, had always kept racehorses, but when the boss died in the late 1950s, the land was let out for a number of years. Then, when Pat took it over again, he decided to stay away from horses, so for me, life from 1966 to 1973 was all about buying and selling cattle. I would buy them at South Kerry fairs or directly from farmers. Immediately or maybe after fattening them up a bit, I sold them again at the Kilmallock Mart on Monday or at Fitt's in Limerick on Wednesday. I often sold fifty animals a week.

Then in 1973, after Ireland joined the EEC, Charolais cattle from France started to appear in Ireland. Or at least half-breeds – the offspring of Charolais bulls bred with Irish cows. The government had the idea that, instead of importing expensive cattle, we could, over time, produce our own and grade them up.

So, in 1973 I went to Donegal to buy 80 young half-breed heifers. And what fun we had for the next seven years. They were all wild sucklers themselves, and when they calved, I left the calves with them. So you couldn't use a dog to control them as they would just attack the dog. So the young lads and I would have to round them up. No surprise that I was fit enough to play football until I was nearly forty, and the lads were winning athletics medals at under six and under eight events.

Over time, we produced some great calves. The young bulls, in particular, were in great demand with many being sold on, winning ribbons in shows.

In the early 1980s, we went back to dry cattle – buying them in the autumn and keeping them over the winter – and it has been that way ever since. However, going back to my roots, I also had to introduce sheep to control ragwort weeds on the farm.

As for progress? Well, we had a Massey Ferguson 35X from the 1970s, and in recent years we moved up to a 135 model! There was never a need for anything bigger as we always got in big contractors to do the silage. But seriously, though, it would be very difficult for me to be still farming were it not for the changes made over time. With a silage pit, all you had to do was move the wire in front of cattle and clean the yard. But the slatted house that we built a few years ago makes life a lot easier. There is nothing to clean up as it all seeps down to a big pit underneath, which means that I can continue to have 70 or 80 cattle in the yard with little bother. Of course, having the lambs arrive at all hours in the springtime helps keep away any boredom.

I didn't play football in Limerick

Well, it wasn't for the lack of being asked that I didn't play football in Limerick. I remember one particular year when word must have got around that I was retired from Kerry football, and on a Thursday evening three lads from Bruff asked me to play against Kilmallock at 2 pm on the following Sunday. When I said I couldn't and was still playing below [*in Kerry*], it was suggested that no one would know me, and no one would find out. Still, I declined. They weren't gone ten minutes when there was another knock at the door – this time three from Camogue Rovers, who were playing at 3.30 pm on Sunday. Same conversation, same answer. Out of curiosity, I went to the match on Sunday and had just arrived in Kilmallock when I was joined in the stand by a cattle dealer from Kilmallock who I knew well from the fairs of Kerry. His brother was playing with Kilmallock that day, so wasn't I glad I didn't play?

The main reason for not playing was that I was playing competitively in Kerry into my late 30s, and I won my last Mid-Kerry title (the equivalent of the South Championship) at 36. So, by the time I was retired it was time to stay retired.

My Involvement with the Underage Teams

I think that the excuse I needed to retire finally came at a parent/teacher meeting in 1979 when I was asked by Sean Garvey and Thomas Bulfin to help them out with the underage teams.

That first year, the U14 football team, involving players from Grange such as Liam Barron, Anthony Madden, Anthony O'Connell, Mike Kenny and Seamus Hourigan reached the County Final, only to lose out to a strong Abbeyfeale side led by Philip Danaher, who later played rugby for Ireland. Having watched the Mid Kerry U14 Final the same year, I was convinced that Bruff could have beaten the pick of the Kerry lads.

So I was hooked, and for the next nearly 30 years I had the pleasure of being involved with dozens of teams from U8 to adults but mostly up to U16, and I can honestly say that I never had an ounce of trouble with any of those young lads from Grange, Bruff or Meanus.

A Great Team

I was involved with so many great teams, it is difficult to single out one of them. Certainly, the Liam Barron captained hurling team who won the minor premier county title in 1983 has to rank up there. It included Anthony Madden, Anthony O’Riordan and Mike Reale, who went on the following year to win an All-Ireland minor title. Pat Barrett joined them in winning the All-Ireland U21 title three years later. Along with Liam and Anthony, Grange was well represented by Seamus Hourigan, Anthony O’Connell, Mike Carroll, Mike Kenny, Diarmuid Hynes and my own John. Of course all of those lads, except for Liam, won a county U16 hurling title the year before, and in 1984 went on to win the premier minor football title on a team that also included John Ryan.

Coincidence or not, it seemed like the more Grange lads that were involved, the further the teams tended to get. We had a lot of good teams down through the years that lost a county semi-final or final by a point or two.

No regrets about moving to Grange all those years ago

I could not have regrets about moving to Grange. It’s where we raised our five children, and the place has been very good to us. From the beginning, if we ever wanted anything or needed any help, all we had to do was ask. Even still today, I get a call every week from Moira [Dillon] – just checking in and giving all the news of the Old Road – but also making sure that everything is in order. And, of course, it is very comforting for us to have the likes of Imelda and Bridget caring for Bridie above in the nursing home. So no, absolutely no regrets.

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