

# A FAMILY TRIBUTE TO TOM “TOASTIE” AND DOLLY O’CONNELL

By Tommy O’Connell

*Introduced by Daughters-In-Law and Sons-In-Law*

Tom “Toastie” O’Connell of Lower Grange was a legend in his lifetime. Respected, greatly liked and admired throughout Grange and beyond, he had a tremendous rapport with all age groups. Widely known for his good humour and turn of phrase: in a group dynamic, he could easily hold the attention of others and entertain them with his wit and unique style of discourse. It would be difficult while in his company not to have your spirits raised. He could offer a perspective on any subject matter and would often draw smiles and even laughter – not always because of what he said but owing to the manner in which it was said. Tom was the type of man of whom a negative word was rarely, if ever, spoken. He possessed the kind of personality that endeared him to people, and he was instantly likeable. He was an amusing man. Tom’s wife, Dolly, was equally likeable and if ever there was ‘a marriage made in heaven’, theirs was one; they were a great team, and they reared a great family – we should know! Tom and Dolly were tremendous grandparents and those of our children who were fortunate to know them, loved them greatly.

*Our Dad and Mam (by Tommy)*

**I**t gives me great pleasure to write this tribute to my late dad, Tom Toastie, on behalf of his twelve children. The tribute is also to our wonderful mother, Dad’s loving wife, Dolly.

Dad was born and reared in Carnane, Fedamore, Co Limerick and in later years relocated to Grange, where he and Mam reared their family and where they happily lived out their lives.

Dad’s parents, Michael O’Connell and Hanny Daly were married in Fedamore Church in February 1913. Dad was the oldest of a family of seven, five boys and two girls: Tom, Mick, Kitty, Mary, Jack, Con and Ned. He was born in an Ireland that bears no resemblance to the Ireland of today. In 1913, Ireland was an oppressed

and relatively poor country. Mick O'Connell, my grandfather, worked for many years as a farm labourer at the Croker Estate at Ballinagarde. Subsequently he cut timber for a living to provide for his family. He supplied elm, oak and ash for the making of wheels for the common horse-drawn cart. As his sons, Tom and Mick, grew older they helped him. It was difficult work carried out in all weather conditions, and inevitably this took a heavy toll on my grandfather's health.

My grandfather, Mick Senior, contracted pneumonia and was hospitalised at Croom. In those times, the medical advances of today's world were unknown – for example, antibiotics had yet to be discovered. The O'Connell family's world came crashing down as word arrived that their dad, Mick Senior had passed away. This occurred in 1926. Such was the shock to the family, having lost their dear father, my dad told me that he could not recall his father's funeral in any great detail. The death was overwhelming for the family.



*L-R: Kitty O'Brien, Dolly O'Connell, Maisie Ryan and Maureen O'Carroll.*

After my grandfather died, his wife, Hanny O'Connell (née Daly), a very strong-minded and resilient woman, held her family together; this was not an easy task, considering all of the circumstances.

To assist my grandmother in providing for her family, my dad and his brother, Mick, continued to cut and supply timber, and they milked cows for my grandmother's brother, Paddy Daly. The earnings from these activities assisted my grandmother with feeding and clothing her family. In those times, there was no widow's pension available, and it was necessary for a family to be as self-sufficient as possible. Self-sufficiency was helped by the tillage of a very large garden of potatoes, cabbage and other vegetables. The family also kept a sow, and pigs were reared for sale and the provision of meat at home. After my grandfather's death, the O'Connell family remained together and survived. It was unusual then for large families to stay together owing to the difficulties involved in procuring a living. My dad was the oldest in the family, and I know from my discussions with him over the years that he felt great pride in having assisted his mother in providing for other members of the family; such that, the family members were able to remain together. In subsequent years, when rearing his family and providing for them and his wife, Dad maintained the family values that he first experienced and adopted in Carnane.

Outside of family life, my dad's great love was for the GAA, having a particular passion for the game of hurling. In the years that followed his father's death, he played hurling for the Fedamore team. In those times, Fedamore Club had a very strong senior hurling team. They played against top senior teams such as Ahane, Young Ireland, St Patrick's and several others. The Fedamore team had a reputation for toughness and as a group of players who were well bonded and who 'pulled' (forgive the pun!) together through good and bad times. The team membership came from several families including the surnames of Malone, Keane, Clohessy, Gleeson, Hedderman, Bresnahan, McMahon, O'Connell, Flavin, Fitzgerald, Conway and Burton. The team routinely had an outing on 'Pattern Day' (15th August) at Ballylanders, when top-class teams such as Glen Rovers from Cork were the opposition.

The 1930s were the golden years of Limerick hurling. Dad, as did many others of that time, cycled huge distances to see hurling matches including return trips to Cork, Thurles, Nenagh and other venues. He regarded a trip to Thurles as being "only a short cycle". He cycled to Ennis to see Limerick play Galway. Recalling his cycle to Cork with others in 1937, Dad left home at about twenty past six and arrived in Mallow about ten o'clock – he attended Mass there, had breakfast and continued the journey. On the way home that night, he stopped in Charleville and went to a dance. Big inter-county games always occurred on Sundays, and no matter how long a distance he had to travel to see a game, Dad always ensured his attendance at Mass, no matter what. On one occasion, he was in Killarney, and, in his haste, he unknowingly entered a non-Catholic Church to pray. Upon taking out his Rosary Beads, an old lady tipped his sleeve and informed him that he was in the wrong church – it wasn't a Catholic Church! Dad replied, "It's the same fellow that is up there". He remained where he was and continued with his prayers.

Work was scarce, and Mick immigrated to England and joined the fire brigade service during the war years. Dad considered emigrating, but his mother convinced him to remain at home. In 1939, Dad commenced working at Banogue Creamery, Fedamore – employment that he was to remain in for many years up to his retirement.

Dad met and married our mother Mary Ryan in 1942. Mary, throughout her life, was widely known as Dolly. Mam was not prepared to locate to Carnane. Consequently, Dad moved to Grange and lived with Mam's mother, Elizabeth Ryan, known as Lizzie, for a period. Lizzie's husband, John Ryan, had died a young man. Dolly and her mother had a close relationship. A few years later, Dad and Mam moved to their new home down the road from Lizzie's home, where my siblings and I were reared. Our parents lived in that house until their deaths many years later. The Maher family previously owned the house. Upon moving to their new home, Dad had to erect buildings at the back of the house to accommodate cows and pigs and to store fodder. He built a number of outhouses and a hay-barn. All

of the outhouses were built with mass concrete and stones and with the assistance of good neighbours and family members.

Dad and Mam had twelve children – eight girls and four boys. As he had done all his life, Dad worked hard keeping a garden, pigs and cows, as well as holding down his job at the creamery. His objective was to be as self-sufficient as possible in providing food for the family. Mam was of great assistance as she was well able to tend to the needs of the animals. Of course, Mam had her hands full looking after her husband and an expanding family: housekeeping, cleaning, washing and drying clothes as well as almost continuous cooking for the many mouths. They were marvellous parents – despite our very large family, we were always well fed and clothed, and our other needs were also satisfied.

Over the earlier years, while in Grange, Dad also looked after cattle for his brothers, some of which involved saving hay at Carnane and Ballinagarde every summer. In winter-time, travelling by bicycle was difficult and demanding as he had to cover a lot of mileage. When the time of year arrived to sell-off the cattle, fairs at Limerick and Bruff were the only outlets as ‘mart’ arrangements had yet to be established. Taking cattle to a fair was a demanding event. With this task, Dad was assisted by my brothers, Mickey and Jackie, and by my sisters, Mary and Betty, who would, in turn, accompany Dad to a fair. I was not involved as by the time I was old enough, marts were in operation.

On the night before a fair, mostly at Limerick, Dad would prepare a number of flash lamps for the journey in the dark. He would remark that the moon would appear later. It was necessary for Dad and those of my brothers and sisters accompanying him to leave home during darkness in order to reach Ballinagarde in time to round up the cattle there and then have them walk to Limerick in time for commencement of the fair at 5.30 am to 6.00 am. The journeys from Grange to Ballinagarde and onwards to Limerick were covered by bicycle or walking, or by a combination of both. My brother, Jackie, often recalled that Ballinagarde was a very ghostly place at two o’clock in the morning.

Tom Enright’s house in Skule was one of my favourite houses to visit with Dad. We went to Skule to buy calves, the buying of which usually took a couple of evenings to complete as Tom Enright, Bill and Dad took time out to recite poetry and sing old songs. The children consumed lemonade and biscuits; it was indeed a lovely house to visit.

When Dad worked at the creamery on a Sunday, he would hurry on his bicycle from there to Fedamore to attend Mass. His beloved dogs, Chubb – a red setter and Spot – a big terrier, would run beside him as he cycled, and they accompanied him into the church as well. Dad’s dogs were as religious as himself! If a local person in Fedamore enquired on a Sunday morning if Toastie was around, his presence could often be confirmed by somebody having sight of the dogs before seeing Dad.

The era of the pony and cart disappeared, replaced by the motor car and trailer. However, times remained simple, and television had yet to arrive. Most families had a few cows or pigs or a combination of both. Cow milking time in the morning and the evening brought a flurry of activity, which was exciting. At milking time in the morning, about 6:30, many neighbours on the Old Road in Grange would jump into action. These included Nora Hourigan, Mai Harty, Nelly Madden, Mick Dillon, Timmy Dillon and others. They sprung to life; sleeping in was not an option. Evening time was no different. Excitement reigned when Mai Harty's cow was "bulling"! All hell broke loose as Mai was at pains to ensure that her cow did not come to any harm from undesirable suitors. Mai would call to my dad asking him to inform the "bullman" that her cow was ready for his services. The "bullman" was the local name for the expert who provided artificial insemination services.

Dad had a motorcycle before he acquired a car and trailer. As well as his own cow milk, he transported neighbours' milk to the creamery. He purchased his first car around 1963. His black, two-saddled, 'James' motorcycle had served him well.

Our home at Grange was a very happy place. Dad was cool and not easy to excite; he had, of course, the previous experience of growing up as the oldest in his own family.

Dad always said that the day he married Mam was the best day of his life. Mam was a very strong-minded and clever woman, who was the banker and budget manager in the house. She was very astute, and you could not get away with telling lies to her – she would detect an untruth immediately, she probably had heard so many over the years. As there were eight girls in our house, pandemonium frequently occurred: whether it was competing for bathroom access to preen in front of a mirror or, as they grew older, preparing themselves for a dance, there was always a reason for high excitement. Of course, the boys could throw the odd tantrum. Amazingly, Mam managed us all in a relatively small space with very little fuss and with great skill. Dad said that having so many girls was a great asset when it came to saving hay, as all of the sons-in-law and boyfriends showed up to assist. Jimmy Fitzgerald, a local farmer, remarked that the girls worked faster than any tractor! When we were growing up, everyone in the family had to help with



Tom and Dolly O'Connell with family members, Tom's brother Con and Peg Madden.

the work, boys and girls alike. This work involved cow milking, hay saving, garden weeding, potato picking and other tasks. Of course, the girls assisted Mam with indoor work. Children were expected to contribute, and they did so without complaint.

Dad was involved in Bruff GAA matters all through our years of hurling. He, Tony Clancy and Tommy Hehir were tremendous underage coaches. Motor cars were scarce, and it wouldn't be unusual then to observe seven or eight bodies ejecting from a car prior to a match at Kilmallock, Bruree and at many other venues.

My sisters and brothers are all alive, thank God. They are Betty O'Connell, Mary Kendall, Ann Hurley, Carmel Gubbins, Helen Slattery, Bridget O'Sullivan, Imelda McNamara, Joan O'Connor, Mickey O'Connell, Jackie O'Connell and Gerard O'Connell.

Dad worked in the creamery for forty years. It was a special place, made so by the milk suppliers and the creamery's neighbours, who included the Flavin, Sheehan and O'Brien families. The creamery was a special place in rural Ireland as were the post office and the small local shop. Apart from a very few surviving small shops, those former institutions are no more now, as are many of the men and women who worked in them.

I remember, as a young fellow, being at the creamery with my father while he worked, when he assigned me the task of giving out the skimmed milk and he would say to me *check the book* in relation to the volume of skim that a supplier was entitled to take away, so as to ensure that nobody would receive more than his entitlement.

The only time that Dad 'issued orders' to the creamery suppliers was in advance of the Sunday of an All-Ireland hurling final, when he reminded them to be on time on the day so that he could depart for Dublin on time. I believe that Dad never missed attendance at a hurling final over a period of forty years, maybe more. When ten-year hurling All-Ireland tickets first became available, Dad bought one. He also attended a number of football finals. Croke Park was very familiar to him. Mam attended one All-Ireland with him; Uncle Con had sent a ticket from England. She never went again, saying that there was too much rushing and running around involved on the day.

Dad retired in 1979 and a lovely event to mark his retirement was held at the old schoolhouse in Grange. There were many in attendance including creamery milk suppliers, neighbours and friends. Dad served with a number of creamery managers: Frank Barry, Bernie Dalton, Tom Irwin and Jack Shanahar. While Dad retired from the creamery, he never retired fully as he kept doing the things that he loved, for many years, particularly farming.

Dad and Mam loved dancing; he had very fancy steps, and he could dance to various types of music. There were only two women who could dance with him,

the first being Mam and the other being his near neighbour, Maureen O'Carroll. My wife, Ann, danced with him once, and he soon elected to sit down saying to her "You are going one road, and I'm going the other". Mam spoke of great set-dancing that took place at her mother's house when Lizzie was living. Christopher (Chris) Madden, Bill Madden, Nellie Madden, Dad and many other neighbours danced away many long winter nights.

Dad loved to tell or listen to a good story or yarn, of which he had many in his repertoire. He was no novice to colourful but inoffensive language, and he had a marvellous turn of phrase. There are many stories told about him, many of which, although harmless, are not suitable for committal to the written word. There are a number that I can relate here.

The first relates to a 'Silent Retreat for Men' which was run by the Redemptorists Fathers in Limerick. As the name suggests, those attending over a weekend were expected to remain silent and to engage in reflective thought and prayer. Three fine and upstanding men attended – Tony Clancy, George Bulfin and Dad. The first overnight went well but on the Sunday afternoon while men were outside for a period, silently and contemplatively walking around the grounds of the Retreat House, familiar sounds were heard from the Gaelic Grounds on the Ennis Road. As the story is told, the trio led by Toastie absconded and were in time to see some of the hurling game that was underway, 'vows' of weekend silence temporarily forgotten. Apparently, the trio did return to the Retreat House after the game and resumed their 'vows' until the retreat ended.

I remember well the day that Mam went to Knock. I was helping Dad to feed the calves. We had one fine black calf with a white head – this calf was a very slow feeder and on the day wouldn't drink milk. He became irritated when a calf refused to feed. Dad decided to give the calf a dose of salt, and so he put a large amount down the throat of the calf. The calf reacted by choking and dying. We were in a bind, knowing that Mam would be furious at losing the fine calf. "What are we going to tell her?" he asked. Anyway, the next morning I was the appointed spokesperson to break the news, and, as we expected, she read us the 'riot act', fresh home from Knock. The upshot was that we were suspended from feeding calves, and Mam took over the tasks. I believe that at least two years elapsed before Dad was allowed to feed the animals again.

There is another story concerning a calf. Jackie and I were assisting Dad to inject a calf. On the day, Jackie was holding the calf in an outhouse. Jackie was near the door, bent over with his ample posterior pointing outwards. Dad was at the calf's head, preparing to administer the injection. Our sister, Carmel, observed the scene and seeing an opportunity for devilment, went indoors and got a needle. Well, she returned silently to the scene and, as quick as lightning, gave Jackie a

fine dart in one buttock and disappeared immediately, Dad hadn't even seen her. The prod set off a chain reaction: Jackie with a shout jumped in the air, letting go of his grip on the calf; the calf, being free and hearing the shout, jumped too, knocking the syringe to the ground and knocking off Dad's glasses as well! There was pandemonium, and Jackie, despite protesting, took the blame for the whole incident. Carmel had her fun without having to pay!

Dad liked shooting, and he told us about one evening in the 'Corcass' back in the 1950s. He shot six geese and owing to their bulk and weight it was difficult to bring them out to the main road. At the Corcass gates, he met an acquaintance who sold eggs. After a discussion, a deal was made for four geese for which the egg man handed over thirty shillings sterling. Dad arrived home with two geese, thirty 'bob' and a dozen eggs – an entirely satisfactory outing.

He told us the story of the Fedamore Camogie Team – at the time he was a young fellow playing hurling. It was a renowned camogie team, and they trained



Danny O'Connell, Tommy O'Connell, Tom 'Toastie' O'Connell and George Bulfin at Holycross.

at "The Ranch" in Carnane where the boys also trained. Sliotars were scarce and had to be minded. One day, the camogie team and the boys were training, and the boys' sliotar went

missing. A search was underway when it became known that one of the girls had picked up the sliotar and put it in her underwear for safe-keeping. Eventually, one of the plucky boys put his hand in and retrieved the ball. A disagreement between the girls and boys ensued, and the local priest was called upon to mediate. Having heard the story, he announced that the boys were correct in retrieving the ball – after all, sliotars were very scarce items!

In his later years, when Dad had health issues, he was on medication. He took his "tablets" every day except on Sundays when he was in the habit of taking a few whiskeys at the pub. When the girls encouraged him to take his medication, he refused saying that medication and drink shouldn't be mixed. He had his way and before the day was out he might have sung one of his favourite songs – "There's a Bridle Hanging on the Wall" or "The Valley of Knockanure". He had a lovely singing voice.

There were times on a Sunday when Dad would fall into a deep sleep in an armchair. That gave the girls the opportunity to re-arrange and colour his hair and to apply make-up, rouge and eyeshadow. Most of the make-up would be undone before he woke up, but on a few occasions he went to The Hamlet for a few drinks, sporting multi-coloured hair. He would laugh heartily at such events.

Many people wonder about the origin of the nickname "Toastie". I can best explain this by quoting from the *Fedamore News* of Christmas 1995. This issue carried the text of an interview with Dad, conducted by John Ryan and Dick Gleeson when they asked him how he acquired the name. Dad explained: "I got it from Davy Clohessy who stuck that name to me away back in 1932 or 1933. I used to be doing a bit of bird catching with a fellow called Toasty Mac from Limerick City. So from that day on, it stuck with me. People would think that you'd be insulted by it. But no, I never took any notice of it. I used to be called by it on the playing fields and at home. I was never called anything else."

Dad died on Easter Saturday morning, 2003 after an illness; he was 89 years of age. He had often said to Mam, "If I go before you Doll, before you follow, give me five or six weeks to talk about hurling matters with the boys who are gone, then we will meet up again." Little did he know that Mam would pass away on 25th May 2003, exactly six weeks after his death. She was 81 years old. They were united very soon again as they had been during all those memorable and happy years in Grange. Mam and Dad were tremendous parents; we could not have asked for better. We loved them dearly and will always miss them.

It is appropriate for me to conclude with a poem written by Christy Fitzgerald of Fedamore to honour Dad. It was published in the *Fedamore News*, 2003. Dad had some great sayings, but the one contained in the poem, "Sure I couldn't get away", meant that the opposition backs had been tight-marking during the hurling match.

*Golden memories of hurling days, those happy times of yore,  
Came crowding back upon us with sad news from Fedamore,  
'Twas Easter Sunday morning in this year, double O three,  
One gentle, kind and loving friend was called by the great Referee.*

*Known to everyone as Toastie, he always wore a smile,  
To hear the sound of clashing ash, travelled many and many a mile,  
That bike was so reliable, it never let him down,  
As he pedalled to watch Fedamore or Limerick seek that Munster crown.*

*A favourite among favourites, whether off the pitch or on,  
Our player and supporter has now to heaven gone,*



Tom 'Toastie' O'Connell and Mike 'Barlow' O'Donnell at GAA dinner dance.

*From his beloved Carnane, near that  
spot we call The Ranch,  
Tom learned all his hurling with brothers,  
Con and Ned and Jack.*

*In the thirties and the forties he proudly  
donned the green and white,  
And gave his all for Fedamore, to him  
'twas sheer delight.*

*A forward of ability, determined to succeed,  
He faced the opposition with courage,  
dash and speed.*

*I played games with Toastie, we were at opposite ends,  
He rarely failed to raise a flag, or else would make amends.  
His passing always accurate, sometimes he "...couldn't get away..."  
And with three more brothers on the team, the O'Connells made our day.*

*Great memories too of Russells Lawn, Caherconlish and Cappamore,  
The pitch 'longside the Morning Star, Caherelly, many more;  
We'll not forget you, Sweet Adare, the draws and the replays,  
When thinking back, we often say "No look was ours those days".*

*They came from every corner to bid farewell to Tom,  
That glorious April evening, friends and neighbours came along,  
Former rivals on the hurling field, with teammates, loyal and true,  
All joined up together, to wish a warm adieu.*

*That sliotar laid upon his breast awoke many a happy thought,  
Of days and times of ash camáns and matches bravely fought,  
The homely guard-of-honour, another tribute fine,  
And wreaths piled high beside you such loving thoughts combine.*

*So, farewell to you, dear Toastie, as you leave us all today,  
Gone to a different world, another game to play,  
Deepest sympathy to your family, as in Grange in peace you lie,  
Take your seat upon that grandstand Tom, all the glory of heaven enjoy.*