



# - MEET A TOWNIE -



## FROM LETTERKENNY TO BOSTON (VIA BALLINA) – MARY’S MEANDERINGS

**It’s over sixty years since Mary Mansfield took up residence in the United States but Boston hasn’t managed to burgle her distinct Letterkenny accent. And indeed her affection for the town she grew up in and its people.**

She is back in her native locality on an extended stay with her sister, Brigid, and her husband, Hugh Kelly, in their home at Beechwood.

It has presented her with the time to visit family and old friends and to attend her nephew, Kieran’s, All-Ireland Drama Final destined play, ‘Beneath an Irish Sky’, which was staged again recently in the An Grianan Theatre. “Very, very good, I’m proud of him,” she declares.

Born to John and Cassie McDaid in Glenswilly, she was reared in Lower Main Street and, along with siblings and friends, rarely ventured beyond that part of town, she recalls.

“There were five of us in the family including Curley who died fifty years ago this year. Then there is Barney and Brigid, and Anna who lives in Scotland.

“Patsy Doherty grew up with us as a brother and was very much part of our family. He went off to England and married Nellie Gillen from Manorcunningham before returning to live in Glencar.” Patsy passed away in February 2010.

Not quite true that the young McDaid’s didn’t spend time outside the surrounds of the Lower Main Street for there was, of course, school to attend. And that brought the infant Mary to the girls primary establishment where she reflects on the teaching staff of the time including Peg O’Donnell, Mother Angelica, Mother Celine, and Mother Pulcheria.

“I liked school and when I finished there I went to the Tech at Lower Ard O’Donnell.”

And subsequently left at the age of sixteen to pursue, temporarily at least, a career in the hotel industry. She worked initially in the Imperial Hotel in Ballina, County Mayo which was run by an uncle of Mary’s father, Joseph McMonagle, originally from Drum-bollogue, Conwal. Subsequently she took up a post in the nearby Moy Hotel under the guidance of Joseph’s daughter, Megan.

“She was teaching me a little bit of everything about the trade. I’d be cleaning out the toilets one day and working as manageress the next.”

Not too many local links for her in Ballina though she did once spot an Oatfield delivery van close to the hotel. “Only I couldn’t see who was driving it. I remember Michael Mellett booked in one night and he was telling me it wasn’t that long before that he had met Brigid at the Gaeltacht!”

A solid learning experience the hotel industry proved and one that kept Mary there for two years before an invitation in the post opened up totally new horizons. “I got a letter from my aunt, Margaret, in Boston, inviting me to go out there to work.”

The young Mary didn’t take too much persuading – farewell Ballina, hello Boston!

*Mary Mansfield just home from Boston pictured at her old house - 86 Lower Main Street, Letterkenny*



She arrived in Massachusetts in 1957 and took up a job as housekeeper and ultimately worked in that capacity for the same family for ten years.

But in between was a return journey to her home town of Letterkenny in 1959 where she spent six months. Doing what? “Dancing and sleeping!,” she laughs.

And again she didn’t have to venture beyond Lower Main Street to fulfil both passions. “The Devlin Hall was just across the street from us – very convenient and somewhere I would have spent every waking moment if I had the chance.

“Joe McAuley taught me to tango on the pavement,” her mind dances back in time.

The neighbouring families were the McAuleys and the Kellys and friendships were born and bred.

And Mary remembers those childhood pursuits that formed so much of those by gone days. “We played marbles and used to play tag around the Devlin Hall. “And we’d watch the ladies of the town going into the Devlin for the supper dances in their long dresses.”

To dance they required the perfect surface and thanks to Mary and her friends they got it. “Denis McGlynn was the caretaker and he’d pull us around on sacks on the floor to help polish it.

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*Mary Mansfield*

There were ventures, too, out to the nearby O’Donnell Park – though she doesn’t recall too many, if any, visits to the equally close Oldtown. “As I say we didn’t stray too far from Lower Main Street.”

And from close pals such as Margaret Larkin and Connie O’Hara who shared those halcyon days.

Days remembered at each of the Letterkenny Reunion events attended by Mary. “I’ve been at all of them and will be at this year’s too.

“I remember at the second Reunion I was chatting to Marian McManus and we were talking about the girls in our class and trying to remember them all. And this woman who was near us said to us: ‘You’re are naming all my classmates! And it turned out it was Phyllis McHugh from the Oldtown.

“That’s the kind of thing that happens at the Reunion. It’s one of the best things that ever happened in the town and I hope it keeps going on,” Mary declares.

And Boston? After her six month stint at home in the late fifties, she returned there and to her old job. “Back doing general housework and thoroughly enjoying it.” And returning home at various times including for the wedding of brother, Barney, in the seventies.

Wedding bells had also chimed for Mary McDaid some years before. It was on a blind date that she met her future spouse, Edward Mansfield, an American who was working with an oil company when they first got together but then took up a job as sacristan in the local St. Clement’s Church.

“We went to a drive-in movie on that first date. ‘Sylvia’ the film was called. And that was the start of it.

“Eddie ended up loving Irish music and he was a good dancer.” Sadly, he passed away in 1999.

The couple had five children, Edward, Katherine, John, Brian and Paul, all of them living and working in or around Boston.

“I taught the boys to waltz around the kitchen,” their mother recalls. The Devlin Hall it wasn’t, of course, but nevertheless they managed to step it out among the dishes and décor.

At the wedding of one of her offspring, Mary had a dance with him, prompting the new bride to remark: “Your mother dances better than she walks!”

At this point in the interview, Mary’s sister, Brigid enters to suggest that her sibling talks equally well! And who can argue...?

She’ll return to Boston following her lengthy break in August after the Letterkenny Reunion. “There’s a Donegal club there but it almost could be called the Inishowen Club.”

But local faces are around including Jim Gallagher from the Back Road and the McDevitts from Glenswilly.

Over the years, Mary’s home in Boston was viewed as a “half-way” house – a temporary dwelling for those who had travelled from Donegal to seek out a new life in the States. And its accommodating hostess invariably offered them the warmest of welcomes.

And she is still blessed with a welcoming personality.



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