

Farming on The Black Mountain

By TERRY ENRIGHT

The existence of at least two neolithic sites on the Black Mountain, give some idea of how long our ancestors have lived on the mountain. The neolithic period dates from around around 3,500 years B.C. and lasted about 1,500 years. This was a significant time in human development for a number of reasons, one of which was the fact that it saw the first use of agriculture and domesticated animals such as cattle and sheep. Before this, people had lived off the land by hunting and gathering. Also, the sites of two raths on the mountain, dating from around 450 A.D. to 1,200 A.D., give further evidence of how people lived, and farmed the Black Mountain so long ago.

In more recent times, particularly at the end of the last century and the beginning of the present one, the mountain and its surrounding area was fairly extensively farmed. Those familiar with walking the mountain will have found the many ruins of cottages and evidence of land worked at that time.

Families like the **Bells**, who still live on the mountain, can date their forebears back over 200 years and actually still live in the house occupied by them, all those years ago.

Other families like the **McCormicks**, whose farm "Brae Foot" is set on the side of the mountain above the Upper Springfield Road leading to Hannahstown, have farmed the mountain the past 70 years, and continue to do so. The McCormicks are proud of that tradition.

BRAE FOOT

Their farm, gets its name "Brae Foot" because that part of the mountain and the road below was always referred to by locals dating back to the last century as "the Foot of the Brae". **James McCormick**, father of the present owner, Charles, bought the farm in 1921 from **Pat Magill** who had owned that part of the mountain stretching from Hannahstown to "the gulley" since 1900. McCormick's farm runs from the old 'stone breaker' on the Upper Springfield Road down to "the gulley" and is separated from the farms which are in the lower fields above the road by the hedge which goes along the foot of the "Black Hill".

(The old stone breaker belonged to people called **Jardine**, and 'bogeys' of rock travelled up and down on rails from the top of the mountain. The bogeys, full of rock, were then tipped into the top of the breaker, and the rock was broken into small aggregate that fell into the lorries which reversed in below the breaker. The lorries then delivered the rock to two yards down the Springfield, "Workmans" where "JK Metals" is now. Both places only made flagstones, concrete posts, etc., nothing on the scale of the present quarrying done by "White Mountain Quarries" which has almost removed a quarter of the "Black Hill").

NOTE: That part of Black Mountain which is known as the 'Black Hill' stretches from Hannahstown to the 'Gulley'. The 'Gulley' appears on the old O.S. maps (1832, 1857) as 'The Doon' or 'Allens Ravine'.)

DAIRY FARM

Charlie McCormick and his sons now work the McCormick farm in much the same way as James did in the early

twenties. The only difference being in terms of quantity, and modern equipment. "Brae Foot" like most other farms on the mountain is a dairy farm. Though as Michael says: "In the earlier times, the farms did a bit of everything and had sheep, pigs, hens, geese and always some horses."

Charlie believes that the reason most were dairy farms was because of the demand for milk from an ever spreading West Belfast and also because of the closeness of the farms to the city. In those days all transport was by horse and cart, and West Belfast virtually finished at the "Flush" on the Springfield Road and the "Bee Hive" bar on the Falls. Most of their customers came from around Clonard and what is now the middle or lower Falls. One of their earliest customers were the priests of Clonard Monastery. Michael still delivers the milk to the priests of Clonard just as his grandfather did.

Growing up, Charlie McCormick attended Hannahstown Primary School, which is no longer there but which stood beside the church, next to where Hannahstown hall is now.

HATCHET FIELD

Charlie often told of walking to school from the farm in his bare feet and at that time, the Upper Springfield Road was just a dust road. At that time the whole lower side of the mountain on the "Black Hill" was heavily wooded, with

The wall of the old Hannahstown School House - with the ivy.



massive ash, sycamore, beech and conifers. Some of these trees still grow along the back of the farm but are much more sparse all over the hill. Trees were often planted in those days to give cover and a bit of privacy. The most commonly planted for these reasons were sycamore and this can be clearly seen in the case of the Hatchet Field, although only the ruins of that house still exist. The ash was also very popular and its wood was used for making practically everything around the farm. None of these trees are native and were only brought to Ireland from Europe in the late 16th and 17th century presumably by planters. The trees were therefore planted on the mountain for all these practical reasons.

In those days, the mountain, or the land on the top was a game reserve, owned by thread and linen merchants Milne and Barbour and they and their friends would come and hunt on the mountain. A cousin of Michael's told him that their grandfather had told her, that the **Hamills** of Trench House had a hunting lodge on the site of the house in which Michael's brother now lives up on the farm.

The Hamills and their friends came up from Trench House via the 'Kiln Lane' which ran from the Glen Road Cottages up to almost directly opposite the land up to McCormick's farm. The entrance to 'Kiln Lane' can still be clearly seen at this point. The Hamills were a wealthy family in the 1800s and owned land on the Upper Malone, Upper Falls, Ballydownfine and Ballyfinaghy. One of their sons John became a city councillor and Justice of the Peace in the 1870s, and John Street and Hamill Street are called after him. The last surviving member of the family, Hannah, died in 1918.

LITTLE COTTAGES

When McCormicks first came there were little cottages and farms all over the top and along the side of the Black Mountain. Only the ruins of most remain.

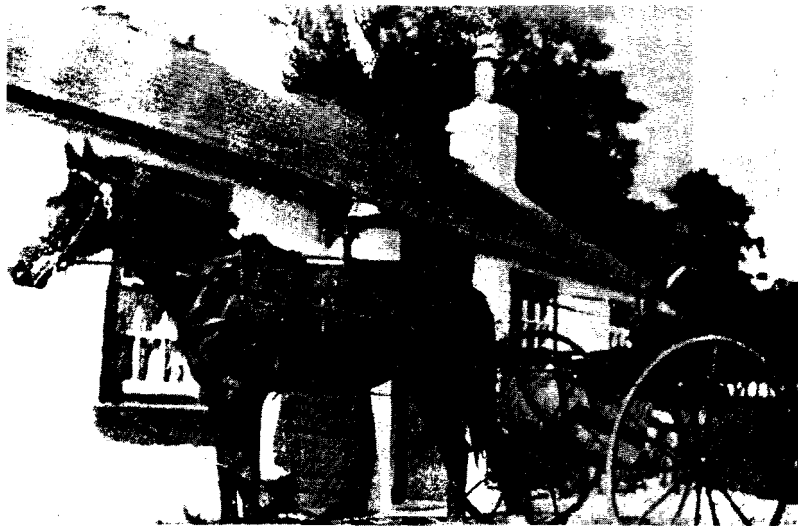
Local landmarks are disappearing and under threat of being lost forever. Places like 'Gordons Brae' which Charlie describes as being that part up and to the left at the top of 'the gulley' above **McCaffery's** farm which still has the remains of a path still running up to it. The ruins of **Gordon's** house is just to the left of the top of the gulley. Another ruined cottage sits to the side of the path leading up to the gulley beside the ruins of **Wharry's** house. People called **Creighton** lived there. There are also some old disused quarries on that part of the mountain and one in particular, a limestone quarry which has been owned by **McGladdery's** has always been a favourite haunt for picnics and climbing spot for kids. Another quarry sits up above and to the right of McCormick's house. Neither of these quarries were used since McCormick's took the farm. Both quarries appear on the 1857 OS map as being disused!

Eventually, as Charlie grew older he got married and he and wife Molly moved to Cavendish Street where they had ten children, seven boys and three girls. Charlie practically only slept in Cavendish Street. Every morning he left early and was never home until late at night. He and a friend called John Doherty, a Donegal man ran the farm. Little has changed. Charlie and his sons work the farm, and every morning he starts at 6.30 a.m. There are sixty to seventy head of cattle which are a Friesian breed and they are now building up a small 'suckler' heard whereby the mother cow only rears the calf for beef.

Only the mature cows get milked but the young calves up to maiden heifers have also to be fed and watered. First thing Charlie does in winter is to get the cows out and the silo cleaned. The cows are then washed, fed and milked in the byre. The cows have always been milked in the byre, and in old days, they were kept tied up in the byre by the neck throughout the winter. Now in the silo they can move about freely and lie down when they wish.

Hannahstown School 1926 - Charlie McCormick, 2nd from left.





Grandfather James McCormick with the trap.

UNTREATED MILK

All milk produced on the farm is untreated as opposed to being pasteurised, and is referred to as "farm bottled". Pasteurised milk is produced by the large dairies and there are indications that in the near future it may become law that all milk must be pasteurised. The basic difference between the two is that pasteurised milk is boiled several times over, whereas farm bottled milk is only strained as it comes from the cow, allowed to cool, and then put into sterilised containers. Everything which touches the milk is also sterilised, including the cans.

Charles' view is that: "The continual boiling only takes the good out of the milk. Farm bottled milk is pure and untreated, and has that special taste of its own, which is why none of our customers would drink anything else."

In the old days, farm bottled milk was taken from the cow, strained and cooled and put into a large sealed chest, filled with steam until the temperature reached 200 degrees Fahrenheit. Everything was sterilised by steam. Now everything is sterilised by chemicals.

ONLY HAY

Also in the past there was no silage, only hay. The difference between being that silage is just raw grass, put into a clamp so tightly that it ferments and does not rot. Whereas the hay was cut at harvest time, dried in the field and put into stacks. The stacks were then brought in and made into a massive 'pike'. The 'pike' was then covered by a tarpaulin and used as it was needed in the winter. They still use hay,

Terry Chatting to Michael McCormick.



but not for the milk cows. They are fed silage which is considered better. He gets his hay from a field further down the road as they always did, and recalls that he always associated the corncrake with cutting the hay. Although he hasn't heard one for years, he says that they always nested in one particular field at the bottom of the lane leading up to the house, into which for some reason, the cattle never went.

The cows stay in the silo from November to April and then are put out into the fields. They are then milked morning and evening. In between, his sons do all the odd jobs that continually need done, cutting hedges, cleaning out the byre and silo and looking after the milk deliveries. They still work from early morning until late as their father and grandfather did before them. Michael and his wife Philomena have seven children and there is no doubt that the tradition of farming on the Black Mountain will continue for generations of McCormicks to come. Just as former generations have farmed the mountain for thousands of years in the past.

NOTE: The corncrake (Traonach: Gaelic)

Habitat: Previously rough, grassy fields and agricultural areas. Also certain rough areas, occasionally sand dunes.

Formally widespread in Ireland. Now in danger because of modern agricultural methods, i.e., use of silage (early cutting of grass), removal of hedgerows, etc.

Although the bird is a migrant covering thousands of miles, it is very rarely seen and prefers to run in the high grass rather than fly. The bird is dumpy and brownish, heavily streaked and barred. When flying, shows red wing patches and its legs dangle.

Its famous call is also heard at night as well as during the day.

NOTE: Unfortunately Charlie McCormick passed away on the 12th February, 1993. He was almost 79 years of age.

ALL DRESSED UP! St. Louise's School Dance 1969



Front row: Margaret McGoldrick, Margaret Conlon, Mrs. C. Stewart, Mrs. R. Conlon. Back row: Pat McLean, Pat Brophy, C. Stewart, Roy Cullen.

Front row: Pat O'Neill, Colette McCloskey and Theresa Cullen. Back row: Eddie McErlan, G. McClory and Owen Trainor.

