

TURF CAMP MEMORIES

By: John Clohessy

In the forties there was little or no work to be got, in urban or rural Ireland and added to that fuel supply was nearing crisis level.

The late Sean Lemass saw a solution that would resolve both the fuel and the job crisis. It was with this in mind that he appointed a Board of Directors with Todd Andrews as Managing Director. Their brief was to produce sufficient turf to supply Dublin with alternative fuel to substitute for coal, which we could no longer import, due to the war. They called this board, 'The Turf Development Board', and it would later extend to other counties.

There was a plentiful supply of manpower available, but accommodation posed a problem and so the turf camps came into being as a solution to that problem. To supply the needs of the 'Kildare Hand' won scheme, camps were built at Corduff South, Corduff Middle, Mucklon and at Robertstown Grand Canal Hotel, with some huts added at Drummond to service what later became Timahoe Bog. Central Stores was their head quarters and supply centre.



President Sean T. O'Kelly visits Timahoe Works 1954.

Each camp was controlled by a camp superintendent and his assistant. Corduff South, with which we are mainly concerned, had as its superintendent a man named Liam Browne. He had been an insurance superintendent in Cork who found himself out of a job. His assistant's name was Mr. Clarke who had been an official at the Dutch Embassy. Under these two men operated a staff of orderlies who cleaned the huts and served the meals, and a kitchen staff who consisted of a cook, assistant cook, senior kitchen hand and finally some junior kitchen hands. The senior kitchen hands received an extra five shillings per week, it seems trivial now but then a week's pay was about £1=13=4.

The rations were supplied from the Curragh through Newbridge which was the central supply depot for all the camps in the Bog of Allen and its surrounds. This was done by a fleet of ration vans. Some of the driver's names come to mind, Bob Mullaly R.I.P, Frank Keely, Jack McGrath, Paddy Green, a Clare man and Jim Clerkin, a Roscommon man. The meat was supplied by butchers from Portarlinton and Edenderry. The meals consisted of a breakfast with rashers, sausages and some black pudding. Fried eggs were served only on Fridays. Dinner was usually stew and potatoes, with the occasional ham and cabbage (A rare delicacy!).

On leaving for the bog in the morning the tea boys were supplied with rations of tea, depending on how many men they had to look after. It was their job to light a fire and boil the cans. Each man received a ration of uncut bread and butter. That was their lunch. If they could pick up some rashers etc. in the local shop, they could do a fry on the stoves in the huts.

The development of the bog drainage and the production of hand worked turf was the responsibility of the bog engineer. In the Corduff Camps the man's name was Meagher. Under him was a staff comprising of an engineer's clerk or walking ganger and a number of gangers. At the time I write of, there were two engineers doing survey work on the bog, marking out a drainage system which would later be required when the bog became mechanised. One of these men was a man named Dubski an Australian and the other was Larry Daly from Kilbeggan who later became the engineer of Mucklon. There was a narrow gauge line and a couple of wagons which delivered the turf to a crude kind of tip head, from where it was taken by truck to the Phoenix Park. This tip head was situated in the back road and access was gained by the roadway from the dispensary down by the lower workshop.

Back in 1944 the men were paid on a Thursday evening from sub office "B" in Newbridge. They were driven there in a hackney car by a man named Mick Buckley, who was famous in his day as a Kildare footballer. He won a senior all Ireland medal with Kildare. His grandson Niall now plays with the Kildare senior team.

The names of some of the pay out staff come to mind: Harry Deveraux, later Accountant and Inspector and Worker Director until his retirement. There was Mick Derham who finished up in the Purchase Section at H.Q.. I remember too Brendan Hogan and a clerk nicknamed 'Moycarkey', because he hurled with that club in Co. Tipperary, his name eludes my memory. Some of the staff would go on to Corduff Middle and Mucklon and all would be treated to a fry, compliments of the cook. This would certainly have been frowned upon by W. J. Stapleton, the camp superintendent, had it come to his notice.

Dancing in the dining hall provided the Sunday night entertainment. Music was supplied by Christy Brereton and his friends for which they got a small sum of money and a couple of bottles of stout. Admission was 2/, for men and ladies were free. Romances started in those dances which later ended in marriage. There was plenty of local lads there and I never saw a row at any of these dances. There was always a very good relationship between the camp men and the locals.

During the week there was football and hurling in the camp fields. Some of the men joined local clubs. There were also inter - camp games and various forms of athletics, running, jumping and weight throwing. The recreation hall provided the workers with games of rings, draughts, dominoes and of course card games, "Twenty Five" for those who wanted a little fun, and for the serious gambler there was pontoon and later poker games, some of which went on into the early hours of the morning and some lost their weeks wages. Most of these poker players have gone to their eternal reward.

At weekends the local pubs did a very brisk trade, Dag Welds and Robertstown catered for Corduff South. While Clarke's of Timahoe (Later known as Bradys), catered for Corduff Middle. Roche's of Derry looked after Mucklon. At that time a three mile limit was in operation on Sundays and after 10 o' clock on weeknights.

Dr. Murphy of Newbridge was the medical officer for the Kildare scheme. He later became president of U.C.D. He was a very nice doctor who visited all the camps at least twice a week and was always available in case of an emergency.

At the end of 1944 Corduff South closed down for the winter and the workers were transferred to the camps that remained open. Some opted to go home for the winter. I was transferred to Killinthomas where I spent the next couple of years.

During this period an event took place which changed and improved the conditions of the workers. It was a general strike organised by the Federation Of Rural Workers. Of course the kitchens were closed down. The union had very little money therefore they sent out bags of potatoes from Edenderry which were cooked in cans on the stoves. Killinthomas closed down that year and the workers were transferred to Clonsast and Boora.

When it was decided to open canteens, I was transferred to Mucklon to look after the canteen there for the next nine months. Then I was transferred to Timahoe. Tea was served with ham sandwiches at night time. Cigarettes were also available in rations of ten per man. Of course there were non smokers and their rations went to the locals. There were other items available such as, soap, razor blades, hair oil etc.

Sometimes a small ration of chocolate was sent out from Newbridge but these were very limited. The following year wet canteens were opened and workers could enjoy a pint before their dinner. closing time was at 10 o' Clock. It was a six day licence so Sunday was closed all day and that was my only day off. Spirits were stocked but only for the staff. There was a separate little room where women could drink because drinking pints with the men was severely frowned upon.

Many politicians and other V.I.P's visited during my time in the camp. Mr. De Velera and Mr. Lemass were regular visitors and always came on Good Friday. Other ministers also visited, among them Jack Lynch and William Norton when he was minister in one of the inter party governments. President Sean T. O'Kelly paid us a visit and we had our fair share of foreigners as well.

By this time the baggars had been assembled, power lines had been set up and the baggars were being powered by electricity. The generating station at Allenwood was ready and the Turf Development Board had become Board na Mona.

The camps closed in 1957, the village of Coill Dubh had been built to cater for families of the camp workers. I was transferred to the stores and a new era had begun.

That is my summary of camp life as I knew it.