

PATRICK J. CORBETT

THE sixty-ninth All-Ireland football final has been fought and won, and to Galway goes the honour for 1956. It must not be forgotten that Limerick won first All-Ireland laurels away back in 1887, and next year we celebrate the seventieth anniversary of that great event.

Limerick Commercials was one of the first teams ever to figure on Gaelic football fields, and was in existence before the actual foundation of the Gaelic Athletic Association. The originators of the Commercials Club were: Dan H. Ryan, a farmer's son from near Thurles, apprenticed to the drapery trade in Cannock's. Dan was a versatile athlete, champion oarsman and step dancer, and proved the driving force behind the G.A.A. movement in its early days in Limerick. Second big figure at the founding was Maurice Fitzgibbon, a great oarsman with the Shannon Rowing Club, a footballer and athlete of much promise. Others associated with the pair included John McNamara, the famous Shelbourne athlete and sportsman; Tom O'Connor, and Ardpatrick - born Pat N. Tracey, also a member of Cannock's staff, who became first Secretary of Commercials.

THE FIRST CAPTAIN.

Dan Ryan was first captain of the great Limerick club, and in that capacity organised matches with the Lees of Cork, Anavale Rovers of Tipperary, Laune Rangers of Kerry, Rosannas and Bohercrowe.

When Dan left Limerick in 1886 Pat Tracey succeeded to the captaincy, and although a non-player on the occasion, he captained the Commercials team which won the first All-Ireland football championship final.

Patrick J. Corbett, the subject of our sketch this week, was a native of Newmarket-on-Fergus, and was enrolled a member of the G.A.A. by Dan Ryan shortly after the formation of the Commercials Club.

When Pat Tracey became captain of the Club in 1886, the mantle of Secretary fell on Pat Corbett, a position he filled with distinction until 1893—seven years during which the G.A.A. underwent many trials and overcame obstacles and difficulties which should have put the infant organisation out of existence several times over.

Men like Pat Corbett, however, were built of tough fibre and the more troubles they met, the more determined they became to establish Gaelic games throughout every parish in the land.

WAS HIMSELF A GREAT FOOTBALLER.

As well as being an enterprising and efficient Secretary, Pat was a very great exponent of football, and he had the proud distinction of winning the first great championship with his Club—an All-Ireland success that will for ever link the name of the Limerick Commercials with this grandest of games.

Many years ago Pat recalled for me some of his memories of that stirring period.

One of Commercials' first games was played in 1883 against the Limerick Butchers in the old Ballynacurra Racecourse. Twelve months later they had their next big match—this time against Meelick. Soon after they met St. Patrick's, under Captain Gough, at the Canal Fields, and Commercials chalked their third victory.

When the G.A.A. became firmly established clubs sprang up everywhere, and Commercials had victories over a great city trio—St. Michael's, St. John's, and St. Patrick's—to their credit before they went further afield, and on Good Friday, of 1886, humbled the pride of Cork—the far famed Lees.

TRIP BY SPECIAL STEAMER.

Immediately after, they travelled to Kilrush and beat the local lads. The trip was made by special steamer—a journey full of pleasure and delightful scenery that but few of the younger generation of Limerick citizens have enjoyed.

The next big fixture was at Bansa, where they played a pair of matches—against Bansa and the Tipperary "Rosannas," two slashing teams—again coming out victors. On that occasion the first special train ever organised for a Gaelic match was guaranteed on behalf of the club by Dan Ryan and Maurice Fitzgibbon.

The development of athletics was an important part of G.A.A. work in the early days and Commercials were not behind in this aspect of G.A.A. activity. One of Pat Corbett's first duties after accepting the position of Secretary was the organisation of a monster sports meeting for the Markets Field under Commercials' auspices.

CONTINUED FOR THREE SUNDAYS.

The sports were so successful and were so well patronised and appreciated by the public that they were continued for three successive Sundays and netted £310—a big sum in those days. Many powerful athletes competed and the members of the Commercials Club proved their worth by winning the lion's share of the prizes. Limerick may not see the equal of that gathering again.

Politics played a big part in the early struggles of the G.A.A.—the rival claims of the Physical Force men (the real originators of the Association) and the Constitutionalists causing splits and dissensions in many areas. Limerick was in the thick of such difficulties and had actually two County Boards struggling for existence the year Commercials won the All-Ireland crown.

Commercials stuck by the "old" Board, as the Physical Force men were called, and who were led by the late Paddy O'Brien ("Twenty") against the rival Board, under the management of Rev. Father Sheehy.

Both Boards played off County Championships in hurling and football for 1887, and when the All-Irelands were announced the Central Council decided that the rival champions should play off to see who would represent Limerick.

SIX "SPECIALS" FROM CITY TO CROOM.

The double fixture, with Central Council officials in charge, was arranged for Croom and proved a record breaking occasion. Commercials again guaranteed a train, but on this occasion six "specials" had to run from the city in order to accommodate the thousands anxious to travel. The return journey cost fivepence!

Commercials won the football, South Liberties the hurling, thus putting the "old" Board in the ascendent.

After this the Commercials won through Munster before meeting Davidstown (Meath) and defeating them, 3-2 to 0-2, at Elm Park, Dublin. In the all-Ireland semi-final they met Kilmacow (Kilkenny) and a great game ended in a draw of 1-10 apiece. Commercials won the re-play, at Bansa, and qualified to meet Dundalk Young Irelands in the first All-Ireland Football Final, which was played at Clonaskeagh, Dublin, on April 29th, 1883, and which Limerick won 1-4 to 0-3.