



The white-washed walls of Teach-Siamsa (Kerry) echo the laughter and voices of local children who are taking lessons regularly in singing, dancing, music and mime. It provides an ideal 'home' for our traditional culture — could be a blueprint for Leitrim. (Photo: K. Coleman)

SIAMSA TIRE A HOME IN LEITRIM?

BY

Nano Blake

DID YOU KNOW that Leitrim's earliest settlers, the Tuatha de Danann, were said to be musicians? Their arrival is dated to the dawn of history when, according to legend, they came in a mist and settled on the mountain of Sliabh an Iarainn.

This interesting piece of information came to my ears recently during a chat about the history of traditional Irish music in the county of Leitrim which I had with Joe Mooney — a better man on the subject couldn't be found! We were talking about the Siamsa Tire workshops in Kerry and discussing the possibility of setting one up on Leitrim. Believe me, after my chat with Joe, I was in no doubt about the abundance of "living" tradition in Leitrim just "waiting for a home" as Joe put it himself.

Beginnings

The traditional Irish music "homes"

which we have been operating in Kerry are called Tithe Siamsa or "Teach Siamsa" in the singular. Each Teach Siamsa was built not only for the purpose of "housing" our local culture and traditions but, in a much broader concept, for providing places to foster their growth and survival. But perhaps the background to the building of these homes will explain more fully their purpose. It will also explain their relevance to the Leitrim man.

The National Folk Theatre

Siamsa Tire, the National Folk Theatre, was founded in February 1974. Its aim is to project through the medium of theatre, Irish folk culture in all its forms. To do this it proposes the setting up of a network of folk theatre workshops in selected rural areas around the country, to provide a central theatre building and to establish a full-time State sponsored performing company. It was "Siamsa", the folk

theatre presentation, performed by the Kerry based group Siamsoiri na Riochta, which inspired the aims of Siamsa Tire. "Siamsa" began as an experiment in 1964. Its purpose was mainly to interest a group of young Kerry people in their native music and traditions. For their inspiration they turned to the folk crafts and customs which were part and parcel of the way of life of their forefathers in the Kerry countryside and through the use of the occupational songs and dances which that life and those times inspired, they recreated the spirit of the one-time familiar scenes.

"Siamsa" is rather like an opera — Irish style. It's a presentation of music, mime, song and dance produced so simply and yet so sensitively that even the unenlightened member of any audience can comprehend its meaning. The flying flail... the twisting of the sugan... the flashing scythe... the thatching... Throughout the performance the audience is shown how the social activities of those times were woven around the working life of the people.

Growth of Siamsa Tire

Through the unprecedented success of "Siamsa", both at home and abroad, came Siamsa Tire. It happened three years ago when Siamsoiri na Riochta launched a report with plans to ensure the continuing survival and development of folk culture and foster growth in appreciation of its intrinsic value. This report also incorporated proposals for a National Folk Theatre in Ireland which would serve as an outlet for the many facets of folk culture which still survive in the whole country.

The theatre, it was proposed, would be fed mainly from the network of rural workshops, whose arteries reach deep into the heart of Ireland, where the important remnants of folk culture still survive, waiting to be tapped. These rural workshops called Tithe Siamsa — merrymakers houses — will be located in districts rich in tradition, where local people will come and meet, perform and exchange their particular arts. The houses will be filter-points where the native talents and folk wealth of the particular districts will be researched and assembled, the cream of which will flow on to the National Folk Theatre.

Siamsa Tire now has two houses operating in Kerry. The first Teach Siamsa is in Fionnuig in north Kerry, which is the main headquarters, the second Teach Siamsa is in the west Kerry Gaeltacht. This "wedding" of the west and north Kerry houses is significant as it will ensure the union of the Gaeltacht and Gaeltacht traditions — an important factor in the development of the folk theatre plan.

Both houses are thriving since they were opened. Already the thick white-washed walls echo the laughter and voices of local children who come regularly for music, song, dance and mime lessons. At intervals there are "open houses" for the elders of the communities whose experience and knowledge of local traditions are eagerly watched, imitated and recorded.

On the social side, each Teach Siamsa provides a unique setting and home for our native culture. Traditional in design, the Teach Siamsa represents the traditional style thatched cottage. Inside, the visitor is surprised by the atmosphere of "living" drama. In an original setting of flagged floors, open hearth and dark rafters, there is room for 200 people. There is a raised section of the floor which can be used as a stage and, hanging unobtrusively from the rafters under the steep sloped roof, are modern stage lighting units. In design and atmosphere the Tithe Siamsa have created a living situation where the local people have the opportunity of exchanging and experiencing their tradition.

Possibilities for Leitrim

The reason why Kerry was chosen as the first site for the Tithe Siamsa is obvious. It was from here that the whole concept grew, from the ready-made material which the wealth of local folk traditions and customs provided, from "Siamsa" which was inspired by the former way of life in Kerry. The county provided a natural habitat for our National Folk Theatre. But Siamsa Tire, as a movement, is nationwide in concept and Leitrim, with its own wealth of traditions and customs, would suggest an obvious artery with whom we could link.

Joe Mooney was quick to enlighten me about the county's long tradition in music and musicians. Going back to the 1700's he spoke about Jerome O'Duigenan, the Leitrim man who played and won a bet of 100 guineas against a Welsh harper, in the then Irish House of Commons. In the 1920's the first ceili band to broadcast on 2RN (now Radio Eireann) was the Cloone Ceili Band. Also in the '20's, one of the first traditional Irish music records released in America, was made by a Leitrim flute player, John McKenna. Among present day Leitrim musicians who are keeping up the tradition, he listed Jim Rawl, Aughavas (fiddle); Michael McNamara (flute); Pat Sweeney, Killargue (banjo); Michael O'Brien, Killargue (accordeon); the Wynne family, the Moffats...

A Teach Siamsa in Leitrim would certainly be welcomed, Joe assured me. "Our culture is a family affair," he maintains, to be kept in the 'home,' not to be exploited in pubs and dead-end



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dancehalls who charge monstrous rents". Our traditions stem from the rural man, says Joe, and therefore they must be kept alive within the rural community if they are to survive. A home of its own, he maintains, is what the tradition of Leitrim wants if it is to continue and thrive.

Maturity?

Your amber eyes, so beautiful, so distant,
Haunt my dreams each day
And tantalise my nights.
And memory wings to long-lost days
Of happy innocence in the swaying meadows
Where we roved hand in hand,
Two of nature's lovers.
Yet lost to one another in our present days
Two friendly strangers when we meet,
But as your spectre fills my mind
As I remember, and I long
For your overflowing laughter
And your amber eyes.

Vincent Woods,
Aughamore,
Spencer Harbour P.O.