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The coming of the ESB -- and other memories of Bere Island in the 50s

Eithne Harrington

I was born in 1936 and lived in Bere Island until 1959, so I remember the coming of the ESB very well.

When the ESB came canvassing, people's biggest worry was whether they could afford to pay the electric bill every month. We had a good-size house, and the bigger the house you had the more the ground rent was.

The first ESB person that came was Jimmy Vale. He stayed with Aunty Nan (that's Nan Coughlan Harrington). He must have been an engineer of some sort. Himself and a Gerard Murphy, I think he played hurling. They went lining then after that and it was Sean Donovan, a first cousin to myself, that was doing the lining of the poles, marking them where they were to be, right through the island. If you stood on one pole, that would cover the next, in a straight line.

The supervisors of the teams putting in the poles were from several parts of County Cork, including Rylane, Castletownroche, Youghal and Dunmanway. They stayed for several months, and lodged in local houses. The two Gleason lads Billy and Michael stayed with Mike Crowley's the Bungalow In the West end. A Jimmy Lavers stayed with Kathy Gihane. Paddy Moynihan and John Ginnivan stayed with Paddy Barule and Lina. Mossy Collins stayed with Sadie and Connie K. A few of them were real characters, Some of the local lads didn't like it at all that some of the outsiders had lots of money and were showing the local girls a good time -- and showing up the local lads.

A lot of locals worked on these teams. Other locals had special jobs. For example, Jackie Barule had a job drawing the poles with his horse, up Ardagh's Hill and other hills, and up through Cloughland.

Bill Moriarty was another. Bill was very conscientious working. He had to put the number and the tag on each pole. Bill used to run out of those little tags and he's say Cripes I have nothing to do, and of course the young crowd were too clever for him and they would hand him a bundle, and they would take it easy. Bill would keep going all day.

A lot of people only got the ground floor wired. Paddy Moynihan and John Ginnivan of the ESB wired our house. It was 18 pounds to wire it*, four bedrooms upstairs and the room and the kitchen and the hall downstairs. There was a plug in each room and in the kitchen, and a light in each room. And the old brown switches, I remember them.

A few weeks after the electricity was turned on in 1958, a fellow came in and stayed with Aunty Nan. He brought in vanloads of electric radios and sold one to nearly every family. Like most families, we bought ours on installments. I can't remember his name; but because he sold Bush radios, he was called Mr. Bush.

During the 50s our big entertainment was going to the dances. There was no drink in the dance halls when I was growing up. The big dances were at Ardgroom and Castletown.

We also went to the dances in the village, up in the Drill Hall. When the Spannies** were in, they would be at the dances too. The local lads would be going mad because all the Spannies would run across, there were so many of them there. But the girls didn't like the Spannies because they were talking their own language. They were quiet and didn't give any trouble.

Twas sixpence to go in to the dances at the Drill Hall, with Markie Peter. He got a lot of washers in his time, I'd say. You know those zinc washers you could buy for the zinc nails. They made the same noise as a sixpence going into the box.

We used to be dancing too at the platform at the Cross, with Jimmy Con Jack. I remember running home -- I was scared of my mother that time -- and she didn't let me out for a week one time because I wasn't in on time.

Money was scarce. We used to be waiting for my younger brothers Joseph and Donal to go on the Wren at Christmas. When they came home on the night there was the counting of money to get the money for us to go to the dances. Joe and Donal were too young to go to the dances then. We were going, and we had to get the money off them. They used to go in to Murphys, and Fr Bob would be there and Fr Brennan, and they would have them singing all day and they would come home with plenty money. We thought t'was plenty money then. We got the price of the dance. [They were fantastic singers; everyone from that time remembers them coming on the "wran" and Joe in particular singing The Gypsy Rover ; no wonder the Murphys kept them all day!]

The earliest money I made myself was when the American parcels were coming. At one point John Sullivan the Post Office used to deliver them but then he went away to England. So I got a bicycle from my aunt. The first parcel I delivered was to Joe Murphy west up in Ardnakinna. I got three shillings, sure that was very good. I often went with them after that, and I delivered some telegrams as well.

We would go out to the dances in the boat run by John Harrington, Colm's father, I think it was. I remember often coming in in the dark after the 11 o' clock dance. Because of the tides and the way the pier was at the time, we often had to get off the boat by walking along a plank or a deal. For some people, even when they had

had a few drinks, it was 'no bother.' But I remember one night Anthony Orpen, he was going across, he wasn't drinking at all, and he fell in; he walked it to the strand.

When the ESB crews were here, we used to be going to the dances with them. They had the ESB van and we used to travel with them. They would give us a lift west, to go out in the boat to the Thursday night dances in Castletown. I don't know who was the fella that used to be driving Murphy's big green van. But it got broke down anyway one night coming home. There were 15 of us inside the green van. As we were going up by the grotto, it cut out and it came back flying, only the ESB van was behind it and it stopped it. We could have been killed.

I left in 1959. Things started to improve in the 1960s, and there was more money around. Then Donogh O Malley brought in the free education. With television and everything else, the world began to open up. When I was young, I remember hearing that Brendan and Fr Bob Murphy went to Lourdes by Spanish Trawler, and I never thought that I would ever see Lourdes or anywhere foreign. But I have been to Spain and to England, and I have been to Lourdes 3 times.

Today's generation have to clear a mortgage, and deal with all the other stresses of modern life. Many of them think things are harder now than we had it in Bere Island in the 50s. And you know, they might be right. We had to do without, but we also enjoyed ourselves. My memories of Bere Island then are very good ones.

NOTES

*. John Finbarr O'Sullivan wired a lot of the houses. In the book **And Then There Was Light** he said that he gave change out of a 10 pound note in most cases. The book, with stories from all over rural Ireland, is a very good read.

** Spannies. Brendan Murphy had the contract to bunker the Spanish fishing trawlers when they put in at Lawrence Cove. We called the fishermen the Spannies.

This piece is based on a telephone conversation between Eithne and Seamus Hanley on October 13, 2020.