



Silence conceals tensions in peaceful Mayo village

# Community relations 'set back 20 years' in crime row

**Conor McMorrow**

ON 19 December 1981, four Travellers broke into the home of 83-year-old Mary Connell in Caherlistrane, a remote area of Galway near the Mayo border. The gang departed empty-handed, leaving Connell tied by the neck and legs to a chair. After their botched robbery attempt, they bought women's tights to make masks for another raid.

This second raid, later the same evening, took place less than ten miles from Pádraig Nally's house in Cross, and is one of the events that has shaped the relationship between the settled community and Travellers in Mayo over the past quarter of a century.

On that evening, the four - Charlie Conroy, 31, and his younger brother Eddie, 18, both of Bog Road, Ballinrobe, their brother-in-law James Cleary, 24, of The Neale and Martin Ward, 19, of Cullen Road, Headford - broke into the home of the

elderly Gilmore brothers in Hollymount, Co Mayo. After they arrived at the Gilmores' door, a struggle ensued that left both Eddie and Peter Gilmore seriously injured after being hit with the leg of a stool.

John Gilmore, who had been out visiting friends, returned home to find his brother Peter lying in a pool of blood on the floor and his other brother Eddie lying under the stairs. Eddie died in the house shortly after he was discovered and Peter died in hospital less than a week after the attack.

Charlie Conroy was later jailed for life for murdering Eddie Gilmore, while Eddie Conroy, along with Cleary and Ward, was convicted of the manslaughter of Eddie Gilmore and of assaulting Connell.

The events of that December night sent shockwaves throughout Mayo and local newspaper cuttings from the time show simmering tension between Travellers and the settled community. A headline in the *Western People* in 1982 read: 'Castlebar Like Dodge City: Itinerant Problem at Flashpoint'.

This tension has fluctuated in Mayo over the past 25 years and was last at

its height in the late 1990s after the murder of 83-year-old draper Eddie Fitzmaurice. Fitzmaurice was found gagged and tied to a chair in the bedroom above his shop in Bellaghy-Charlestown on 4 May 1998. While gardaí are still investigating the murder, locals believe Travellers were involved.

The pathologist's report found that Fitzmaurice, who had run his shop for more than 60 years, had died from hypothermia and had been there for days before he was discovered. Gardaí described his death as "a particularly brutal and callous crime," and the fear that has recently emerged was evident at his funeral. Bishop Thomas Flynn of Achonry said, "Do we have to turn our houses into fortresses to enjoy our basic right to stay alive? While murder lurks in our society, no life is safe."

Just weeks after the Fitzmaurice murder, John Flannery, a Fine Gael councillor from Mayo, sparked a national controversy after he said Travellers should be tagged with microchips to monitor their movements. Travellers in Mayo were outraged at those comments, and Bernard Sweeney of the Mayo Traveller Support Group this weekend said tensions there are now at boiling point again.

"There is a sense among the settled community in Mayo that they can't be seen talking to Travellers and that shows how much tension there is between the two communities," Sweeney told the *Sunday Tribune*. "Support groups like ours have developed a good relationship with settled people and this relationship has now been set back about 20 years across the whole country."

The travelling community in Mayo is extremely angry at the way it says Travellers are being blamed for crime in the area.

"There is a lot of talk about Traveller criminality, but criminality has to be tackled across the board and it should not just focus on Travellers," said Sweeney. "If the media were to highlight all the wrongdoings of the settled community, we would be living in fear of them."

Dr Ian O'Donnell, of the Institute of Criminology at UCD, says there is very little research into Traveller involvement in crime and is apprehensive about people suspecting them of crime.

"It is pretty well established that there is a poor relationship between how scared people are and how much risk there is of

them becoming a victim of crime," he said.

Meanwhile, with the deferral this weekend of a rally in Athlone organised by the Pádraig Nally Support Group, and of a press conference in Galway organised by three Traveller support groups, hope remains that tensions can be alleviated.

"We want to have peace and reconciliation and this is the challenge that both communities have to meet," said Bernard Sweeney.

"Things have got better in the last 10 years and we don't want to revert back and have all that good work derailed."

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