

Leitrim Guardian Person of the Year 2006

Nancy Woods

Peggy Lynch

THE LEITRIM GUARDIAN Person of the Year Award for 2006 goes to Nancy Woods from Cornaro, Drumshanbo.

Nancy has been, and continues to be, an energetic contributor to the many projects and committees, in which she is involved. A modest person, who will happily work in the background, and attribute the success of her various ventures to those who work with her, she was somewhat alarmed, when she was nominated for this award. With her life-long dedication to the promotion of Irish music, the name Nancy Woods is synonymous with the huge success story of the Joe Mooney Summer School.

Nancy had come to know and love Drumshanbo, long before she came to live there. Her father Patrick Weldon, a Mayo man, was appointed to Drumshanbo as sergeant in 1922 to establish the Garda Síochána there. After marrying local girl, Agnes McGovern, he was transferred to Bray and later Castle-town-Geoghegan, Co Westmeath. It was here that Nancy was born into a family of four sisters, Peggie, Kathleen, Eileen and Agnes and three brothers, Tom, Pat and Séamus.

Nancy's Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann 50th Anniversary Medal



Was it her native village that kindled a life long love of traditional music? She recalls the 'whistling postman', Billy Whelan, whistling traditional tunes as he did his rounds. Never one to miss an opportunity, Nancy would wait on the steps to ask him to whistle a particular tune for her. Her sister and herself had a copybook full of songs that they practised every night in bed. Her father loved to hear them sing, especially their rendition of 'Moonlight in Mayo' or 'The West's Awake'. They had a song for nearly every county—'Galway Bay', 'The Star of the County Down', 'The Girl from Donegal'—it was to be years before she added 'Lovely Leitrim' to her repertoire.

When the family moved to Mount Temple near Athlone, Nancy remembers dancing half-sets at the house dances, while their next door neighbour played the accordion. Her teacher in primary school there was Miss Flanagan and after gaining the hard-won County scholarship, she started her secondary education as a boarder in the Convent of Mercy, Roscommon. Though she

Nancy & Shane Woods and family at 40th Wedding Anniversary celebrations. At the back are: Aengus, Gail, Darina, Yvonne, Kenneth & Shane Óg.

was offered a job in the ESB after her Leaving Certificate, and was keen to start earning money, her father insisted she take the coveted 'call to training'. She somewhat reluctantly headed for Carysfort. She remembers having £33.6s.8d, which was one third of the annual fees, in her pocket and being afraid of her life she would lose it!

By now her parents had moved back to Drumshanbo, as her father had retired. Their home was in Corlough and it was from here that Nancy started her teaching career in Drumshanbo NS in 1955. A short while later she became Principal in Auhagrania NS. This was a few miles from the town so it necessitated her first major purchase—a brand new Rally bicycle from Timmy Moran's. Rain, hail or snow Nancy braved the hills to Auhagrania.



Nancy Woods (front centre) & friends at the Mercy Convent Boarding School, Roscommon.

Always one to pick up new skills she became an expert at breaking sods of turf, lighting fires with paraffin oil and setting mouse traps! When her colleague, Mrs Sheila McMorrow, bought a car Nancy had the luxury of a lift to school. But the journey was often fraught with difficulty especially on fair days, or on frosty mornings when Derryhallow hill had to be nego-

Below: Shane & Nancy Woods with Paddy Ryan (Shannonside Radio) & Joe Burke (Accordian Tutor) at the Joe Mooney Summer School Concert.

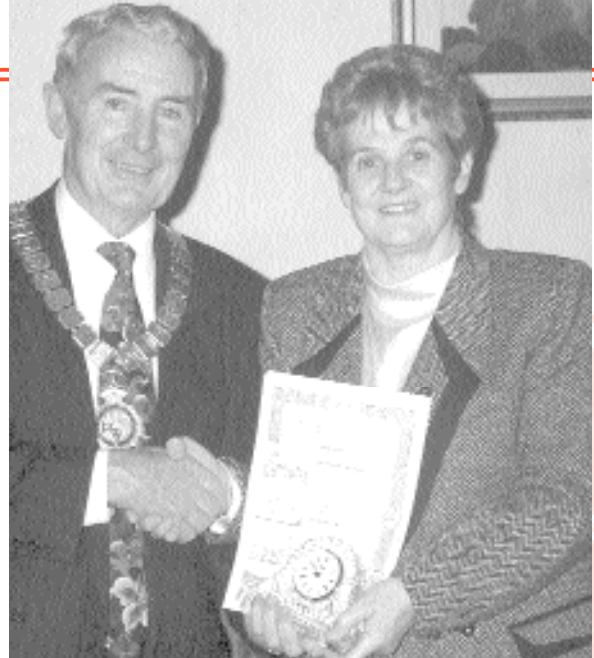
Below Right: Nancy with the other teachers at Drumshanbo Central School, where she spent many happy teaching days.

Back Row—Brid Mc Morrow, Elsie McWeeney, Nancy Woods, Dessie Doyle, Patricia O'Connor, Una Brennan & Peggy Lynch. Front Row—Paddy O'Keeffe & Nora McGovern

tiated. She is still a nervous passenger!

Nancy felt at home in this ballad singing community around Aughagrana where she entered the pupils for An Tóstal competitions. But she was already distracted by another style of music. The Kevin Woods showband was all the rage in the dancehalls, and from his vantage point as drummer, Shane spotted her one night in Doherty's Hall. Love bloomed, and when they married in 1962 Nancy joined a family known far and wide for their music—Kevin, who emigrated to America, Micheál, Shane, Maureen, Eileen, Rosaleen and Monica. While she continued to teach, and rear her family, she still found time to enjoy all the sessions of music centred around the Mick Woods Sound and Maureen Doran's legendary fiddle playing. It would have been on nights like these, maybe in Doherty's Mountain Tavern, that Nancy herself would join in a melodious rendering of 'Four Green Fields' or 'Any Dream Will Do'-this time without the copybook.

Mention of Drumshanbo inevitably brings up the name of Joseph Mooney. Nancy recalls him coming regularly to Aughagrana NS to collect the five shillings for an insurance policy. It was he who enticed her to join the local branch of Comhaltas, and so began a thirty year span of dedicated work for that organisation. She has held the position of secretary, PRO and treasurer of the local branch, and was County



Nancy Woods receiving an INTO presentation from Liam McCluskey to mark her retirement from teaching.

Secretary until 2004. She is presently the County Treasurer. After so many years of various roles and duties, she has seen the same family names, now second generation of competitors, appear on programmes. In 2001 she was justly awarded the Comhaltas Millennium Medallion for her dedicated services.

It was Drumshanbo's great fortune that Nancy Woods happened to go to a Community Council meeting back in the late 1980s. Ideas were being discussed as to how best to promote the town and attract people to the area. Set dancing weekends were mentioned, as the local Scór group had been generating interest with an intrepid set of dancers. The South Sligo Summer School was becoming established in



Tubbercurry, so Paddy McManus, Eva Mooney and Nancy were dispatched there, to suss out their modus operandi! Connie Ryan was in his heyday and Nancy knew he would be a star attraction. However, Leitrim had such a strong traditional music heritage; she felt that they should incorporate music classes as well. A committee was formed. It was decided to run a summer-school week, the following July, based on the music legacy of John McKenna and the flute players of Leitrim. It was to be named after Joseph Mary Mooney who had died some time previously. And so was born the Joe Mooney Summer School—Scoil Samhraidh Liatroma.

Nancy will be the first to mention the names of those courageous officers of the inaugural committee, who were setting out on a mission to replicate the type of summer school already making huge headlines in Miltown Malbay and Tubbercurry. A total of sixty students enrolled on the first morning. Six musicians took charge of the classes, among them Ben Lennon, Noel Hill and Michael Tubridy, while local man, Tony McGowan taught the piano accordion. Four sets took the floor in the Mayflower as Connie Ryan demonstrated to very raw recruits, how to 'house' and 'slide in'. Who would believe that it would grow into the international festival that it is today.

Nancy is the back-bone of the summer school. Her work starts as soon as the summer is over. While acknowledging all the committee, the dedicated helpers, and in particular Mary Doyle, she herself has the responsibility of booking tutors and lecturers, advertising, producing and distributing five thousand brochures, and arranging venues and accommodation. She has managed to attract funding, and have the set Dancing Class, under Pat Murphy acquire the status of a recognised summer course for teachers. A new dimension is added to the programme each year. Musicians have launched their tapes or CDs, a youth recital attracts families

from all over and a Summer School video was made in the Millennium year. In 2005 forty one tutors took charge of over seven hundred students and thousands of visitors flocked to Drumshanbo to savour the wonderful atmosphere during summer school week. The Ramada Hotel on the banks of Lough Allen hosted the opening concert and it was there too, on a balmy July evening that a huge crowd enjoyed a barbecue. No wonder the visitors commented on how lucky the local people were, to live in Drumshanbo. Somewhere in the crowd, Nancy was smiling.

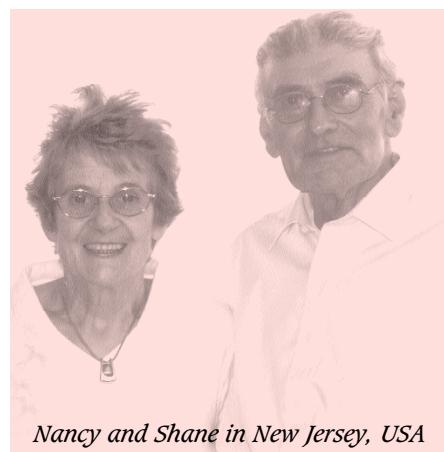
People forget that Nancy has a life outside of the Summer School. She taught in Drumshanbo parish for forty years. When the schools of the parish were amalgamated in 1974 she joined the staff of Drumshanbo Central School until she retired in 1995. She is remembered with fondness by colleagues and past pupils for her gentleness and kindness. She instilled in her pupils a great appreciation of the Irish language and culture. Her interest in local history and folklore prompted her to collect many articles and artefacts from past times. These are an invaluable resource and have been useful in the compilation of projects at local level. She was always a gifted organiser and whenever a show, raffle or sports events were being held she was at hand to help. She has been a member of the Drumshanbo Adult Choir, directed by Orla Daly, for almost twenty years, and took part in the local musical productions of 'Oliver' and 'The King and I'. She not only organised set dancing classes, for the long winter nights, but was always there herself to participate and enjoy the ceol agus craic.

Nancy has been relentless in the promotion of traditional music. When she retired from teaching some years ago she approached the then principal of the Vocational School Pádraig McLoughlin with a view to setting up a VTOS Irish music class. She saw it as



Above: Presentation of recognition award to Nancy Woods on 50th anniversary of the foundation of Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann (Knock 2001) by Sen. Labhrás O'Murchu (Ard Stiurthoir CCE) & other members of the Connacht CCE council.

an extension of the interest generated by the Summer School, and as an opportunity for those who did not have access to music classes elsewhere. The first year, with tutor Mairéad Whelan of Aughavas had an enrolment of



Nancy and Shane in New Jersey, USA



Nancy's parents—mother, Agnes (McGovern); father Garda Sgt Patrick Weldon; sister Maureen & brother Tom.

Joe Mooney Summer School 1998-2001
Anniversary re-enactment of General Humbert's march with his French troops in 1798.



twelve students, among them Nancy herself. These classes have continued successfully each year with Paddy Ryan as tutor. There are currently twenty five students on roll. She was also involved in setting up weekly tin whistle and button accordion classes for children. It is true to say that the 'sounds of music' coming from the various centres around Drumshanbo have all been initiated by Nancy Woods.

Shane and Nancy, both coming from large close knit families, meant that their home in Cornaroy was always bustling with activity. Their own family of three boys and three girls grew up in the pleasant environs of farm life. Five of them are now married with families of their own, Kenneth lives in Dublin, Shane Óg in Cavan, while Yvonne and Darina have returned to settle in Leitrim.

The youngest two, Gail and Aengus are both in America. Shane and Nancy enjoy the visits of their ten grandchildren and are already nurturing in them, the love of music and dance, which has been so much at the heart of their lives. While members of their family were scattered all over the world they took advantage of the opportunity to visit such places as London, Prague, Rome, Georgia and Hoboken, New Jersey.

Nancy joins the other illustrious recipients of the *Leitrim Guardian Award* who have all generously shared their talents for the love of their



Shane and Nancy Woods on their wedding day in June, 1962 with bridesmaid Laura Mc Manus (Nancy's cousin).

county and local community. She has spent her life planting little acorns, nurturing them and watching them grow into mighty oaks.

Is iomaí páiste sa pharóiste a raibh tionchar aici air. Tá a rian láidir fágtha aici ar oidhreacht cheol agus rince an chontae. Is bean chumasach ildánach í, bean phobail agus bean chlainne, duine lách spioradálta, dlúthchara. Go mbaine sí taitneamh as an ngradam seo.

Joe Mooney Summer School
Committee: Pdraig Sweeney, James Costello, Mary Doyle, Nancy Woods, Michael Smyth & Pdraig McLoughlin.

PHOTO: WILLIE DONNELLAN

