

The Irish EXAMINER

ALSO INSIDE
Angela Collins O'Mahoney,
Ireland's Only Steeplejill



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NEVER FORGET!

SteepleJill

In her own words, Angela Collins O'Mahoney tells the story of her life, detailing the drive and determination that led her to own her own successful business, be lauded by her peers and overcome the challenges that we all face in our pursuit of our life goals

I was asked to write my autobiography because my story is inspirational, and it gives hope to people of all walks of life. It confirms that a person can come from anywhere and go anywhere. It is entirely up to the person themselves. One does not have to be rich or famous to start a business. One can fail and you only fail if they stop trying. My book tells this story.

My family lived on a small farm at Enagh, near the village of Kilkishen, Co. Clare, Ireland

We were a family of six children plus my parents. I was the youngest with four older brothers and one sister. We lived on a farm and I often heard my parents talking when sitting around the fire that we had plenty in the early years producing milk, meat, eggs, potatoes, vegetables and how they sold their produce to buy the necessities like clothes, shoes, and to pay bills.

Life was normal and happy for those first ten years of marriage until November 1944 when my sister died aged seven and a half and their world fell apart. They never got over her death. My dad became an alcoholic and my mother took care of him and us until each one went out to work.

A family can become disadvantaged for various reasons and having grown up in a situation where alcohol played havoc with our family life I was encouraged to write my life's story in a book that shows that despite fear and hardship early in life, you can put that behind you and still do well in life.

Because of her loss my mother was often very sad and tired due to having to work both in the fields and in the home. She was very soft hearted and asked us to help with chores but at that exact time we normally developed headaches or sore fingers and she did not insist and that contributed to her having to work so hard.

Back in the 1950s most boys left school after doing the Primary Certificate aged about twelve or thirteen and went to train for a trade or work on farms or in factories as did my four brothers.

Shannon Airport was set up at this time and two were employed there and two emigrated to England when they became old enough to travel.

Getting love from both parents and seeing Mam's determination to survive stood to us. The many parcels and letters we received from my Dad's family in America greatly helped.

Seeing my Dad destroy our lives and his own, was tough but that

was a huge lesson as we ensured we did not follow in his footsteps.

My Dad had seventeen in his family and all emigrated, to the USA except his oldest brother who went to England and an older sister who remained at home.

As he was the youngest he took care of his parents and inherited the farm.

Sometime around 1952 one of my Dad's older brothers died in America and left money to us (back then it was called a legacy). I recall the great excitement when it arrived and to ensure Dad did not spend it on alcohol, Mam took it immediately to the bank in Tulla, Co. Clare and took me along.

She lodged it in both names with the condition that I would receive it at twenty-one or when I married into a farm. It was to be my Dowry.

Many may not know what a Dowry was but it was significant in Ireland as one would know if they watched the film "The Quiet Man" with John Wayne and Maureen O'Hara.

My parents spoke endlessly about me being provided for and that my future was secure because I could now marry any farmer when the time came.

I cannot emphasize enough how significant this was, but it really annoyed me because at ten or eleven I did not know what my parents were talking about. As time went on I knew I would not marry a farmer having seen how hard my mother worked in all kinds of weather, but to them, especially my mother, the land was God. She used to say she would have been 'out on the road' only for the farm that she worked and the produce she sold.

I kept telling Mam and Dad I had plans to get educated and often thought of being a nun after a visit from a Missionary Sister from Africa to our school.

My father told me in no uncertain terms no money was going with me to the convent - he needed it and said, "it will stay here where it is wanted."

They were making inquiries about single rich farmers and were suggesting marriage to me on a regular basis.

They talked endlessly about the benefit of being friendly with those young men who would likely inherit their parents land and that I should consider marrying one of them.

They even promised me their home and farm to attract an even larger land-owner and often told me we could join the two farms

and later they followed through and gave it to me.

I did get some offers from two of those men and never knew if my parents put them up to it, I never asked, as the answer might be embarrassing.

I know half the county knew of my Dowry, especially from my father when he had a few pints in him but also from my mother.

Most parents were not in favour of educating daughters back then because women ended up marrying and taking care of the home and family but I held tough to my plan.

I persuaded them to pay for the uniform and let me go to the Convent of Mercy in Tulla, about four miles away.

However, I left there after my second year as it would take five years to the Leaving Certificate and my mother was harassing me.

Somewhere, I heard of a year-long course that was run in Limerick City where girls were trained to do office work. I decided that was for me and went to live with an aunt there.

Soon after, my parents began the ten-mile journey to Limerick selling their animals and they would meet me and bring me to Hogan's Restaurant where all the farmers ate and I loved my food so I went with them.

Again and again, they were introducing me to the other farmers and telling me who they were and who had the most land, etc. but I told them I would never milk cows but my mother would say, "with your dowry ye will be able to hire help."

She tried everything to get me home and take a position in a local shop and save my wages to increase my Dowry, as the more money a girl had the larger the farm she could marry into, but I ate the free dinner and pretended I was listening when in fact I had no interest in their suggestions.

While I loved my parents, and missed them when I moved to Limerick, I did not succumb to returning home.

I loved the Commercial Course I was doing in Limerick. We learned typing, shorthand, and book-keeping and when completed I got employed immediately as a secretary to a local steeplejack company.

Though living with an elderly aunt who was kind, loving but controlling, my real life began at sixteen and I was happy.

I had expected to work in a grand office downtown in Limerick but instead I was in a builder's yard in a makeshift office that did not impress me one bit but when I dis-

this allowed me to return quickly to my office and impress my employer.

That was the beginning of my climbing career as a steeplejack (Steeplejill). It was unusual back in early 1960s to see a woman climbing tall chimneys, working on church roofs or even being on a construction site.

I was very happy there for six years and it was only when my employer died suddenly I discovered my inner strengths and started my own business.

I had just married John O'Mahony a member of the Garda Síochána, and at twenty-three, being my own boss, I became aware of my unusual situation.

Climbing and site work did not sit well with me, so I often dressed as a man just to go unnoticed.

I felt that everyone presumed I should be at home looking after my family and my home but I had my opportunity and I took it. That, of course, could have been the way I saw things but when I engaged with customers and fellow employees nobody said anything, instead they simply offered to help in every way.

I knew a good deal about the steeplejack business after typing quotations and sending invoices and visiting sites but I had employed very qualified steeplejacks in any case.

When John was off duty from his garda work, we would carry out contracts just the two of us. I remember he would grit blast with our new machine and my job was to keep the pot filled for him.

I always tucked my hair underneath a man's cap and I wore a man's overall and a heavy buttoned up coat so no one took a blind bit of notice whether I was a man or a woman.

However, that was not always the case as I would be staying in Bed and Breakfasts and some people found that it was strange for a woman to be away from home and pregnant. I got noticed once when working in Kinsale Church, County Cork and luckily got the attention of the media.

I was invited onto the Late Late Show with Gay Byrne on two occasions and with Ireland only having one television channel myself and my business became known all over Ireland after that show.

On my first appearance, I was heavily pregnant when I climbed the church and on that same night Stanley Baker and Phyllis Diller were on.

I was petrified but she helped me greatly and when she went on she spoke about me and announced that I was going to have a baby and the audience gasped at seeing the video of me on ladders.

Though I was twenty-five years old I was very nervous being on television for the first time and telling my story publicly.

My climbing story was on newspapers and magazines, followed by other television appearances as years passed.

To this day, the media are interested in writing and taking pictures of steeplejacks climbing up the sheer face of a building, a fact that we appreciated because we could not afford to pay for that type of advertising.

Steeplejack work is not as plentiful now due to the tall chimneys being demolished. It is becoming a dying trade since the introduction of hoists and cranes. ☺

Next week, in part two of this autobiography, Angela continues her story detailing the continued development of her business, her work in building a golf course and her drive to overcome any hurdles in her way and become one of Ireland's most successful business-women.

