

## HIDDEN GEMS AND FORGOTTEN PEOPLE

### ANTRIM HISTORICAL SOCIETY



**STEVE McCOOKE (d. 2007): Athlete**

Steve McCooke was born and grew up in Armoy, spent his working life in Antrim and retired to the Ballymena/Broughshane area. Steve and his brother Charlie were members of the East Antrim Harriers in Ballyclare. It was Charlie who introduced Steve to the sport of athletics but this wasn't until he was in his mid-twenties, married and the father of three children. The brothers had to make the journey of over 35 miles from Armoy to Ballyclare, either on foot or by bicycle at least twice a week to train and compete. In Ballyclare they ran in several Cross-Country races in an afternoon, consisting of distances of three, five and ten miles. After the races, they had their 'shower' in the Six Mile River, before making the return journey back to Armoy.

There are startling differences between athletic competitions today and those of the 1940/50's. Then, athletes had no training facilities or personal coaches. Steve trained himself around the roads and fields close to his home. His wife Jeannie cycled with him as pacemaker, covering distances of up to ten miles a night. On one training session, Jeannie cycled the ten miles and then went to the Massereene Hospital, where she gave birth to their son, the following morning. One of Steve's training spots was a field owned by a local farmer. He had calculated that the distance around the field was exactly one mile, so he ran around the field ten times, much to the farmer's annoyance. The farmer used to chase after Steve, wielding a pitch fork, but he never managed to catch up with the champion runner.

Another of the differences was that there were no prizes of money when Steve was competing. The prizes were usually household items such as cutlery, china and clocks. This meant that Steve was much encouraged by his wife to enter multiple races of an afternoon as she delighted in these prizes.

Steve gained his first Irish International vest at Ayr in the 1945/46 season when competition resumed after the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War. In 1948 he ran in the six-mile event in the A.A.A. event

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at the White City in London, where he won the Bronze Medal. This win gained for him a British Vest in the six-mile event against France and led to him being selected for the 10000 metres event at the 1948 Olympic Games at Wembley Stadium, where he competed against the renowned Emil Zatopek. Steve must have impressed, as Zatopek, in his book, devoted a half page to his fellow competitor from Northern Ireland.

One other difference between then and now was that there was no sponsorship and that wages were not paid when they were absent from the work place, competing for their country. Steve recalled that in 1948, he went to London with 30 'bob' in his pocket and was there for fifteen days of Olympic Competition. When he returned home, his wife asked him for two shillings to buy some food, but all that was in his pocket was tuppence – all that remained of the 30 'bob'!

Steve McCooke's motto was "run as fast as you can for as long as you can". He certainly did this, achieving much along the way, during an impressive career in Athletics. He held virtually every distance record in Irish Athletics for distances between 2 and 10 miles. In the mid 1950's his participation in events lessened a bit, but he did not retire, he just kept on running to keep fit, even well into retirement he could still move at a fair pace.

Steve McCooke died in March 2007 at an advanced age.

### **Josie Herbison**