



Heritage Newsletter

Issue 5

The Beach Donkeys and Ponies

Kate Murphy interview with Fern Gibson (nee Edgar)

My family kept the donkeys and ponies on the beaches in the summer months. There were eight donkeys and six ponies – four went to the West Beach and the others to the East. We lived in Croc na Mac but they stayed in the fields where the Catering College was built at night. I have a cutting (I think it's from the Belfast Telegraph) of me sitting on a donkey when I was about 18 months. When I was older I was put in charge of the animals at the West Bay.

After the donkeys' rides were finished I kept one, Rosie, for my daughter. Alan McFadden wanted to borrow it one time for the raft race, to dress up and pretend to look for buried treasure on the beach. I got Rosie brushed up and took her along the promenade but she wouldn't put a hoof on the beach – it wasn't her beach – she was always on the East Strand!

People might have thought we were cruel making them do all this hard work but in Sept, when the beach work finished for the year and they were back in the field, they got bored. They used to break out but we went through the fields at Ballywillan and found them. One time some of them were missing overnight until some children found them standing on the beach where they were used to giving rides.

We had one character of a donkey called Joey. The preachers used to come down to the beach with their accordions. They stood there about half way between 'Teas and Ices' and the steps. When Joey saw them coming you could have seen his stomach expanding and when they started to sing he started to bray! One day, it was very busy and Joey went missing – he was in and out through the preachers trying to get his nose into their handbags.



West Strand from left girl on donkey unknown, Claire McIntyre, Janet Fleming, Margaret Haslam



One Scotch Week there were two wee ladies, two wee bandy-legged ladies (I can see them yet!) a carrying their baskets up the beach. Joey saw the baskets and took off after them. He was used to Mammy feeding him when she came down every day with our sandwiches. Well, when they saw the donkey running, they ran too and we had to run and get Joey back again

My father got Joey from an old horse dealer in Coleraine called Pongo McIlreavey. Pongo said he would race. In those days there was a donkey derby at the Coleraine Show. Pongo came down before hand with corn and Guinness mixed up, expecting the donkey to eat that. Well, Joey went to the Show and wouldn't put one foot in front of the other never mind race! Donkeys are not stupid by any manner of means. David Broome, the show jumper said, 'If you ask a horse to do something it'll go ahead and do it; if you ask a donkey, it'll think about it first'. If they didn't want to go to the beach some days they might have run and stood in a patch of nettles. They knew we didn't like nettles and it was difficult for us to get them out. Joey lived till he was 13.



East Strand

I stayed with the donkeys till I joined the Civil Service at 18 when I went to Belfast. I never left Portrush though – I made sure I was home every weekend!

Interview with Fern Gibson (nee Edgar)

Our thanks to Kate and Fern for this excellent contribution.

Portrush Heritage Group

April 18th 2020