

## L'Atelier Studio by Patricia Gray (Lee)

(from David Martin's 'Portrush Tales' blog)

My family name is Lee – maiden name sounds so old fashioned!! – my married name is Gray – but when I lived in Portrush, I used my full name, Patricia Lee. I am the 4th generation of the Lee family of photographers in Portrush, who had the L'Atelier studio on Main Street, and am the last. I tell here of the end of that era.



Billy and Winifred Lee outside L'Atelier Studio 1960

It was the evening of Tuesday 3rd August, 1976.

We were living in the house in Dhu Varren. I was home from Uni, with a summer job in the Vehicle Licensing Office in Coleraine. It was the week before my 21st birthday. I got the bus home about 5pm and had arranged to meet Mum and Dad, that's Billy and Winifred Lee, in Main Street to get my present for my birthday – a gold bracelet, in Rohdich's. I went back to get changed and was just about to set off when I got a call from Mum. They were in Albert Rohdich's house in Kerr Street. The police had passed them a warning message – Albert had brought them and quite a few others to stay with them in Kerr Street, until they found out what was going on.

Mum told me that they had got a shout from the police through the front door in Main Street, telling them to get everyone out as quick as possible. The call was for real! Mum ran to the back of the house, alerted Dad, then ran up the back stairs, alerted Billy Logan, then ran and checked that the tenant in the front flat was away. Dad grabbed his two main cameras, and Mum picked up the negatives from that year's NUU graduation, and the photo order book, and put them in her basket – and that was the sum total that survived from that 29 roomed house.



“As the evening went on, I got the call from Mum to say everything is fine, they were safe. And then the bombs started going off.



Looking from East Strand past Arcadia to back of Main Street

From Dhu Varren, I could see the palls of smoke appearing. As I watched from Dhu Varren, the whole peninsula glowed red. It really did!

Later that evening, after all the explosions, the police directed the cars out of the town, from Kerr Street and Lansdowne down and along the West Promenade – the cars went down the hill by the old lifeboat house, along the west prom and out through the Dry Arch. A bizarre sight, to see headlights moving along the promenade.... Later on, my friend Dorma and I met up and we walked as far along Salisbury Terrace as far we could. You could feel the heat of the fires. After that I went home and waited for Mum & Dad to walk up.

Mum & Dad got back around 11pm. Dad decided he would walk down into the town, approaching from the Arcadia / East Strand. Needless to say, Mum and I went with him! I remember clearly standing near the old paddling pool, and Dad talking to one of the firemen. He explained where L'Atelier was, and the man told him, it had totally gone, because they had used it as a firebreak for the rest of the street. Another issue, the



fire engines ran out of water and were taking sea water from the Ladies bathing place – but the pump kept blocking with seaweed.

The worst of the fire was caused by the old Picture House. When it had been converted into an amusement arcade, all the old cinema seats and stuff were still there, under a new false floor. That together with the old half-hoop tarred roof meant it was a tinderbox. However at the time we felt very lucky because if they hadn't managed to get everyone out in time, both my parents could have been in there. There was a device at the front of the building, pretty much under where my Mum was, and another at the rear, where my Dad's printing room was... “

Anyway after that Dad decided to head to Dunluce Car Park, to try and retrieve our car. When he was challenged and told there could possibly be more devices, Dad's reply was – They have got everything I own tonight, they're not getting my car too! A bit foolhardy, but I totally understood his sentiments, and I would support them even today.

The firemen told Dad that evening that L'Atelier formed a natural firebreak for Rohdich's, Ross's and Bruntsfield House and the other shops further up the street. Next door, what was once the Picture House, now Sportsland, acted as the reverse – as mentioned earlier, it was effectively a fire lighter, with lots of open space, and flammable material...

The day after, both Dad and I went up with Derek Ross to the top floor of Bruntsfield House (No 44/46) and looked back onto the ruins of number 38, Main St. – L'Atelier.



38, Main St. L'Atelier

And then after that, it was down to business. Dad found premises across the street, above the off licence. It wasn't great, the building had been in disrepair – let's just say there was a lot of pigeon guano in the top storey!

There was a lot of work to do, and architect's drawings and paperwork to prepare, and many delays before the compensation came through.

That activity tided Dad over until retirement but his heart was not really in it.



It was tough times overall, bad timing for us. My brother Martin had had a fatal road accident, his first day of university at the NUU, only 4 years before, and it was still so hard for the family and my Dad especially. And for Dad and Mum's Silver wedding anniversary later in the autumn, they had planned a trip to London to identify places to sell all the old cameras – they had heard there was a huge interest from Japan.



Billy served on Lady Scott Lifeboat in the 60's Pictured with fellow crew members. Back row L to R: Gilbert Chambers, mechanic; Fred Williams, assistant mechanic; Mr. Noble Ruddock, RNLI District Engineer. Front row: J. Stewart, second coxswain; B. Lee, bowman; Mac O'Neill, crew; Robert McMullan, coxswain; Robert McMullan, Jnr.

So much was lost. I do not exaggerate when I say that virtually nothing had been thrown out of Main Street. Even down to the old stands, with chin supports that held your head steady, when you had to 'freeze' for your photo. (Mum used the chin supports as mounting irons and heated them on the gas stove!) There was a vast old cast iron press for mounting photographs. Put the photos in, wind this huge handle, on a spindle, wait x minutes then release. Not quite child labour but when things were busy, both my brother and I were pretty adept!"

But from all that store of 100 years of photography, all that survived were those two main cameras, the negatives from that year's NUU graduation, and the photo order book, that they carried out.

Portrush Heritage Group would like to thank Patricia for this very moving account of the day Portrush's Photographic History went up in smoke.

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