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'WHEN AN OLD MAN DIES, A LIBRARY BURNS'

- Innovative project records the life stories of some of Ireland's oldest citizens

The unique memories of some of Ireland's oldest citizens are being documented as part of an innovative new initiative in the West of Ireland.

An independent and voluntary group of young history enthusiasts from County Clare have formed Cuimhneamh an Chláir - the Clare Oral History and Folklore group - which aims to tell the story of Ireland's Banner County through its oral history and folklore.

The group members have set about digitally recording, documenting and archiving the memories, experiences, customs, traditions and practices of the county from the local population's own perspective. Cuairteoirí or Volunteer Recorders have already conducted twenty interviews with Clare's older generation including two 105-year-olds, one of whom passed away just two weeks after her life story was recorded.

Cuimhneamh an Chláir has developed an ambitious three-year strategy, which includes an overseas programme aimed at identifying and recording the stories of Clare natives who immigrated from Ireland during the last century. The strategy, which commences in January 2009, also features Day Care Centre reminiscence projects; a comprehensive oral history collection based on such themes as Ennis Traders and seasonal customs in Clare; and a derelict ruins project where the stories of old ruined houses are illuminated through audio recordings.

The group aims to use the recorded material to create an enhanced awareness and appreciation for the lore, customs and tradition of Clare by hosting a series of educational initiatives with community groups, schools, third level institutions and the broader public.

"In recording these life interviews, the group is motivated by a sense of urgency, mindful that our current elderly population may represent the last link to an older way of life in Clare", commented group member and County Councillor Pat Hayes.

He expressed his hope that Cuimhneamh an Chláir would be both a successful project of documentation, but also one of cultural renewal. *"As a councillor attending funerals on a regular basis, I personally have become aware that every day we seem to be losing our final connection with an older and fading way of life in Clare. The memories of these people are a unique record of what Clare was like in the past, and once lost can never be retrieved. Due to the lack of any official response to the urgent task of recording these memories a group of mainly young people, conscious of this loss within their own local communities came together to establish a countywide initiative that will address this issue in a co-ordinated, strategic and comprehensive way",* added Mr. Hayes.

Project Co-ordinator Tomás Mac Conmara explained how Cuimhneamh an Chláir had opted to refer to volunteer recorders as Cuairteoirí as a conscious reference to the traditional practice of social visiting known as going "on cuairt". According to Mr. Mac Conmara, *"Going on cuairt involved visiting houses in the locality where stories would be told, and often poems recited, songs sung and music played. As one of the primary aims of Cuimhneamh an Chláir is to ensure the continued survival of such traditions we feel it is*

appropriate to refer to the ancient visiting practice in our work".

Explaining the motivation behind the group, Mr. Mac Conmara said: "*We are witnessing the end of an older way of life and as individuals we could not sit by and let this last tangible connection to our past be lost. At the very least, as part of the younger Clare generation, we feel we owe these people the respect to visit them, ask them about their lives and listen to their stories*".

Since Cuimhneamh an Chláir's formation in February, members have been invited to make a presentation at the first national Oral History summer school in the University of Limerick. The group also opened the renowned Kilkee Civic Trust Lecture series last month.

Cuimhneamh an Chláir are looking to speak with elderly Clare natives who are living in other parts of Ireland. The group can be contacted through their website at

www.clarememories.ie,
by email at clarememories@eircom.net
or by calling Edel Greene on
087-9165916.

-ENDS-

- Tomas Mac Conmara **087-2764980** is available for interview and further comment
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