

No 145—W. J. SPAIN Of Commercials

By SEAMUS O'CEALLAIGH.

ONLY eight men, in the seventy years since the G.A.A. was founded, have succeeded in winning All-Ireland medals in both hurling and football.

The first claim to such greatness was hammered in the initial All-Ireland senior football final, in which Limerick Commercials beat Dundalk Young Irelands, 1-4, to 0-3.

One of the Limerick players was W. J. Spain, who two years later had the honour of being the first player to prove his mastery in both codes, when he helped Dublin Kickhams beat Tulla (Clare), 5-1 to 1-6, in the 1889 All-Ireland senior hurling final.

Actually, he won his renown in consecutive championships, for, owing to the "invasion" of America by G.A.A. athletes and players in 1888, the championships for that season were not played.

Thus, in the second decided championship, the record was set that only seven others have succeeded in emulating down the long years.

WON WITH TWO COUNTIES.

And only one of that seven won with two counties, as W. J. Spain did. He was Dr. Pierce Grace, who took football laurels with Dublin, in 1908, and afterwards captured three hurling titles with his native Kilkenny—the years, 1911, 1912 and 1913.

Two Wexfordmen gained the "double" as the result of the 1910 hurling defeat of Limerick. They were P. J. Mackey and Sean O'Kennedy, who subsequently helped the Slaneysiders in winning the football Blue Riband—Mackey doing so on four occasions—1915, 1916, 1917 and 1918; O'Kennedy three times successful, 1915, 1916, and 1917.

Frank Burke was the only man to win at least two in each code. He helped Dublin in the 1917 and 1920 hurling finals, and was with the same county in the 1921, 1922 and 1923 football finals—all of which they won.

Cork boast three of the eight dual champions—Willie Mackessy, who won in 1903, in hurling, and in 1911, in football; Derry Beckett, 1942, in hurling, and 1945, in football, and last, but by no means least, Jack Lynch, with the biggest collection of the lot—five in hurling, 1941, 1942, 1943, 1944 and 1946, with one in football, the year, 1945.

WAS TOWER OF STRENGTH TO COMMERCIALS.

Like many of his colleagues on that first great Limerick Commercials side, W. J. Spain was employed in the drapery trade in the city. Born at Moanfin, Nenagh, he spent his early football years in Limerick City and was a tower of strength to the Commercials from the very start—and that start predated the actual foundation of the G.A.A. by almost twelve months.

He participated in all the great games of the early G.A.A. days by Shannonside and was a familiar figure every place the Commercials went—and they travelled far, considering the limited facilities available at the time.

Shortly after the great victory of the Limerick lads in securing the first All-Ireland senior football title, a number of the players left to seek a living elsewhere—and included in the batch was W. J. Spain, who went to take up a position in Arnott's, of Dublin.

What Commercials was to the young lads entering business life in Limerick, Kickhams was to the Metropolitan youth, and when W. J. Spain moved to the capital, the Kickhams soon claimed him. He entered as enthusiastically into the work of Gaelicisation by the Liffey as by the Shannon, and was one of the best of the Dubliners that day against Clare.

WORK FOR THE GAMES IN AMERICA.

In April, 1890, he left for America, and continued there his good work for Irish games, then fighting an uphill battle for recognition in the big cities of the Americas.

An outstanding achievement recorded to his credit across the Atlantic took place at Madison Square Gardens, New York, on December 13th, 1890, when in a Gaelic football exhibition he scored two goals and five points for his team—New York Gaelic. And it is interesting to recall that J. Connery, who remained in America following the 1888 "invasion" played in the same game.

W. J. Spain was a hard worker and was not long making his mark across the broad Atlantic, becoming in time, one of the richest silk merchants in New York. And that he did not forget Ireland is evidenced from the fact that he brought over many of his neighbours and found them good employ-

ment in the silk business.

It was many years afterwards before the Central Council provided the medals for the teams who won the first titles. The Council was in debt for several years and the American "invasion" did not help matters, incurring a heavy financial loss instead of the expected profit.

ARRIVED LATE!

When eventually the medals were received in Limerick only three of the original selection were still in the city—Thomas McNamara, Patrick J. Corbett and Michael O'Loughlin. Nine had died—P. Reeves, J. Mulqueen, Patrick Kelly, Robert Normoyle, Thomas Keating, William Guiny, Philip Keating, Richard O'Brien and Patrick Treacy.

With W. J. Spain in America there were also Timothy Fitzgibbon, Malachi O'Brien, Ned Casey and Denis Corbett. Mick Slattery was in Australia and James Purcell was in the Philippines. In Ireland, we find Timothy Kennedy and Ned Nicholas, in Dublin, John Hyland, in Cork, Jeremiah Kenny, in Gort, and Thomas Lynch, in Kilcomman. The whereabouts of one—Willie Cleary, could not be traced.

HECTIC DAYS.

The early G.A.A. days in Limerick were hectic ones as far as football was concerned, and it is on record that the only defeat the famous Commercials suffered in that great first championship campaign was at the hands of another Limerick City club—St. Michael's. They were great rivals this pair, and played some memorable games when the G.A.A. was young.

On their way to the 1887 final, played at Clonskeagh; then a remote village on the outskirts of Dublin, reached by horse tram to Ranelagh Angle—now well in the city area and partly occupied by Browne and Nolan's factory; the date, April 29th, 1888; Commercials ousted Dowdstown (Meath), Kilmacow (Kilkenny) on a replay, and Templemore (Tipperary), also on a second meeting, and in the decider, which proved a grand game, in which Young Irelands (Louth) employed the hand to toe style to an exceptional extent, the Limerickmen triumphed by 1-4 to 0-3.

A press report of that first great All-Ireland football final demonstrates the part W. J. Spain played in bringing the title to the Shannon.

A REMARKABLY GOOD TEAM.

"To Din Corbett, the Commercials owe a good deal for their victory, as his splendid play in goal, together with his admirable generalship, contributed largely towards it. The Commercials team was a remarkably good one, there not being what could be called a weak man on it. Where everyone worked so well it is almost a pity to mention any particular names; still, I think that not one of the team will feel aggrieved by my picking out two who beyond doubt distinguished themselves in no small way. One of the two is W. J. Spain, who blinded the Dundalk goalkeeper and backs on such an extraordinary manner when he scored the only goal of the game, and the other is no less a personage than that football wonder—seventeen years old Malachy O'Brien, whose name is a household word in the South of Ireland.