

WAR IMPLEMENTS WERE NEVER USED

Hundreds of Rifles Bought Forty Years Ago for Fenian Invasion Ruined in Fitzgerald Fire.

Buried under a bewildering heap of debris which resulted from the burning of the former home of the late John Fitzgerald has been found a reminder, pathetic to every Irishman, of the failure of the Fenian movement in 1868 to establish a republic in Ireland, independent of the British government on a basis of universal suffrage and religious liberty.

This melancholy relic of the crushed hopes of many an ardent Irish patriot is in the form of a secret armory containing some 600 or 700 stands of arms of the very best manufacture than in service, the Springfield rifle, still considered a very effective weapon. These arms are reputed to have been totally ruined by the recent fire, but of that no authentic information has been obtained, for they are still buried, it is stated in the ruins.

But such of them as remained buried for so many years for obliteration by the fierce conflagration, but a part of the large consignment, the purchase and secretion of which were evidences of the deep solicitude which John Fitzgerald in life entertained for the future of his native land and the love that inspires the hearts of Irish patriots everywhere whenever confronted by suggestions of their racial servitude.

It is now something like forty years since John Fitzgerald came into possession of some fifteen hundred stands of arms that had been purchased for use in the ill-fated invasion of Canada as the initiative whereby the society, known officially as the Irish Revolutionary Brotherhood, expected to carry revolution into England and secure the freedom of Erin from English domination. Just when the guns were received by Mr. Fitzgerald or the exact details of how the guns were exact details of how he came to get them, is more or less a matter of tradition among his former acquaintances, but it is known that it was shortly after the failure of the Fenian invasion of Canada, and that it was as a patriot bent on preventing the confiscation by the English or United States government and to save the cause from the disgrace that would attach to non-payment of its war debts, that he came to the rescue with his then already ample means.

Authorities differ as to the original organization of the Irish Revolutionary Brotherhood, but it is conceded that the plan of the organization was drawn in Paris by a small group of Irish revolutionary exiles in 1843. The Irish society was organized in 1853 by James Stephens, who traveled through the oppressed land and organized the disaffected centers into a powerful conspiracy. Its work was necessarily secret, and purpose was to convert the Irish people into efficient soldiery capable of resisting the British army.

At about the same time the American society was organized by John O'Mahoney, according to arrangements originally made in Paris, but it did not obtain a really good footing until the arrival of Stephens in America in 1853. The subject of the American branch was to supply money and arms for the army of Ireland, and the ability to bear arms was not here made an essential of membership. O'Mahoney as head center appointed all of the subordinate officials, which included those whose service was to be of a military character, as well as those who were to conduct the affairs of the organization in this country. In 1865 a great Fenian convention was held in Chicago, by which the office of head center became elective, and the American branch extended rapidly into Canada.

The civil war in the United States gave the Fenians a great and coveted opportunity to obtain military training. A large proportion of the Irish soldiers engaged on both sides of the great conflict were Fenians, and at the end of the war there was a formidable number of trained soldiers ready and anxious to take up the war for the liberation from bondage of their native land.

It was then believed in Irish circles that a definite understanding existed between the federal government and the Fenian leaders to the effect that after the war in Mississippi was ended the Fenians should receive material assistance. When the Irish officers from this country went to Ireland to take up the training of the soldiery there they found the organization not sufficiently advanced for active military measures, so that the chief hope of the revolutionists

turned upon the American soldiery enlisted in the cause.

Meantime the British government had kept itself informed of the movement by the aid of spies and informers. In 1865 it suddenly suspended the writ of habeas corpus in Great Britain and caused the chief leaders of the Brotherhood to be arrested in Ireland. Stephens escaped from prison and fled to America, where he was made head center.

It was in 1866 that a proposed invasion of Canada was organized with an army of 10,000 men, but only 500 men crossed the border. They defeated the Canadian militia, but had to return to the United States on account of the failure of the organization to provide them with reinforcements and supplies. Their leaders were arrested by the American authorities. In 1867 a daring attempt to seize the arms stored in what the selection has designated as Chester Castle without giving its location, was thwarted. Meantime the uprising in Ireland was vigorously suppressed and the Fenian invasion passed into history as a failure, although another attempt to raid Canada was suppressed by the United States government in 1871.

Acquaintances of the late Mr. Fitzgerald state that it was just after the failure of the first expedition that he came into possession of these guns. Tradition has it that Ed. Fitzgerald, a brother of John, was a captain in the Fenian invasion, as was also the late John O'Rourke, who in the early '60s, was mayor of Plattsburgh and who died there nearly twenty-five years ago.

According to the information available a shipment comprising 1,500 rifles was made to some point on the Canadian border where it would be ready for the equipment of soldiery that was expected to come that way in reaching Canada. But owing to the adverse conditions that prevailed the soldiers never came and the arms remained for some time thereafter in secret storage. Finally an appeal was made to Mr. Fitzgerald, then a resident of Plattsburgh and engaged in profitable railroad contracting, to pay for them and the charges for freight and storage, so as to get them out of the way of capture. This he did, and in due time the rifles were received at his home in Plattsburgh and placed in secret storage there. All of these transactions were conducted with the utmost secrecy to avoid unpleasant complications with the government.

When years later he removed his home to Lincoln he brought his guns with him and stored them in the basement of his spacious home. Little was said about either the guns or their whereabouts, although there has been a tradition current in Lincoln for many years that Mr. Fitzgerald had somewhere hidden away a large number of firearms bought for the Fenian invasion.

However, when the cadet battalion was organized at the state university some years ago Mr. Fitzgerald found a great deal of pleasure in supplying the arms needed. Not infrequently also he, during his life, and members of his family and business circle since he died, have taken pleasure in presenting a gun to a friend now and then, some for actual use and others as mementoes of a celebrated lost cause.

A gentleman whose relation to the Fitzgerald family is close says that there were probably between 600 and 700 of these Springfield rifles in the basement of the fine old mansion when it burned some weeks since, and that they are still there, buried in the ashes and probably ruined. It is also said that the insurance policy on the house included the articles listed as insured "firearms." It is stated that the widow of Mr. Fitzgerald has effected a settlement with the insurance companies for the loss, but that it is not quite definite whether or not any specific calculation was made as to the figure which these old guns cut in it.

It is probable, however, that John Fitzgerald was more than compensated in life for the expenditure of the many thousands of dollars to save these old guns from falling into the hands of the hated enemy, for the bestowal of so many firearms which it must have taken to receive this relic of a lost cause was doubtless responsible for much of the reputation he acquired among patriots for great liberality in behalf of his motherland, which reputation secured for him the honor of becoming head of the Irish National League many years afterward.

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