As Féile an Phobail approaches its 30th anniversary, we begin a monthly series of articles on the festival beginning with Ciarán de Baróid’s memories of a festival that would become the forerunner to Féile

Originally, the idea was to have been a Ballymurphy festival but in line with efforts of the time to cement the eight housing estates of Ballymurphy, Springfield, Whitrock, Westrock, New Barntle, Moyard, Dermott Hill and Springfield Park into some form of coordinated community development project, it was decided to extend the festival to include all eight estates. In an effort to bridge some of the then unresolved political divisions within republican areas, all shades of opinion agreed to participate in the organisation and operation of the festival.

In these days there were no grants for events like this. Yet, the idea immediately captured the imagination of everyone across the eight housing estates. The dates were set for August 12-13, 1973 and a magnificent organisational effort got underway. Every community group and facility in the area became energised. Events were planned centrally by the festival committee and they were planned by everyone else at the local level - down to the very streets. Even Fred Bess’s annual summer play, “Theatre in Absence” was absorbed into the whole. A huge billboard, it was decided, would be erected above the Ballymurphy ‘Bullying’ shops. Using a pegboard and large moveable letters, the events of each day could then be advertised for all to see. (Admittedly, there were a few unspecified messages up in the mornings, but generally, the board was spared abuse.) Money was raised locally and from a small number of outside sponsors, and prizes were bought. And, with no any prompting, the women began to make hundreds from old clothes - first one street, then another, until the whole area was festooned in an ocean of fluttering colour. Then the planning committee decided the question of military activity.

“We can’t have children playing in the streets and bullets flying everywhere,” 18-year-old Kate McNamara said. “There needs to be a ceasefire.”

“It is everyone in agreement with that,” Charlie Heath from Westrock asked. Charlie was chair of the committee.

“Agreed,” Jenny Gleeson from Glenalna Park said and everyone nodded.

“Well, that’s simple,” Steve Pittam, then a ‘Féile an Phobail’ Community Committee member, said.

“We can call out the IRA and the GDF and the Free State Army. They know they are the problem in the area. They have to come together. Steve, a Quaker volunteer based in Moyard, had been one of the men who had brought Mr. Hugh Mullin’s body off the street after he’d been shot dead by British paratroopers during Internment week in 1971.

“The IRA won’t be a problem,” Steve Pittam said. “They can talk to some people about the place here and they’ll sort that out. That just leaves the Brits.”

We all agreed that “just was a great word. But Frank continued undaunted. “We need to send someone up to the Gortag to talk to the Mayor.”

“I wonder who could send?” Charlie Heath asked.

“You! Frank said without hesitation. “The best person to send is always the chair.”

“Whether that be you or not or not, we all agreed, and Charlie was dispatched off to the Gortag the very next day. An hour later he came back.

“That place is very bad for the brave,” he declared. “I’m never going back near it again.”

“What happened?” he was asked. “Well, I arrived, they wouldn’t open the gates. Then, in the end, when they let me in, I was brought into the Mayor’s office at gunpoint. ‘NAMN!’ the Mayor bawled as soon as I walked through the door. ‘My

Within a big parade. Well, it wasn’t really a big parade. The Liam McParland Accordion Band, two of whose members had been wounded by loyalists from Springmart the previous May, came marching up the Whitrock Road, followed by a couple of hundred people. Frank Cahill’s wife Tessa and Ann McCarthy, whose partner Pat died in Ballymurphy during Internment week, were there. Gerry Finnegan, the previously Meath-based local community development officer was there, stripped to the waist and white as a ghost, with his great beard shorn away.

Steve Pittam was there with a small crowd from Moyard, carrying banners, flags and a couple of whistles and balloons. It didn’t look like much, but it was the beginning of one of the most participative events the district would ever see. Since then, there have been many festivals, but apart from ‘Upper Springfield’ Mark two, the level of community participation has never, in my opinion, been equalled or surpassed.

There were no great props and there was no fancy equipment. People clapped their hands or blew a whistle to start the race. At the end of the race, two people held a piece of string. To accommodate the kids’ parties, families brought chairs and tables from their homes, made cakes and buns, and seated off the streets with buns so the kids could have them for themselves. In the clubs there were old-time waltzes and dance and pensioners’ nights and bingo. There were guider races and tugs-of-war and fancy dress. The street theatre put on by Fred Bess’s playgroup was led

through the district by a painted clown in a bowler hat. In the women’s netball tournament, Big Alice Franklin of Ballymurphy turned out a scary team dressed in white shirts, knee-length woollen socks and short, red pleated skirts, who beat the crap out of all opposition to take the coveted cup. At the Bonny Babies competition, the judges shuffled their feet and the organisers had been made, or were.

There were music nights and debates and painting competitions and 16mm-movie screenings, including the historical classic, Miss Rite. And some enterprising young people cracked open the fire hydrants in several streets to provide fountains in which overheating kids could dance. Unfortunately, there lingered no great photographic record, but the photos that do exist show a community determined to give it the best, while the massive netting that far exceeded the offerings as the days progressed. And while people in their thousands spilled from their homes to pack the streets. They also became part of the new unified social movement that eventually had more than eight voluntary community strengths and groups looking after the needs of a single square mile. And they kindled the idea of a West Belfast festival which was attempted in 1975 but didn’t have the organisational spread needed to make it the big success that had been hoped for. However, from little acorns grow mighty oaks... Féile an Phobail would come in its wake.

This article is part of the Queen’s University Féile an Phobail History Project