



**CLARE  
TRAVELLER**  
COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT PROJECT

# *“Understanding Traveller Culture and Heritage”*



*A handbook from  
Clare Traveller Community  
Development Project*

# A Starry Flag

by Helen Hutchinson

Wrap the Starry Flag around me for I am Irish too  
for me my people's namesakes are part of history.  
There's McCarthy's and McDonagh's, Quinn's and Casey's too.  
A sublia juel and darlingt, don't ignore us now will you.

Joyce's of Connemara, a big part of our clann.  
Proud to be Travellers, to be part of this land.  
The horses and the wagons may be gone but there again  
it takes more than this romantic look to be a Travelling man.

All our trades are gone now, they died a death so hard.  
Just like a bullet from a gun, never to be revived.  
Made now dependent on the dole to live from week to week  
an independent people that the system made so weak.

Gone but not forgotten are the times of long ago  
but you don't have to be on the road to be a Traveller.  
So a proud man from proud people, some of our lifestyle saved  
for my children and their children. Our traditions we will hold.

There's enough of our history dead. I miss the camps  
and us singing around the fire. But I remember all the rebel songs  
handed down to us through mouth.

The Gammon is our language, now too mostly gone.  
The system did a job on us, banned us from travelling and moving on,  
in this a caring country a land we call our home.  
Wrap the Starry Flag around me for I am Irish too.

\*\*\* Sublia juel means precious boy, and darlingt is a term of endearment

## INTRODUCTION

### The Irish Traveller Community: Our Culture and Heritage and Life Today

This handbook was written following a pilot project run by Clare Traveller CDP. Funded by Solas Learning Works. The project was a *'train the trainer'* programme where a group of Travellers from Clare attended a series of workshops to learn to deliver training on Traveller Culture and Heritage to any group that might need it in the future. In these workshops we heard from invited guest speakers from around the country and shared our own knowledge of our Traveller community's rich culture and traditions.

Some of the people who took part in this project told the story of hearing their own children come home from school and ask *'Mummy, what is a Traveller?'* or *'Dad, who are the Travellers'* and having to answer them by saying *'you are a Traveller sure'*. We found that often our own children first came across the word Traveller as a bad or a negative thing. With the work we've put into this project we are helping to make sure our community in Clare will be able to give all our children a better answer to the question *'Who are the Travellers?'* An answer that builds their pride and confidence and grows their sense of identity and belonging.

We also took time to examine the situation for Travellers in Ireland now. Travellers nowadays are successful up to the very highest levels in sport, in education, in the legal and other professions, in business, politics and in theatre, literature, poetry and the arts. Despite this though, because of the way society is set up and because of the way the Irish state treated the Traveller community over the years, many Travellers do not get opportunities to develop to our full potential.

Our Traveller families in Clare experience levels of poverty, inequality, homelessness and discrimination that make it very hard for them to get ahead in life. The fact that so many of our young people are now doing just that is a tribute to their talent and strength of character.

One of the greatest successes for the Traveller community is that our identity and culture have survived at all even though there have been so many attempts to erase us. This guide is to help you understand Traveller's culture, history and our current reality. We hope that it will help all people who read it learn that Travellers are a unique and precious part of Irish society and of society in County Clare.

One thing to say before you read on though, is that while Travellers share our culture, heritage and origins, we are also very different from each other with different tastes, preferences, interests and lifestyles just like any other group. Our culture isn't a fixed thing from the past; it is living and changes over time like all cultures: we make the road by walking.

You will find some *'generalisations'* in this handbook -that's where we say something as if it applies all Travellers in Ireland. We use this only to help the reader understand common traits and traditions in the community, not to try to say that all Travellers share one view or opinion. We definitely don't. The easiest way to learn about Travellers in your community is to get to know us as neighbours, as colleagues and friends. Or, if you're shy, you could listen to our songs, read our stories, poems and articles, listen to our podcasts, go to see our plays, our photo exhibitions and watch our films. Travellers always brought the news, songs and stories with us wherever we went and even though times and methods have changed, we are still doing it today. There is a list of some of these on the last page of this handbook.

We hope getting to know us like this will make you want to become an ally of the Traveller community and that you will work to help us thrive into the future instead of having to struggle to even survive.

**Bridgie Casey**  
**Coordinator**  
**Clare Traveller Community Development Project**

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## Part 1: Who Are the Irish Travellers Mincéirs or Pavees?

Let's get to know the Irish Traveller Community.

Imagine a unique nomadic cultural group with a long, rich history, living within and alongside the settled community in Ireland, the UK, and much further afield. That's the Irish Traveller Community.

The origins of Irish Travellers are a subject of debate but we are an indigenous minority group, like Native Americans, Sami, Inuit, Maori people of New Zealand or Aboriginal Australians. Where it gets a little confusing is that *'indigenous'* means native to a place and in the case of Ireland both Travellers and settled Irish people are indigenous to Ireland. In many places where nomadic groups of people or people with distinct cultural practices are *'indigenous'* this word is used as a distinction between the descendants of colonial settlers (people who came from other countries and took control) and the original people of the land. Australia, New Zealand and the USA are some well-known examples of this. In Ireland, because both the settled and Traveller people are indigenous, the Traveller community is now usually referred to as an ethnic minority population. This means that while Travellers are fully Irish citizens, as Irish as anyone could be or has been, we also belong to a minority within the wider Irish people and we have a distinct identity as well as our Irish one. Some aspects of our history, lifestyles, traditions, beliefs and cultural practices are unique to us. In fact, it was discovered recently that Travellers even have a *'microbiome'* that is different from other Irish people and from most other populations in the world except for a very few groups which did not experience *'industrialisation'*.



### What's a microbiome?

The microbiome is the collection of all microbes, such as bacteria, fungi, viruses, and their genes, that naturally live on our bodies and inside us. Although microbes are so small that they require a microscope to see them, they contribute in big ways to human health and wellness.

### What is industrialisation?

Industrialisation is a word used to describe how a society changes from a peasant or farming type economy to one that uses more machines and technology and has factories. These changes also mean people tend to move to live in towns and cities and move to being employed in formal jobs and paid wages rather than self employed or a craftsperson (Tin smith etc).

### It's in the genes:

Genetic studies tell us that Travellers had already diverged (spilt) from the settled population approximately 12 generations ago. Other theories which were widely believed and taught until recently suggested that Travellers are people who became landless during the Great Famine in Ireland (1847) and went on the road, or that we were related to the Romani or Roma people who originated in India and migrated over centuries all the way to Northern Europe. It now appears from the genetic studies that neither one of those theories is correct.

The DNA evidence has shown that it is much more likely that Travellers date back to well before 1650 in Ireland because at that stage they were already genetically distinct from the settled community. In Irish folklore, legend and poetry there are lots of mentions of communities like the Traveller community living alongside more settled groups so it really is possible that our heritage is much more ancient than we know for sure yet. We get further clues about our heritage from our own language.

## Part 2: Mincéirtoiree / Traveller's Talk

In the Irish language Travellers are known as *'An Lucht Siuil'* *'the walking people'*. In Traveller's own language which can be called *'Cant'* or *'Gammon'* depending on which strain of the language is used, the names for Traveller are Mincéir or Pavee. In books or official documents you might sometimes see Cant or Gammon called *'Shelta'* but this is a word that named the language from outside, not one that was traditionally used by Travellers ourselves.

Cant or Gammon is an ancient language, possibly dating back as far as the time of the Ogham stones (around 2000 years ago or more). It shares some characteristics with old Irish, the form of the Irish language that was spoken up until around 1200 AD. It also contains some elements now of modern Irish language and the type of English spoken in Ireland.

There are a few reasons that this language is not widely known and why its importance is often misunderstood. Firstly, it was an oral language, passed between generations without being written down as far as we know. Secondly most of the people who first began to study the language were not Travellers and to make it even harder, many of them didn't speak Irish, let alone the old Irish from which some parts of the language came.

The existence of the language and its survival to this day tells us of the long history of the Traveller community and how cultures change over time. In the last section of this handbook there are some links where you can hear a song in Cant and read more about the language itself. You can try these phrases below for yourself:

### Some phrases in Cant/Gammon

ARE YOU GOOD? Ar munya dil? /Ar munya hu?

I'M GOOD Mydil Tome/Munya

WHAT NAME DID YOU TAKE? Munika Bug astúrt, lit?

TAKE A CUP OF TEA Bug a gushach weed

I'M PROUD TO BE AN IRISH TRAVELLER Mydil Mincéir tashler

WILL YOU GET ME A CUP OF TEA? Will ya Bug mí'dil a gusach a weed

MAKE SOME SPACE Crush mier (move over) and Bug mí'dil nomera (give me room)

## Part 3: Some key things to know about Travellers:

### Travellers are an Indigenous Ethnic Minority:

In 2017, after a long campaign led by Traveller organisations, the Irish government officially recognized Travellers as a distinct ethnic group within Irish society. This wasn't just a symbolic gesture; it acknowledges that our unique identity, history, and culture are a valuable part of Ireland's story. Some people in the Traveller community are disappointed that this 'recognition' hasn't been accompanied by the investment in our community that is badly needed. At the very least though, this recognition should mean that no policy will be made again that tries to take the 'Travellerness' out of Travellers.

### Taking the 'Travellerness' out of Travellers: Assimilation as state policy:

#### What does assimilation mean?:

Cultural assimilation means when a smaller group like Travellers changes their culture to fully take on the values, behaviours, beliefs and customs of another usually bigger group – in this case the settled community

#### The Report of the Commission on Itinerancy 1963.

The Report of the Commission on Itinerancy 1963 is the Irish State's first policy document that is supposed to be about Travellers. It followed three years of studies and research carried out by 'The Commission' which began in 1960. There were no Traveller members of the commission, instead it was made up of representatives of Local Government, health and education professionals, judges, farmers and religious orders.

While they might have been well-meaning, right from the beginning they saw Travellers as a problem for the settled community instead of looking at what Travellers themselves needed or had to offer. One of the main lessons anyone who does community development learns is 'nothing about us without us'. This Commission hadn't had that lesson and they made really serious mistakes in their recommendations that have harmed generations of Travellers and nearly wiped out any possibility for Travelling or nomadism.

Their key approach was to try to make sure that Travellers were 'assimilated' or absorbed into the main population- that the traits and practices that make Travellers unique would be buried or prevented until they were gone altogether. When Travellers talk about the Government trying to get rid of or wipe out Travellers this is what we mean. Most of the policies the state has adopted since then have also aimed at 'settling' Travellers. They haven't worked, but still they have done huge intergenerational harm to the community. In some cases Travellers even had their children taken away to be raised in settled foster families or industrial schools so that they could be influenced to be more like settled people.

Attempts by the Government to take a more informed approach did begin twenty years later with the Report of the Travelling People Review Body 1983, and the Housing Acts that were adopted between 1988 and 2002 recognised the need for Traveller Specific Accommodation and said that local authorities should provide it. However these acts also provided the laws through which Travellers in unofficial sites could be 'moved on' by the authorities and criminalised 'trespassing' on both private or public land. We want people to remember that at the time these laws were brought in there were more than 1000 Traveller families living in unofficial sites because of a lack of other suitable accommodation. The criminalisation of 'trespassing' on public land also made nomadism almost impossible and this brought many Travellers into conflict with authorities such as Local Councils and the Gardai and damaged trust between them.

There has been an ongoing crisis in accommodation and homes for our community since then. As Travellers often say, there has always been a housing crisis for Travellers.



**Travellers are not just people who are "homeless" or "itinerant" or 'failed settled people'** Being a Traveller is an **ethnic and cultural identity**, not a lifestyle choice or a result of economic hardship. Our identity is deeply rooted in our DNA, our family connections, traditions, and our history going back at least twelve generations.

**A proud and resilient people:** Travellers have faced, and continue to face, discrimination, hardship and attempts to 'assimilate' us into the general population. However despite all this our culture remains strong, vibrant, and proud. Imagine what it could be like if Travellers were accepted and supported as ourselves?

**The Importance of Nomadism:** While many Travellers now live in settled housing, the cultural value of travelling and freedom of movement remain powerful. The roadside is not just a place to stop - it's a cultural space for family and community connection and to gather news. There were networks of stopping places dotted all over Ireland and Clare until very recently. Many of these sites are now blockaded with boulders or barriers and have bylaws prohibiting overnight parking. Trespass laws and forced assimilation have largely ended the possibility of being nomadic for our community. Many of us still travel during the summer and many more would do so if it was possible or affordable.

The choice of some Travellers to live in extended family groups on halting sites or in group housing schemes is linked to our cultural heritage. Many of these places though are substandard and located in positions away from wider society and often enclosed behind high walls. This makes them unattractive to many Travellers.

The Traveller Approved Housing Body CENA has done a lot of work on trying to design and develop culturally appropriate housing in cooperation with Travellers. They want to demonstrate to Travellers and to the Irish Government and to County Councils that housing and accommodation can be comfortable, healthy and modern and still be culturally appropriate for Traveller's needs. Here in Clare in 2024 we worked with CENA on a Traveller Housing Needs Assessment. This is the first of its kind to be done in a county and it was done on a Traveller to Traveller basis where the needs today and needs into the future were recorded. We hope that this will help to deliver good housing for the Traveller Community in Clare.

**Remember: Travellers are not defined by whether we live in houses or trailers or whether we travel around, we are a distinct cultural group with a very long history, and our own traditions, language and identity no matter where or how we now live.**

## Part 4: Work and Livelihoods

### How did Travellers Survive?

As we said already we don't have a single date for when Travellers "began." For centuries, Travellers played an important role in the Irish countryside and economy. Our ancestors, including our grandparents and some of our parents moved from place to place, depending on work, the seasons, on religious and family occasions, and lots of us also attended Ireland's traditional fairs. We offered services that settled people needed such as:

**Tinsmithing:** Mending and making pots, pans, and utensils.

**Horse Trading:** Buying, selling, training and caring for horses.

**Farm Work:** Seasonal work like harvesting.

**Recycling:** Long before it was common, Travellers collected and sold scrap metal and other materials.

**Crafts** – such as lace and paper flowers.

**Door to door** sales, hawking and market-trading at fairs.

**Music** – Traveller musicians were renowned all over Ireland with many of our best being household names.

**Change comes:** With modernisation many traditional trades weren't needed so much any more. People began to use plastic instead of tin and cars instead of horses. Public education became common and Irish society became more urban (living in towns and cities). This meant that Traveller communities' traditional ways of earning a living for our families became harder. At the same time, Irish governments came to see Travellers and our ways of life as a problem to be fixed rather than just a different way of being. As we said before policies (rules and plans) made by these Governments often tried to "settle" Travellers, sometimes by force, without understanding or valuing our nomadic culture. Even when Travellers weren't settled by the state, they found themselves being moved on and barred from stopping places and not welcomed alongside the new urban communities that were being developed.

**What do we know so far:** Travellers have a long history in Ireland, we have our own language, we were skilled at many necessary trades and had a nomadic way of life that was once essential to the economy. We brought news from place to place and traded goods. This way of life became much harder as a result of modernisation. Bad government policies were made and enforced by people who didn't understand that they would do Traveller communities lasting harm by trying to force them into a different way of being and living.



## Part 5: Trauma

This lasting harm is known as 'trauma' and can transfer down through generations in many ways. For example if parents suffer poverty and insecurity or were made to feel shame in their identity, or if they had bad experiences in school and weren't allowed to be part of society it can be really hard for them not to pass on these feelings to their children. That's why you will sometimes hear Traveller advocates speak of 'intergenerational trauma'.

There are now Travellers who have qualified in social work and social-care and they are bringing their knowledge to their communities to try and end the cycles of trauma. Travellers have also worked to establish our own dedicated Traveller Counselling Service and there is also a new National Traveller Mental Health Network, which was also set up by and for Travellers. One of the cruellest things about trauma is that it often turns inwards and causes conflict within communities as well as depression and addiction - you've probably heard the saying that 'hurt people hurt people' and while this is not always true of course, Travellers have had to learn to deal with conflict within our own communities. One great response to this which has come from our community is the development of the Traveller Mediation Service which helps us manage and move on from conflict and also trains up mediators from within our community.

However unless discrimination from the wider society is stopped this cycle will continue and it makes the lives of Travellers much more difficult than they should be. To say it bluntly: bad government policies and widespread social discrimination are harming Travellers so much that we have a mental health and suicide crisis on our hands in our small community.

**Traveller women are six times more likely to take their own lives than women in the settled community and Traveller men are seven times more likely to do so.**

This means that even though many Traveller parents themselves have difficult lives to manage because of the discrimination we face, we still will have to work extra hard as parents to bring our children up with pride in their identity and to be secure and confident in themselves.

The government and all state services must understand that a Traveller is not 'a failed settled person' and that our culture and heritage are valid, living and precious. It must set about fixing the damage that has been done to our community by investing in proper suitable housing, education and health services. As you can see above Travellers and Traveller organisations are already doing our part, we just need the state and society to work alongside us as equals.



### Discrimination:

*“Travellers and Roma face the highest levels of prejudice of any ethnic group in Ireland, according to new ESRI research on attitudes to social groups.”*

New ESRI research finds high levels of prejudice against Travellers and Roma in Ireland | ESRI

*“Travellers are more than 22 times more likely than white Irish to experience discrimination in shops, pubs and restaurants.”* Dr Verene Shepherd, ECRI\_report\_FR

In a 2023 large-sample survey only 53 per cent of respondents surveyed said they would be comfortable living beside a member of the Traveller community. Roma communities received the same score.

Only those with alcohol addiction, those with drug addiction issues, those with convictions for violence and those with convictions for drug dealing came below Travellers and Roma in this survey.

In the same survey when asked if they would be comfortable with their grown-up children being in a romantic relationship with people from more than 30 different categories of people, Travellers were the third from the bottom, again scoring just above people with alcohol or drug addiction. Only 43 per cent of respondents said that they would be comfortable with their grown-up child being in a relationship with a Traveller.

The survey further found that 67% of people felt that Travellers would be at a disadvantage when it came to employment. This was the highest per centage with all other categories of person being perceived to be less at a disadvantage than Travellers.

Survey on People in Ireland’s attitude towards diversity

A separate survey demonstrated that no serving member of An Garda Siochana had a positive view of the Traveller community.

Gardaí have negative view of Travellers, survey finds – The Irish Times



## Part 6 Family & Community

For many Travellers our families are the most important thing. When Travellers talk about our families we don’t usually mean what settled people would call the ‘nuclear’ family that is, two parents and their children living alone together.

When Travellers talk about family we tend to mean a more extended family than this, where we have very strong bonds and connections with parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts, sisters, brothers and cousins. Travellers are usually very loyal to our families through thick and thin. There is a lot of respect for older people in our communities where we feel they have wisdom and experience and knowledge of the old ways. Children are precious within the Traveller community and they are really cherished. They receive a lot of attention and love from the wider family as well as their own parents.

### Social lives:

The wider Traveller community is closely knit. News travels fast, and people look out for one another. This strong network provides a powerful support system, especially in the face of external prejudice. A lot of our socialising takes place around family or religious occasions. Weddings, Christenings, Christmas, St Patrick’s Day and other such occasions.

Traditionally some of the key horse fairs such as Cahirmee and Spencil Hill, would have been great get togethers where Travellers from all over would catch up with each other or young people might meet future husbands or wives. At Ballinasloe Fair and Appelby Fair in England this still happens. Travellers traditionally travelled over and back between England, Scotland and Wales and journeyed north to the six counties as well, they weren’t constrained by the borders of the Irish state. In Clare horses are not as strong a pursuit for Travellers as they are in some other counties with only a few families having a strong horse tradition.



Travellers of course socialise in loads other ways too and given that the community is young and lively, you will meet young Travellers everywhere from the gym, to the nail bar, to night club, the restaurant or bar, and on sun holidays and city breaks around the world. Young Travellers in particular are very fashionable and many love dressing up well and looking well. Young Traveller women can spend hours on their appearance and many are trained or training in beauty services.

Sometimes settled people say that Travellers tend to stick to ourselves. This is often because we don't feel welcome in some of the places in wider society. In fact here in Clare, even though this is illegal under the Equal Status Acts Travellers are frequently excluded from sports clubs, bars, bus services and hotels. This is not because of our personal behaviour but because we are Travellers. When we walk up to the door of a place we always have to wonder if we will be allowed in and this is a very uncomfortable feeling and it can be really embarrassing when it happens even though it is not our fault.

In a focus group with Traveller men in Clare where they talked about this they said it gave them feelings of shame and anger and that often they gave up trying to socialise or they would hire a marquee to socialise where they lived. While many successful cases have been taken by Travellers to the Workplace Relations Commission which hears the cases under the Equal Status Acts this is also unpleasant and not what Travellers want when they go out for a night out or a family celebration.



#### What is the Equal Status Act?

The Equal Status Acts 2000-2018 are laws that ban discrimination in the provision of goods, services, accommodation, and education. They mean that it is illegal to treat people worse because of their age, disability, race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, family status, marital status, or membership of the Traveller community. A kind of court called the Workplace Relations Commission is able to investigate and fine companies that break these laws and to award the fines to the people who experienced the discrimination. This hasn't prevented discrimination from happening but it does help to make businesses aware that it is illegal to discriminate. At the moment there is a proposal to make the fines bigger and if this happens it might work better but the settled culture needs to change significantly too.



**Demographics:** Travellers are a growing population, although we still number less than 1 % of the Irish Population, our numbers grew 6 per cent between the last two censuses. Travellers are also a very young community compared to settled people, with a much higher share of young people. This is for a few reasons, one is a positive: Travellers still have larger families and more children than the settled or country people. Traveller households have an average of 4 people in each family whereas Settled households have 2.7 people. 36% of all Travellers in Ireland are under the age of 15, whereas only 20% of the Settled community are 15 or under.

The second reason is less positive, it is because Travellers, on average have shorter lives.

The average life expectancy for Traveller men is 61 years. That's 15.5 years less than men in the general population.

The average life expectancy for Traveller women is 70.5 years. That's 11.5 years less than women in the general population.

To demonstrate this, in the general population 15 % of people were over 65 in the 2022 CSO Survey, but only 5% of the Traveller community were. This means we are missing 10% of our older people and all that they would contribute to our families and culture. We put this down to discrimination, poor living conditions, poor accommodation, poor standards of education about health including mental health and sometimes it is also due to poverty and trauma.

## Part 7: Religious Faith and Beliefs

The majority of Irish Travellers are Roman Catholics. Faith plays a central role in daily life, marking important events like births, first holy communions, and marriages. Pilgrimages to holy sites like Knock and Croagh Patrick are also common as are trips to pray or leave momentos at Holy wells. Many Traveller families regularly visit the graves of their relatives who have died and maintain them as part of their family culture. Lots of Travellers also go to international pilgrimage sites such as Lourdes and Medjugorje.

Some Travellers are also now joining born again evangelical churches or may have become part of another religious group through marriage or choice, but we don't know how widespread this is, and of course there are Travellers who don't practice any religion or hold any strong faith.



St Brigid's Well, Liscannor, County Clare

### Traditional beliefs, wells, cures:

Many Travellers have strong beliefs about the power of prayer and wear icons of religious figures or relics of various saints. Lots of these beliefs go back even further than Christianity does in Ireland. Christianity spread gradually in Ireland from around the 4th and 5th centuries and it replaced or overlaid the pagan beliefs that went before it. Many Irish people joined their pagan beliefs and Christianity together and so it not unusual at all that some of these earlier beliefs still exist in the Traveller community and in some of the practices of the settled community. There is a rich heritage of traditional healing practices among Travellers too, some of us hold strong beliefs in the healing power of water taken from holy wells as well as in herbal remedies prepared by traditional healers.

Some community members have knowledge of cures for particular conditions, such as thrush and warts. As well as these cultural practices most Travellers also respect modern medical care and we look for it as well as the other more traditional or spiritual cures.

We shouldn't forget that Irish people in general have superstitions or traditions '*piseoga*' that come from pagan or pre-Christian beliefs (if you don't believe us ask any Irish person to cut down a fairy tree!) but this is particularly strong in the Traveller community. This is probably because we were more connected with the land and old ways for longer than the settled community. There is a lot of wisdom in many of these old beliefs and superstitions and a lot of them may have been based on an understanding of the signs and symbols in the natural world that is mostly lost now. Even though we have a lot of scientific cures and technology now and we benefit from modern medicine, these old beliefs are not something to be forgotten and removed from Traveller culture or from Irish culture. They should be collected and passed on so that we know our history and don't lose precious knowledge.



Poulnabrone Dolmen

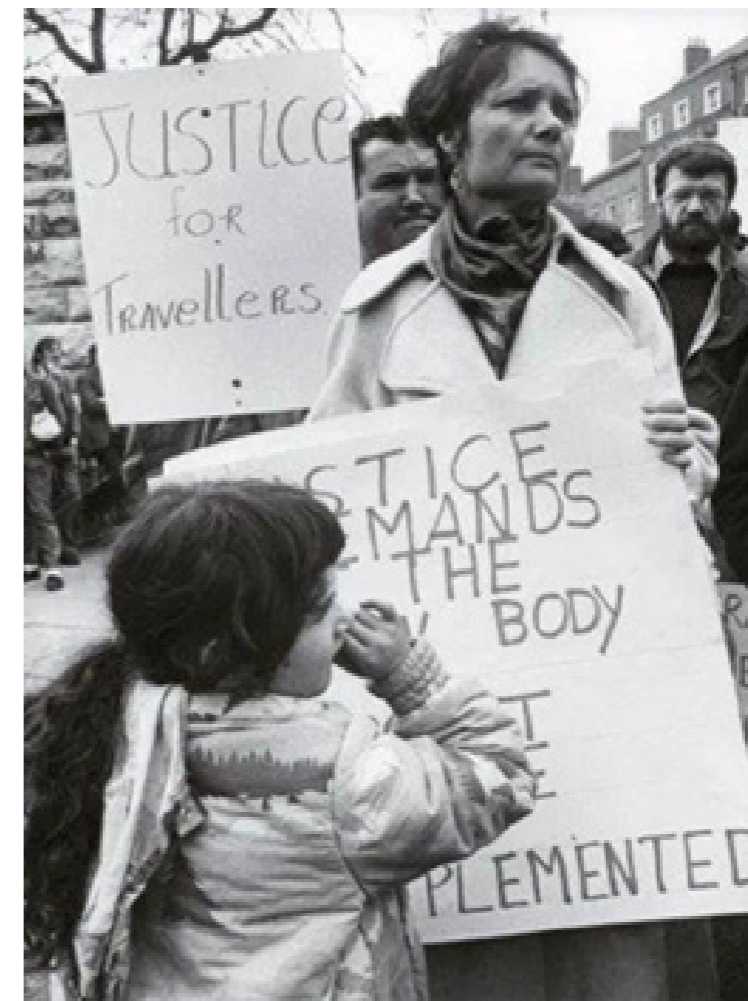
## Part 8: Facing Challenges

It's important that we don't ignore the challenges the community faces today and we've mentioned some of them already such as trauma and discrimination but we haven't talked much about Accommodation- which, along with the Traveller mental health crisis is one of the most serious issues Travellers are dealing with:

There is an urgent accommodation crisis for Travellers. There simply aren't anywhere near enough safe, culturally appropriate homes for Travellers to live in. We know that there's a general housing crisis too at the moment and we don't wish homelessness on any human, however the situation we are in began way before the current crisis and we are affected worse than any other Irish community by it.

Even though Travellers make up less than 1 % of Ireland's population we make up between 13 and 25 % of Ireland's homeless people.

Our organisations have struggled for decades to get Local Authorities to make proper use of the funding that is available from central government to build Traveller Specific Accommodation. Every year millions remains unspent even while our families are experiencing such high levels of homelessness and overcrowding. In some cases Travellers are still living in conditions where there is no sanitation or electricity. Travellers also face severe discrimination when trying to rent houses from private landlords and we often face opposition from settled communities if housing for us is planned in an area or if we are offered a house in a settled estate.



As a small minority, it is very difficult for Travellers to influence the political system even though we have had Traveller Councillors, a Traveller Mayor, a TD with a Traveller background and we currently have Senator Eileen Flynn as the first Traveller Senator. We need strong allies from the settled community to join us in our fight for accommodation. Traveller organisations have a great record standing in solidarity with other communities when they need our support. We need our allies to stand with us now and demand that the Irish state meets the housing and accommodation needs of all communities including Travellers so we can thrive into the future.

HOME PAGE / NEWS

### Protest over Traveller site like 'Alabama in the 1950s'

Equality Minister Aodhán Ó Riordáin has criticised people protesting against emergency accommodation for Traveller families caught up in the Carrickmines blaze, saying their views "remind me of Alabama in the 1950s".



HOME PAGE / NEWS

### House bought for Traveller family badly damaged by fire

Gardaí are treating as suspicious a fire at a building bought to house a Traveller family in Ballyshannon, Co Donegal.



### Traveller family 'devastated' after suspected arson attack on house



Set ablaze: A garda at the scene of a fire in an unoccupied house near Oranmore, Co Galway. Photo: Ray Ryan.

Home / Irish News

### Carrickmines tragedy: Temporary site for survivors blocked by residents



Residents objecting to the construction of a temporary holding site beside Rockville Drive where the Glenamuck Road blaze survivors are due to be housed. Photo: Justin Farrelly.

As Dr Sindy Joyce said "They don't want us on the roads, they don't want us on halting sites and now they don't want us in houses. Where do they want us to go?"

When Travellers have access to safe and secure accommodation that meets our needs our families thrive. Travellers have been campaigning ourselves for housing for a long number of years. Many of us remember Nan Joyce running for election in 1982 with advocating for decent homes for Travellers as a key part of her campaign for Traveller Equality. Yet we are 43 years later with the same problem still holding us back.

**Education is a priority for many Traveller parents.** More and more Traveller parents are prioritising education for our children, hoping to provide them with more opportunities. However, bullying and a lack of cultural understanding in schools can still be significant barriers. There are few teachers still from the Traveller community, and many Traveller children find themselves on a reduced school hours programme. Reduced school hours cause Traveller children to feel 'different' and be excluded from peer groups. They can reinforce stigma and shame and cause Traveller children to miss out on much needed supports and opportunities for education. Some Travellers have really excelled in Education over the last number of years with many Travellers now holding PHDs and Master's Degrees and many in fact being awarded honorary degrees for their services to education in the community. We need everyone to remember that each of these brave Travellers have done so against all odds and that only around 30% of Traveller children currently complete their leaving certs. Travellers need changes within the education system to support us in making progress and to end the practices that make schools a very difficult and unhappy place for many Traveller children.

There has been much work done by Traveller activists and academics such as Dr Hannagh Mc Ginley and Oein De Bhairdun which has led to a commitment in 2025 from the Department of Education to mainstream the teaching of Traveller history and culture in schools by including the topic on the curriculum. This will take a while to trickle through in Teacher training programmes to the classroom and so we ask everyone involved in education to make the effort themselves from now on even starting with training sessions and resources like this one.

### Employment nowadays for Travellers:

We already covered how the traditional ways for our community to earn their living became more out of date. We've also talked about how Travellers can struggle with the system set up to deliver education in Ireland. We also showed how the Traveller community experiences very high levels of discrimination. These three ingredients mean that Travellers find it very hard to find good jobs in Ireland and we have very high levels of unemployment. Like with education above, of course some Travellers have been highly successful in almost all professions and trades, proving that obviously that we can do it when we get the chance.

There is a lot of work and supports needed for our community in this area though. Many basic jobs now ask for lots of qualifications just to begin with, with professional roles often seeking Master's degrees for people to even start out in the field. Some young Travellers are now going on to Third Level Education (This means college or university or a college of further education) after school but this is still not anywhere near a majority. It can seem to young Travellers that even when they stick with their school education and get as far as their leaving cert that the goalposts have moved by the time they are finished. Although it is changing, the most recent figures tell us that only 3% of Travellers hold a primary degree compared to 52 % of the Settled Community, and that 61% of the Traveller community of working age are unemployed compared to between 4 and 5 % of the settled community.

There are programmes now for Traveller Apprenticeships and Civil Service Internship Schemes and these will help, but some of our community will need support to access and complete these.

We need great investment in workplace programmes, adult and continuing education courses and of course in Traveller social enterprises and self-employment. We also however need attention to be paid to what can become a 'social welfare trap' for Travellers. What happens is that a lot of the work available to Travellers is low wage and insecure. Many Travellers cannot make the decision to enter the workplace because they would not be able to provide for their families securely. While many Travellers who do work, do so part time so as not to affect their social welfare payments, this is unsatisfactory and often prevents their access to higher salaries or more secure positions.

These are policy issues that will have to be resolved at a policy level but in all our work in Clare Traveller CPD we can tell you that Travellers in our community are very keen to work and have good jobs. What we need are schemes that will allow Travellers to keep our homes, medical cards and social welfare while we transition to the workplace. There would be no downside to this given that once Travellers are working the state would benefit and our own families would be able to make their way out of poverty. We need work on making workplaces less discriminatory, bridging the education gap, and supporting Travellers into work.



## Part 9: Traveller Organisations

### Bridging Two Worlds:

Many Travellers have to balance their traditional community life and the wider "settled" world. They are business owners, teachers, nurses, and politicians, all while keeping their strong Traveller identity. Historically this has been difficult within the community with many of those who were able to make successful lives in mainstream Irish society having to cover up their origins or feeling shame about them. Traveller Pride Celebrations and Traveller Cultural Festivals and events are some of the ways the Traveller community has begun to build pride in our identity in a public facing way. Most of us were already proud to be Travellers and of our community privately and so the public celebrations are a way of bridging the gap and telling a different story about ourselves than the stories the settled community has told about us for generations.

Travellers have established a whole range of support and community development organisations in Ireland. In some cases these were established by working closely with settled allies and while these supports have been invaluable as Travellers the last couple of decades have seen us taking more control and in fact setting up some Traveller only organisations. The Traveller only organisations are not attempts to exclude any other community but rather are attempts to ensure that there are spaces where people who have the lived experience of being a Traveller in Ireland can bring their varied experiences, expertise and views to the table.

Most Travellers who work or volunteer in community development value both types of organisation as no community can do everything alone, however it remains necessary for the settled community to also examine how it contributes to or creates the discriminatory environment that Travellers live in as well as advising and supporting the Traveller community to make internal changes. Some of the key national organisations for Travellers are

- Pavee Point
- Irish Traveller Movement
- Minceirs Whiden
- National Traveller Women's Forum
- National Traveller Mental Health Network
- National Traveller Counselling Service
- Traveller MABS
- Traveller Mediation Service
- Traveller Voice (magazine)
- Exchange House Ireland
- CENA Approved Housing Body

There are also many locally based Traveller Community Development Projects like ours in Clare and these work locally to empower communities to claim their rights. Within the health sphere too, Traveller Primary Health Care Projects have provided connections and wellbeing and health supports and advice to Travellers around Ireland.

## Section 10: Our creative culture is thriving

The Traveller community has a spectacularly rich tradition of creativity, and today, Traveller writers, musicians, and artists are sharing our stories with the world. Folklore, storytelling and most of all, folk and traditional music in Ireland owe much of their existence to the Traveller community.

### Music:

This is not news at all to the people who are involved in those art forms and there is huge respect paid to musicians such as the Pecker Dunne, Margaret Barry, Johnny Doran, Finbar Furey and Thomas McCarthy, a traditional singer who has won the highest accolades in Irish traditional music.

Thomas McCarthy is the subject of a documentary 'Songs of the Open Road' as well as being the presenter and curator of 'Songline's' a documentary where along with filmmaker Pat Collins he travelled the country gathering songs associated with the Traveller community. Links to watch both of these documentaries are here:

[Songs of the Open Road: Songs of the Open Road- RTE Player](#)

[Songlines: Songlines- RTE Player](#)

Clare has a rich tradition too of Traveller musicians and singers with Kathleen and Mary Francis Keenan being talented and popular singers. Davy Keenan, from the same family is also a well-respected musician in high demand. Other well-known performers from the community include Trish Reilly, Steo Wall and Sharyn Ward both of whom bridge the gap between tradition and more current tastes.

### Plays and literature:

**Dr Rosaleen McDonagh:** A groundbreaking playwright and writer and activist. As a Traveller and a woman with a disability, her work powerfully explores themes of identity, discrimination, and feminism. Rosaleen is a member of Aosdana the national organisation that recognises excellence in the arts.

**Martin Beanz Ward:** Is a renowned comedian, TV presenter and playwright. Martin famously wrote his first play without ever having been to the theatre to see a play. Despite this it was recognised as an excellent theatre piece and was very well received by critics and audiences. Martin is a great advocate for the Traveller community and is also himself a member of the LGBTQIA+ community which makes his leadership extra important for people within and outside the Traveller community.

**Michael Collins:** Is an actor and playwright who was very famous in Ireland for having played the popular Blackie Connors character in the long running TV series Glenroe but who also starred and played supporting roles in more than ten other film and TV productions including the heartbreaking Pavee Lackeen. He also founded his own theatre company and wrote 'It's a Cultural Thing' a powerful play about being a Traveller in Ireland and was awarded a lifetime achievement award for services to the cultural recognition of the Traveller Community

**Oein DeBhairduin:** Is a writer, curator of traditions and a story teller. He wrote the beautiful book "Why the Moon Travels," a collection of Traveller folktales, helping to preserve and share this precious oral history. He currently works with the National Museum of Ireland as the Traveller Culture Collector. He regularly comments or provides expert advice on TV shows, radio and to many community and arts contexts in Ireland.

**Michael McDonagh:** Is a poet and memoirist. His collection "The Same Age as the State" and memoir "The House of an Irish Traveller" give great views on his life and times and the lives of our community

**Helen Hutchinson:** Is a poet who has published a beautiful collection of poems called 'From Dirt Lane' in which she reflects on life in Ireland and her upbringing. Helen's work has also been featured by Poetry Ireland for whom she also edited an issue of their magazine 'Trumpet'. Her poems and interviews have featured on the RTE Arena Arts Show and we are delighted to reproduce her poem on the last page of this handbook. You can also listen to a podcast with her here: [Helen Hutchinson - Bairbre Flood](#)

### Visual Artists:

**Leanne Mc Donagh:** Is a brilliant contemporary artist from the Traveller community. Her work including two series of work featuring the Traveller community 'Beoirs' and 'Macho Men', has been purchased and added to the national collections in both IMMA and the Hugh Lane Gallery. You can see her work in IMMA or browse some of it at this link: [Leanne McDonagh - IMMA](#)

We haven't the space here to list all the people who are making their mark on Irish culture from our community but at least those listed above will give you a flavour of how creativity is blossoming in our community. We hope you take the time to experience some of it.

### How can the settled community be better allies?

It's great that you are here reading this handbook, and great that you've probably come across it by doing a training session on Traveller Culture and Heritage. We know that one person can't change the years of discrimination, but we also know that one good person can change the minds of many. Travellers are working hard to change our own situations and to safeguard our culture and identity and we'd love your help.



Thomas McCarthy

### What is an ally?

An ally is a someone who gives support and help to another, often to a person from a minority community. A good ally works to end oppression and discrimination even though it might not affect them themselves.

**Use Respectful Language:** Refer to us as 'Travellers' or "Travellers" (with a capital 'T'). Avoid the old fashioned terms "tinker," or itinerant both of which are considered slurs. Avoid using other terms to refer to Travellers, some of which you'll know. These are hurtful and belittling.

**Challenge Stereotypes:** If you hear a negative joke or a stereotype, about any community speak up. If someone says some misinformation and you are confident, it can be good to gently correct them.

**See the Person, Not the Prejudice:** Treat every Traveller as an individual person not as a representative of a group or a way of life

**Listen and Learn:** The best way to understand is to listen to Travellers' own voices. Read books by Traveller authors, listen to our music, and follow our advocacy groups.

**Be an workplace ally:** In your workplace, school, or community, support policies and practices that are inclusive and fight discrimination.

**Be a friend:** Lots of Travellers who have worked in community development have the experience of being included in the workplace but then finding themselves outside the friendship groups that form in workplaces. We aren't saying that we can tell you who to be friends with, everyone likes different people and has different interests but do make sure that you are not excluding people from any particular community. It will make your own life richer.

**Final Thought:** A handbook like this can't cover a whole culture. Travellers like any group of people have many differences, we are LGBTQIA+ some of us have disabilities, some of us have intermarried with other communities and have mixed identities, races and skin colours. We want you to take this handbook as an introduction and we hope you continue to learn about Travellers. We are part and parcel of Irish culture and heritage and we are also unique. We hope our next generations have a great future and that it is one in which people can live as themselves without shame.



# Tinker's Lullaby

by Pecker Dunne

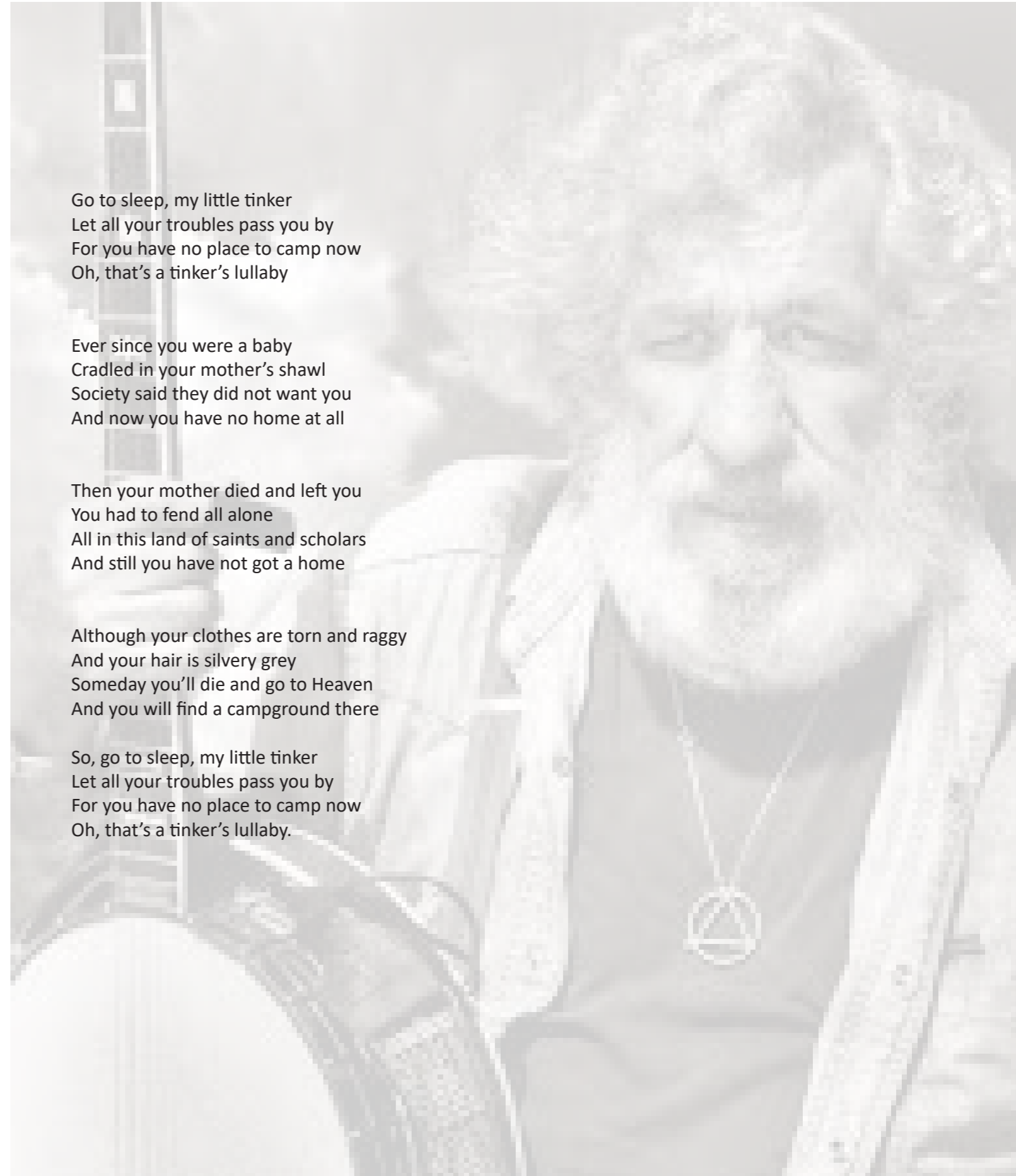
Go to sleep, my little tinker  
Let all your troubles pass you by  
For you have no place to camp now  
Oh, that's a tinker's lullaby

Ever since you were a baby  
Cradled in your mother's shawl  
Society said they did not want you  
And now you have no home at all

Then your mother died and left you  
You had to fend all alone  
All in this land of saints and scholars  
And still you have not got a home

Although your clothes are torn and raggy  
And your hair is silvery grey  
Someday you'll die and go to Heaven  
And you will find a campground there

So, go to sleep, my little tinker  
Let all your troubles pass you by  
For you have no place to camp now  
Oh, that's a tinker's lullaby.



# Sullivans John

by Pecker Dunne

Sullivans John to the road you've gone far away from your native home  
You're gone with the tinker's daughter all along the road to roam  
Sullivans John you won't stick it long till your belly will soon get slack  
You'll be goin the road with a mighty load and your tool box up on your back

There is a horse fair in the county Clare in a place they call Spencilhill  
Where my brother James got the rap of a hames and poor Johnny they tried to kill  
They loaded him up on an auld ass and car all along the road to pass  
Saying bad luck to the day that I went away to join with the tinker band

I met Kate Coffee with her neat baby behind on her back strapped on  
She'd and auld ash plant all in her hand to drive her donkey on  
Enquiring at every farmers door as on the road she'd pass  
As to where she'd get and auld pot to mend or where she might swap an ass

Sullivans John to the road you've gone far away from your native home  
You're gone with the tinker's daughter all along the road to roam  
Sullivans John you won't stick it long till your belly will soon get slack  
You'll be goin the road with a heavy load and your tool box up on your back



# When we were Happy

By Helen Hutchinson

When all of us were small, we had no toys at all  
But we had each other and our imagination.  
We'd have brainwaves of what in the name of God  
we could do to pass the time in the long days  
of summer and then winter would come in.

In summer bicycle wheels would do ran a stiff wire  
through the centre and down the lane with them we'd run  
We'd race up and down all day long the noise slapping the air  
like a haunted song, we'd catch wasps and bees and all  
in a jam jar, the lid held close to the petals, they'd fly into  
the jar and then we had one. We'd feed them flowers look on  
for a while in the wonder of what they were for. Then on come Daddy  
'let them go' he'd say 'they bring seeds to other flowers in May'

In evening our attention was turned to the wild bats.  
They flew to close to our heads for comfort. With long sticks  
we'd battle. Yea we fought. We thought they were out to scalp our hair.  
We didn't know how blind they were.  
Daddy let us play this game, then he talked about built in radar.  
We never did catch one.

We played skipping for hours on end counting to a hundred  
Until we'd nearly faint. In winter months we'd play cards.  
Snap was our favourite. Many's a battle we had I cheated on them  
They cheated on me. Simple times, way back then.

We'd sit through stories and songs by our elders.  
We'd be quiet as mice in case they'd corb us.  
The good old days, yes indeed they were.  
Young happy children clearly cared for.  
Sometimes we'd talk about way back then.  
An odd tear was shed but then again there's today.  
I can write, try to pass it on to our young ones  
as they might try and play the simple games we played.



## Appendix:

### Learn More:

We used a lot of different sources of information in this handbook. You can read the original sources here at the links below. There is plenty more of interest and to learn. We hope you enjoy them.

Traveller's own language: Cant/Gammon  
Listen here to some children speaking Cant  
<https://youtu.be/qOLnT-wMcIE?si=k3nxaf-Pt2apJDtQ>

Hear a song from AnneMarie Ward in Gammon/Cant at this link:  
<https://www.facebook.com/share/v/188RhELbmV/>  
You can read an article here from Oein De Bhairdun talking about Gammon or Cant  
<https://minceirportlairge.ie/heritage-culture/gammon-cant/>

A great article about both Gypsy and Traveller languages (they are different)  
<https://www.gypsy-traveller.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/GRTHM-Language-cards-2-1.pdf>

### History and Background of Irish Travellers:

This is a beautiful website that attempts to gather as much information as possible about the Traveller community through the years. There are some fantastic photo collections you can flick through here that show our community around Ireland Traveller Collection <https://travellercollection.ie/>

This is a very information filled piece by Dr Sindy Joyce about Travellers and how we have been treated by the state A Brief History of the Institutionalisation of Discrimination Against Irish Travellers - Irish Council for Civil Liberties [https://www.iccl.ie/news/whrdtakeover/#:~:text=Minc%C3%A9irs%20\(Irish%20Travellers\)%20are%20a,from%20the%20majority%20Irish%20population.](https://www.iccl.ie/news/whrdtakeover/#:~:text=Minc%C3%A9irs%20(Irish%20Travellers)%20are%20a,from%20the%20majority%20Irish%20population.)

An article about Traveller's Genetic Heritage: New Study on Irish Travellers Confirms Irish Ancestry and Estimates Split from Settled Community <https://www.sfi.ie/research-news/news/new-study-on-irish-travel/>

This is an article about the Traveller community's unique Microbiome: News | University College Cork <https://www.ucc.ie/en/apc/news/apc-news/what-we-can-learn-from-the-extraordinary-microbiome-of-irish-travellers.html>

### Laws and studies that affect the Traveller Community:

This is a list of some legislation that effects the Traveller community here Exchange House Ireland National Travellers Service [https://www.exchangehouse.ie/faq\\_legislationtimeline.php](https://www.exchangehouse.ie/faq_legislationtimeline.php)

Download the Commission on Itinerancy 1963 report here: Report of the Commission on Itinerancy <https://www.lenus.ie/entities/publication/c8a365d3-4cae-4387-b187-7d45647b14fe>

Download the Report of the Travelling People Review Body 1983 here: Report of the Travelling People Review Body <https://www.lenus.ie/entities/publication/017a788f-0b8c-443e-b723-8f4bfb99c739>

This is an article about the 1963 Commission on itinerancy which explains its effect very well "Those who do not understand history are condemned to repeat it" <https://itmtrav.ie/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/ITM-Review-of-the-1963-Commission-on-Itinerancy.pdf>

This is from Ireland's Central Statistics Office and it tells you the most recent figures for the Traveller community in Ireland Irish Travellers Census of Population 2022 Profile 5 - Diversity, Migration, Ethnicity, Irish Travellers & Religion - Central Statistics Office <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cpp5/censusofpopulation2022profile5-diversitymigrationethnicityirishtravellersreligion/irishtravellers/>

This is a report on the discrimination faced by Travellers and Roma in Ireland - Understanding attitudes to Travellers and Roma in Ireland | ESRI <https://www.esri.ie/publications/understanding-attitudes-to-travellers-and-roma-in-ireland>

This is a very good article which shows the links between deprivation, discrimination and Travellers Mental Health Crisis Irish Travellers 'mental health crisis' driven by discrimination and deprivation <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-61117469>

### Read More:

This is an article about a great Traveller woman's social enterprise Quite the yarn: From weekly knitting club to Traveller-women-led craft business – The Irish Times <https://www.irishtimes.com/ireland/social-affairs/2025/12/02/quite-the-yarn-from-weekly-knitting-club-to-traveller-women-led-craft-business/>

This is an art project that took Traveller Women's Beady Pockets as inspiration The Beady Pocket Project | National Museum of Ireland [https://www.museum.ie/en-IE/Collections-Research/Folklife-Collections/Folklife-Collections-List-\(1\)/Traveller-Culture/The-Beady-Pocket-Project](https://www.museum.ie/en-IE/Collections-Research/Folklife-Collections/Folklife-Collections-List-(1)/Traveller-Culture/The-Beady-Pocket-Project)

This is an article by Rosaleen McDonagh which considers how Love Hate showed the Traveller Community 'Love/Hate' breaks important new ground in portrayal of Travellers – The Irish Times <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/love-hate-breaks-important-new-ground-in-portrayal-of-travellers-1.1994402>

Thomas McCarthy links to two RTE Documentaries about him and the songs he sings and collects Songs of the Open Road: Songs of the Open Road - RTE Player <https://www.rte.ie/player/movie/songs-of-the-open-road-s1-e1/270598696372>

Songlines: Songlines - RTE Player <https://www.rte.ie/player/movie/songlines/512936488227>

You can listen to an interview with poet Helen Hutchinson here: Helen Hutchinson - Bairbre Flood <https://bairbreflood.org/2025/04/helen-hutchinson/>

You can see some of artist Leanne McDonagh's work here <https://imma.ie/artists/leanne-mcdonagh/>



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