

# Growing up

by June Howard Elias

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*June Howard Elias on the important influences of her childhood.*

THERE WERE FOUR THINGS THAT influenced me and other children in our younger years in the Rhondda: school, chapels, cinema, and home. From three years old you would go to the Mixed Infants School. From the very start, the emphasis was on the three 'Rs'; the ability to read, write (in pencil), and the times tables. By the time we left for Penyreglyn Junior School at seven years of age, girls and boys were separated. The system was strict and you had to be punctual – if you were late you would get a black mark on the register. After you started Junior School, you were encouraged to work hard in preparation for scholarships at eleven to county or secondary schools. I must say that our teachers were very dedicated. There would be singing and poetry and St David's Day would have performances in Welsh – all of which gave us a sense of strong identity rooted in our culture and heritage. The second big influence in my life was chapel. We had to go three times on Sundays; in the morning, then Sunday school, and again in the evening. But the chapel was also the place for social life with the annual summer outing by train to Barry Island or Porthcawl, the *gymanfaganus* and the operettas with all the colourful costumes. The chapel was a dominating force in the

life of people. There were, of course, public houses, but women never went into pubs, it was just the way it was. The cinema, or the pictures, was also very important to us children. In Treherbert we had the Gaiety Cinema. There would be the news reel, short films and a main film between Monday and Wednesday and films would change on Thursdays. It was like stepping into a world of fantasy far removed from the gas lit streets of our little mining villages. The pictures provided a great means of escape and were the highlight of my week.

The most important influence in my life, however, was the home and community. It was a rich environment to grow in despite the lack of material wealth. The warm coal fires blazing in the grates; the lovely cooked dinners by our mothers with gravy only the Welsh *mams* knew the secrets of. We had the freedom to play in the street or up the mountain; to go to the park after school or, in summer, to the baths. Sometimes we had ice cream from the Italian shops and pies and hot chocolate in their cafés. The fact that people lived in such close proximity to each other evoked a strong spirit of good neighbourliness. It was common for people to send a dinner over to someone on their own; such was the nature of sharing by those who had very little themselves.

It is hard to imagine in today's world of television, computers and Blackberries the impact the wireless had when it first arrived in the Rhondda. My father, Arthur Howard, was a Londoner who, when he married a local girl, decided to move to Wales and set up business in Treherbert selling the wireless. Fortunately he was of London-Welsh origin and able to speak Welsh fluently, which meant he was accepted by the community and approved of by his new parents-in-law. His shop in Bute Street called Gwalia Galleries was stocked with all the latest models being produced at the time and it also had a van for deliveries. When the shop opened in 1932, it signalled a radical change in the lives of the people as it opened up new horizons. They were now able to keep up to date about world events and tune in to programmes of entertainment. The wireless soon became the focal point of the family and would remain so until the television took over many, many years later.



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