

Memories from Treherbert

by June Howard Elias

To be born in the Rhondda is one of the most fortunate accidents of nature! Like most Rhonddaites, I confess to being rather parochial-minded, and think of Treherbert, the place I was born and raised, with special hiraeth. Nevertheless I feel a strong bond with my other Rhondda brothers and sisters, as we are all the siblings of our dear Rhondda *mam*, sharing the same rich heritage.

To have experienced a Rhondda childhood surpasses any man-made theme park that kids today aspire to for a brief visit of a lifetime. We had real mountains to climb, culverts to wade through, and lamp posts to swing on. We made our furtive detours through goolies, and caught crachons in tin cans from bubbling brooks with the same enthusiasm as Moby Dick! We rustled sheep as they wandered the streets rummaging through ashbins for the odd cauli stalk or succulent potato peelings.

Do the old familiar smell of childhood still exist? The aroma of freshly baked bread from Jim's Bakehouse, and from the neat linoleumed passages where the doors were never closed came th mouth-watering smell of the 'Sunday Dinner' which wafted over the back garden walls of the little terraced rows. And in the evenings, the air it seemed was pervaded with the pungent scent of chips, sald and vinegared nestling in last nights now very greasy Echo.

Sounds too still linger in my brain of miners' boots when dawn was breaking, silent now as the colliery hooters which were once as regular as any chantic-leer. From chapels came the voices in hwyl like angel choirs, and echoing from each village when the gymanfa ganu's were in full swing. The seasons brought their own special magic. Springtime picnics on Twmpyn-Teg surrounded by wild bluebells. Summers it seemed were always hot, and we basked beside the local swimming baths, our bodies brown and vibrant with vitality. Autumn

was golden, bringing to the valley its glowing reflection upon our grey little streets. But only in winter did our valley truly emerge as a wonderland when the black tips merged with the mountains in pristine white snow capped splendour and no alpine village could ever surpass its beauty in that brief encounter with nature.

My Valley

*I remember, I remember the place where I was born
The drone of pithead hooters that awaked us each dawn
I remember sheep astraying, gas lit streets so dim we'd quiver
I remember children playing, catching crachwns in the river
I remember chapel voices raised in hwyl like angels' choir
I remember black-lead ranges framing the back-kitchen fire
I recall the smells of childhood from the bake-house and chip shop
Sounds of boots when dawn was breaking, taking miners to the bus-stop
I still see the blue scarred faces coming home from hours in dark toil
To sun and wind and rain's embraces when they reached the welcom top soil
Yet my valley's ever blooming in my memory ever green
For beneat those black coal tips looming, lies the verdant hill I've seen
For just like clouds with silver lining, within grey terrace houses shining
Lived people who were kind and good, in my dear old Rhondda neighbourhood*

My great grandfather Simon Jones was a master mason who came from Cardiganshire in 1879, like so many others in that period to seek work. He then met my great grandmother, Eleanor, also a migrant from Cardiganshire and they married in 1875. They settled in Bute Street, Treherbert, where their two daughters were born. Some years later they opened a shop in the large premises they occupied in what was a prime position on Bute Square. It had a license to sell sweets and tobacco and also sold the general provisions needed by the growing population arriving to work in the mines.

In later years the shop passed to my grandmother, Sarah Ann Jones, a woman of great ability and immense vision who, with the assistance of her sister Mary, built a thriving business by adding china and other ornaments which were that popular at the time. She also became aware of the big demands for toys, especially at Christmas time and during that period the windows were lit up with a magical display of toys of all kinds for people to order in time for Christmas. It is worth mentioning that these were bought and paid for in advance by customers who joined the Christmas club. This is how people in those hard times were able to acquire things beyond the reach of their weekly pay packets – only by saving up.

Of course the corner shop was also a place where people heard news of deaths or a birth as well as local gossip that spun around like Chinese whispers. Both Welsh and English was spoken there and although my grandparents were predominantly Welsh, they soon adapted to the transition into English in deference of their customers' needs. Looking back I would like to pay tribute to the many shopkeepers of Bute Street who worked so hard serving individuals throughout the difficult times with an ever welcoming face.

I will always be grateful that my ancestors migrated to the Rhondda Valleys in the late 1800s because being born and raised in Treherbert formed the fundamental values that have helped sustain me over the years. But above all, it was the spirit of Rhondda people, whose wit, warmth and natural ability to shine through adversity that made the Rhondda unique.



Simon Jones' shop in 1934. June is the little girl on the left with the doll.

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Simon Jones' shop in 1904 with Simon's daughters Mary and Sarah Ann, John (Sara Ann's husband) and their baby daughter Nell Mary, June's grand mother. Image © June H. Elias