

A fold in the hills

by Mrs Phyllis Bowen

Phyllis Bowen was born in Clydach Vale in 1913 and today lives in Llwynypia. She has written many poems, one of them is buried in a capsule situated behind the statue on Llwynypia Road. In 1998 she won the first prize in a literary competition which was run by Swansea Council. Here she remembers life, people and places from her childhood in Clydach Vale.

Looking back over my childhood days in Clydach Vale, life was kind of utopia. Everyone were equal, there was no need to keep up with the Jones's, for the Jones's had nothing more than the rest of us. If you had a new rig out, the street would know of it and would also know where it came from. Front doors were always open and all through my childhood years, I cannot remember houses being burgled, and the fighting was done on Sunday mornings on top of the mountain, when the opponents were cold sober. The galling part of life in those days was the fact that poverty kept intelligent children from higher education, but libraries were taken advantage of for those of us who were eager to read and learn.

MY FAMILY AND HOME

My family consisted of my grandparents George and Ruth Anthony, my parents Arthur and Florence, my brother Sydney and my sister Muriel. My grandparents lived with us after my grandmother had suffered a stroke. My granddad, who we called Dat, was a dear man. He would repair all our boots and shoes in the little shed he had built in the garden; while he did any job he always had a clay pipe in his mouth. He worked in the Cambrian colliery as an ostler until he was seventy years old. In those days there was no set time for retirement.



Welsh was spoken in our house, and many Clydach inhabitants came originally from the rural parts of west Wales, there were also many families from Somerset and Cornwall. There was always cawl in our house made from fresh vegetable grown in the garden and my grandfather would fetch home a piece of beef which he would buy late on a Saturday night from the butchers who had a shop opposite the Bush Hotel. My mother made her own bread in a large earthenware bowl that we used to call a badell. The loaves were

baked in the old bake house in Wern Street. I was always fascinated at the sight of a little old man sitting on piles of small coal, smoking on his clay pipe and every so often he would shovel coal onto the fire which was under the huge oven at the bakery. To me there was an air of mystery about all this, as the old man seemed to be there forever.

Coal was delivered by horse and cart and tipped outside houses and then carried through the house in buckets, unless you had a back lane entrance. Ashes were collected every day, and with every house burning coal, there was always a conservable amount to dispose of. Sheep roaming the streets were always a problem, as they descended in droves from the mountains and caused chaos as they foraged in the ash buckets. Oil for the lams that lit our houses was delivered weekly by a trader by horse and cart. He also sold Welsh blankets, shawls, stockings and Welsh knitting wool.

LAUGHTER AND YEARS

As children, my brother, sister and I loved to cross the little bridge over the railway to play. Sometimes we took bottles to fill with water that came from the pump situated on the top of the street we called the Bush houses. At the other end of the street was a drift mine called Gorky Colliery and a chapel. Sadly this street was demolished to make room for the land reclamation scheme. Summer days seemed to last for months and our time after school was spent playing on the mountains. 'The Coronation' was our favourite place, or the Welfare Ground, which was at that time recently built. The streets were also our playgrounds, and with nothing to worry us except for an occasional horse and cart passing by, we skipped, or played with whips and tops on the pavements. Swinging on the lap post was my idea of heaven, and if you were lucky enough to own a rope that had come off an orange box given you by a kind shop keeper, it would last a long time. But you had to watch out for the man who came around every night to turn on the gas light. He did not wear a uniform, but would scare the wits out of us if he caught us swinging on the lamp posts.

St Thomas' Church Hall was the place to be on a Saturday night. It was the night the weekly dance was held, and when my sister and I were old enough, we were allowed to attend, provided we were home by 10pm. There would be a five piece band playing and during the intervals you could by a cup of tea and a Welsh cake. The admission charge was four pence, and for a short time we could forget the poverty and drabness that surrounded us. In 1926 the Assembly Hall was built in Howard Street, it was used for concerts and dances. The floor was built with a noticeable slope, this was fine for concerts, but when you danced, your partner pushed you up one side, and then you slid down the other side. But this is where I learnt to dance and where I laughed often with my friends. This hall was later used to receive the bodies of the miners who were killed in the Cambrian Colliery explosion in 1965, many I knew and grew up with.

The night Tommy Farr fought Joe Louis in America in 1937 was a night to remember, I don't think anyone slept in Clydach that night. Thousands of people were outside the Assembly Hall waiting to hear the start of the fight, which

was relayed by wireless from inside the hall. Tommy fought like a true Welshman, and if America said he lost the fight, then Clydach Vale said he won.

I remember the first car I ever saw. It was driven by a man called Dai Davies. and caused a great deal of excitement as it came up Wern Street. I believe it was a Buick, it was an open top car and in the back of it a man was throwing out bundles of newspapers at various stops, where they would be collected by young boys and then sold on the streets. The greatest thrill of all was when the buses first came to Clydach. Previously we had to walk down the steep hill to Tonypandy, but a bus, now that was something wonderful... At first they were uncomfortable, the seats were made of wooden slats and the cover was tarpaulin which often let in the rain. The lighting was a candle in a glass shade. The fares started at 2 pence from Pandy Square to the top of Howard Street and 1 and a half pence to the Bush Hotel.

It goes without saying that Clydach Vale had its share of singers. The Cambrian Male Choir was quite famous, and the Noddfa Girls Choir under the leadership of Willie Edwards, and the Blaenclydach Girls Choir and their conductor John Stanley Evans won many Eisteddfod Prizes and acclaim. We were lucky to live next door to a very well known soprano singer, Madame Nana Lewis Thomas. Every time she practiced singing, my mother, sister and I would sit on chairs in our passageway to listen to her beautiful voice.

Recently my daughter took me on a trip down memory lane, a ride from Tonypandy up a steep hill to Clydach Vale. As we drove through the streets I saw how bright the houses looked, a contrast to the days when all the villages were grey and drab... Passing my old school in Wern Street brought back memories of all the dear friends I played with as a child, and then on top of the Cwm, where once the Cambrian Colliery thrived with all the noise and coal dust. Now on this site is a beautiful place of peace and tranquillity. I sat on a bench near the lake and back to the days of long ago, and I knew I had to write about these things for my grandchildren to know of how life was in this little part of Rhondda so many years ago.