Memories of Llanelly Hill; its Hamlet and People.

Preface.

(The following are the memories of Mr. William James Williams. These were written in 1970 when Mr. Williams was 70 years old. Words or sentences in *italics* are explanations. Words in ( ) are additions to the original text. Wherever possible the original text has been used with some spelling and punctuation changed to help with the flow of the narrative.

Chapter 1

Having reached my 70th year I am minded to write of my life in and around a very scattered community in the Welsh Hills known as Llanelly Hill in the County of Breckonshire. There is nothing to commend us in the way of civic buildings, only a few small shops, a few chapels and a few very old farms scattered along this mountain. There is a rugged beauty along this mountain side which has been defaced over the years by shale tips that has scarred its beauty for over a hundred years. The old Iron and Coal Masters took away fortunes out of these hills leaving the district ugly with shale tips reaching right to the people's doorsteps. In some instances a stern reminder of the hard old days of coal mining when men only saw daylight on the weekend.

My grandfather died a young man at 41, my own father at 61 from the miners' lung disease pneumoiosis, not in those times considered an industrial disease so no compensation was ever paid to those unfortunate men. Their death was always ascribed as bronchial pneumonia. How many died under that lie I shall never know, that was a scar left worst than the shale tips on the spirits of miners of that day and age.

As a lad I had passed all my classes at school by the time I was 13 and attempted to get work at a local coal level called Pinchy but the law came after a few weeks saying that all lads must be 14 years of age before you could enrolled as a collier's helper. So I was yanked out of it until I had arrived at the proper age of 14, however Mr. William Eynon, a local farmer gave me a job on his farm until I was of proper age for mining. I didn't take to farming very much especially after an incident one morning. On going into one of the fields I found i the hedge a nest of eggs, so picking them up I placed them in my cap and took them to the farmer's wife who looked at them and said "Oh, one of the hens has been laying out, dig a hole in the old shale tip in the field and bury them, goodness knows how long they have been there". So away I went and dug a hole, buried the eggs and clapped my cap on my head. Starting to walk back to the house I had not gone many paces before I felt my head very queer and so I snatched my cap off my head and found to my horror that my cap was full of chicken lice and they were swarming all over my head and neck.

I don't mind telling you I really panicked, I let out a yell and shouting when who should I run into but Maggie Ann Eynon, the farmer's sister. She saw at once what had happened to me, tore my coat and shirt off me, ran me round to the back of the house where there was a water butt, dipped my head in the ice cold water, it was a cold day, at the same time she was laughing her head off until she was exhausted between trying to get the lice off me and laughing. She was a card of a girl, something like that would tickle her pink. She would laugh over that for years and she would tease me about it when I had grown up to be a young man. So that finished my farming and I was glad when I was able at last to go in the mines.

I found in the mines a fine spirit of comradeship, not that there was not differences of opinion but in the main they were men with strong principals, if any miner was in trouble in his work as sometimes would happen, a man under a fall of rock or hurt in any way, every man would be there even at a risk to himself often time. Today there are much more precautions taken by men and management but it is still a hazardous occupation.

Llanelly Hill being a very scattered community with so many little hamlets lies on a mountain side reaching for some 5 miles from its first hamlet, Cwmnantgam (*translates as Crooked Brook Vale*) to Pwll Du. Brynmawr, our nearest town has two approaches to Cwmnantgam, one through Ben Wards Fields and the other from the old tramway to lower Cwmnantgam. The boundaries of this hamlet are marked by two railway lines, Lower Cwmnantgam by the L.N.W.R. as it was called when I was a lad and Upper Cwmnantgam by the G.W. Railway, a single line which ran from Brynmawr to Waenafon, on to Blaenafon and on to Newport. The London and North Eastern was a double line running from Brynmawr to Abergavenny and up to the Midlands. Waenafon was the highest station in Wales (apart from Snowdon) being 1280 feet above sea level. Mr Smith was the station master at Waenafon and Mr. Order the station master at Clydach, one station at the top of Llanelly Hill and one on the bottom.

It was a long walk for most of us from either station so often we found it as near to walk from Brynmawr or Blaenavon as from the stations which we often did. We would often short cut over the breast of the hill to reach our different homes; that was the position at Cwmnantgam, neither of the railways offered any station to this little hamlet. There were no tarred roads, no lights on this bleak hillside. When I was a lad you made your own lights, usually a bit of candle placed in a jam jar with a tin on top with holes to allow the air in just sufficient that the candle would burn and they would rarely blow out even in high wind. Such were the conditions I knew as a lad.

Mining was the only work as youngsters we could get which reminds me of an incident that happened to me just before I started to work in the mines. On getting near to 13 years old I had been on to my mother to buy me white mole skin trousers ready to start work in the mines. At last she consented and gave me 10/- (*ten shillings, 50p in today's money*) to buy the mole skin trousers and a leather belt. I set off straight for Brynmawr and purchased my trousers and belt, quite proud coming back through Ben Wards Fields. I couldn't wait to get home so I got down in a hollow in the field, slipped my short trousers off and got into my white moleskin trousers. I felt a fully fledged miner straight away; stroll off proud as a peacock. On coming to the last stile off Ben Wards Fields in Cwmnantgam I met a girl who was in the same class as me in the school. She started to laugh as she said "You don't half think you're the kiddy with that white moleskin trouser on, the way you swaggered through the field".

At that I got peeved, "Well" I said "it's better than your old Welsh flannel bloomers anyhow". She blushed as she said "I don't wear Welsh flannel bloomers you cheeky devil, if

you want to show off your moleskin trousers all the boys of our class are bathing in the Yard Pond, go and swank it to them".

It was a very hot day and the pond was right between some shale tips, so not to be put off by Gerty I went to the pond. The lads were enjoying themselves larking about in water, nobody noticed my new trousers and I was soon splashing about with them. The only thing was the pond would soon muddy up in the shale tips but we lads never worried about that. The weather was hot and the pond was cool when all of a sudden a Gypsy lad appeared on the far side of the pond, gave a whoop like a Red Indian and made such a spectacular dive we were all amazed but he didn't come up. I suddenly remembered that our local farmer would put his cart in that side of the pond to stop the wood from cracking therefore we children never used that side of the pond but the poor Gypsy lad wouldn't know of that. Once I realised this I waded across the pond, took a deep breath and dropped under the water where I thought he might be. Luckily I found him straight away, picked him up and carried him to the bank where eager hands pulled us both out of the pond. After throwing up some dog's broth I was all right but the gypsy lad was unconscious.

Gus and Harold Edwards who lived in the first house as you come into upper Cwmnantgam were two brothers who lived near the pond, they did their best to get the water out of him when they were joined by a railwayman who was a First Aid man who applied artificial respiration and to our relief he started to breathe and vomit. With warm drink some of the women gave him the greyness left his face but he had a lump on his forehead as big as a hen egg. They carried him to Mrs Edwards's house where with some more hot drinks he came more to himself. Then 12 or more Gypsies came over the Blaenavon line all asking for the Edwards' house. But Harold would only allow the father to pick up the lad, when he got the lad outside the gate the Gypsy man turned to the lad and said "How you feeling now son?" The lad did not answer, I think he was too weak and he was holding his hand to his head, when the gypsy man gave him such a wallop across his ear and he said, "Now bugger off and don't let me catch yer down here again".

We all felt sorry for the Gypsy lad and if Mr Fred Whitby hadn't been along I think some of the women would have scalped that Gypsy man but he got away with a few boos and jeers. Most of the men folk of this small hamlet were of the mining community apart from Mr Edwards, the father of Gus and Harold and Gerty. Mr Edwards being a Ganger Man of the section of line from Brynmawr to the signal box at Gelli Felen. The two lads later became Colliery Examiners at the Milfrain Pit until it closed after the Milfrain explosion in 1929. Lower Cwmnantgam was all of the mining community with one exception, Mr Gomer Williams who was the family grocer for many years at this small hamlet. Each of these hamlets seems to produce one or more outstanding characters of which I would like to bring to the notice of the reader.

Such a person was Mr Fred Whitby. Fred was a miner who was much respected at his work and as a leader of his Church in Darren Felen, he was a man who led by example, did much

to raise the moral tone of the district and whoever he came in contact with. I recognise his influence over people even from when I was a lad from the time of the incident I have just spoken of. He lost a son in the early part of the First World War but bore it with much Christian fortitude and knew how to really sympathise with other in their loss. Such another respected family of Lower Cwmnantgam were the Moores who also lost a son in the early part of 1914 war. They were the crossing keepers for the London & Eastern Northern railway running from Brynmawr to Abergavenny for many years. Leonard was a younger brother who was also in my class in school. There was also the Bevan family that attended Darrenfelen School; they also farmed each side of the railway line for many years. Some of the children went out to Canada; David went out for many years then came home to become one of our councillors. I well can remember a public house in Lower Cwmnantgam called the George Inn, Abram Bates being the last licensee. Then I remember Thomas Jones Mark who also had the immigration urge and went out to New Zealand. David James Williams and William John, two brothers who were the sons of the Grocer, the two lads working at the Milfrain pit and Garn Drift, Then the Howells family, I went to school with Charlie and Billy and the girls. The one girl Beatrice had a very good soprano voice and at the grand age of 83 still sings at our O.A.P. choir. I have conducted them for ten years and she was my first soprano soloist when we started in19 67 and she will still sing quite nicely now in 1977 in Brynmawr known as Mrs Davies Dan. For many years while living in Cwmnantgam she sung at the Calvinistic Methodist chapel Darrenfelen. Her husband Dan too had a nice tenor voice and sung with the male Voice Party at Llanelly Hill under Owen Davies Blaen Gelly.

Another character I thought a lot of from my childhood was teacher Sarah of Lower Cwmnantgam who later became Mrs Albert Jones. She was very kind and considerate to we children in the infant department, like herself some of us had a long way to come to school and in winter would get very wet. She would dry our clothes till time to go home and often our tears if we fell and got hurt in the school yard which was very rough in those days.

From Lower Cwmnantgam following a long lane we arrive at (another) small hamlet called Fedw Ddu. From top Cwmnantgam a rough earth road from the old school house bought you to the same point at Fedw Ddu.

A little history about the old school at Upper Cwmnantgam, It was here my mother had her schooling. As was the custom in her days if any child came to school without two pence for their schooling when the register was called your name was called out in this way: Margaret Watkins, Pauper. What an awful thing to daub a child's name with. Talking to Mr Fred Whitby some years later he confirmed this to me as being quite true. Thank God we have moved on from such stigma as that when at last a Board School was built in Darrenfelen.

(Was the school mentioned at Upper Cwmnantgam the site of a Welsh medium school started by Thomas Price whose bardic name was Carnhuanawc?).

All along this mountain side was left an eyesore and an abomination by the old Iron and Coal Masters particularly at Fedw Ddu where one of the highest shale tip stands so prominently known as Cwm Mawr Tip. All this shale had been tipped down the face of the mountain from the sinking of the old pit named Cwm Mawr Pit. These old tips had even reached to the houses where people were living. The first cottages is where lived Simond Fox and family were surrounded by these tips and a path had been made for them to come from the cottages to keep them off the slime of the shale tips, this was so of other places along the hillside.

Simond Fox and family were a respected family who attended the congregational Church at Darren Felen for many years. Philip the oldest son went to Canada, later the youngest boy Glandon also went out during the depression; David Fox went up the Midlands. The exodus of young people left our churches very weak in the years of the winding up of our coal seams. It is to be hoped that with the land reclamation schemes that some of the former beauty will be brought back to this lovely hilltop.

Not only were there ugly shale tips left behind but also danger spots such as the Cwm Mawr Pit itself. After the pit had been abandoned some wooden planks had been thrown across the top of the tip which with the years had by the time that I was a lad had rotted away leaving half of the open pit in sight. Many a time as young boys we would roll big stones to the edge of the pit and drop them over just to hear them vibrating from one side of the shaft to the other and wait for the sound of the splash on the water far below.

Chapter2

I shudder today to think of the risks we lads took in those days. There was the old Patch Pond that had filled up with water, no one knowing how deep. Those dangers were often found in isolated places, a danger to children. Right in between a nest of shale tips emerges an old level that has served for many years as a water course for the different coal seams being maintained by the Waen Nantyglo Company for over 60 years. It had been worked for many years before that by the very old Llanelli Works that left so many shale tips all over the district. That is why we have the Gelly Yard in our next hamlet, an old shale tip from the old water course. Over the top of this old level is a place called The Lodge, one of the old places built by the old Llanelly masters for their bailiffs, in the old days a kind of policeman who used to keep an eye on things for them. Today (1977) Sam Colman lives at the Lodge, a member of the Beersheba Baptist Chapel at Darrenfelen, a good bottom bass that used to sing under William Luther at the chapel and a very useful member of the Male Voice party under Owen Davies. Right along side of the old Gelly water course lived Joshua Yates, Mr and Mrs Cooper and Tom Brooks. Joshua lost a leg while working in the mines. Although he had a big family he set about to earn a living as soon as he was well. He bought himself a knitting machine and knitted stockings and other things. His wife took over the school cleaning that was one of the things I came to admire with the mining community; whatever the adversity they would never let it get them down. This couple were of that make up. Mrs Yates in particular wouldn't miss any service from her chapel or prayer meetings of the week that they would hold at the Baptist in Darrenfelen. She must have been very tired at times after her labours at the school and home duties but her attendance at her chapel was never neglected. Mrs Cooper was Church of England, a typical Hereford woman where she came from, a dour kind of Christian but straight to the point as I shall tell of her encounter with Tom Brooks her neighbour. The day school teacher had called to see Tom to let him know that one of his girls should have glasses, that she was not seeing very good.

> "How much will that cost me" said Tom.
>
> "About 15/- " (*15 shillings, roughly 75 pence in today's money)* said the teacher.
>
> "I can't afford that" replied Tom.
>
> "Get along with yer" said Mrs Cooper who heard, "yer spends that much on beer every week"
>
> "I'll tell you what I'll do" said Tom, "I'll feed her lettuce every day, same as I feed the rabbits and they don't wear glasses."
>
> "Well" said the teacher "don't say you haven't been warned"

But Tom didn't get off the hook like that with Mrs Cooper. Every morning when the children were coming home from school she would say to Tom: "That young one of yours is getting to look like a rabbit every day." till Tom couldn't stand her taunting any longer and bought the girl her glasses to have a bit of peace. When Mr. Cooper died she was asked if she would

go back to Hereford, her two children were married away but the old lady said “I stay where the old tree fell.” (meaning her husband). That was Mrs Cooper, a strong mind of her own.

A few paces from these cottages were the Gelly Yard. By including the road we lads managed to make our football ground. There was no grass on it, because it was all shale no grass would grow on it but we even won the league cup one year having a good soccer side then.

This huge shale tip reached right to the back of a long row of houses that went to make Gelli Felen a very busy place at one time. When the L & N Eastern railway drove two tunnels through the solid rock for over 600 yards it was considered a fine piece of engineering in stone arching and through such hard rock. Although today the railway does not run the tunnels still stand as good as ever, a good reminder of the solid work done by the railways so many years ago. A deep ravine was bridged at the same time.

A siding was also built at Gelli Felen to take the surplus trucks from the marshalling yard at Brynmawr. During this construction period Gelli Felen was an alive place for navvies and the local pubs did a roaring trade so the old timers have told me. One particular character of those days, a man by the name of George Corner who had worked on the tunnels and had lived to be over 90 told me this story of those days. The Navvies would have a good booze up every weekend and as many of them came from different parts of the country there were some rough customers among them. He recounted many fights that occurred with them which I could well imagine, George being a tough handful himself in his younger days but he always ended up with this particular incident which I will hand over the reader as he told me. It seems that a sciff (*sic*) they had filled with rock out of the tunnel had jumped its shackle and run back and broken the two legs of the navvy who was drilling a hole in the rock of the tunnel for the next shot that would be fired in the driving of the tunnel through the rock. Not hearing the runaway sciff owing to the noise of his drilling he received the full impact of the runaway dram or sciff. It smashed both his legs below the knees, the best they could do for the poor chap was amputate both legs but he didn’t die (said George) he was as tough as they come so we all clubbed around for two peg legs for him and with two walking sticks he soon stumped around quite well. The company gave him a light job in the stores and he done very good for himself and many a pint he had out of sympathy.

When George started to drop his M & his H and started to lisp a bit I never knew when to take him seriously. “So what happened after George” said I.

“Well I’ll tell ye,” said he, (that was after he’d refilled his pipe), “one Saturday night we all got pretty sloshed and I help Pegleg home. So when we got by the gate Pegleg says to me; Put me in the WC until I come to myself a bit, I don’t want the landlady to see me like this. So I sat him on the lavatory seat and wished him Good Night”.

“After I left him” said George “Pegleg fell asleep when just after someone in a hurry to get into the WC groping about in the dark found peg leg’s stumps sticking out”.

“Good Lord, what a place to leave a bloody wheel barrow”. I’m not sure was George pulling my leg or not but I’ll forgive him for his sense of humour, he was one of the old school who lived to the ripe old age of 96. Long after 90 he would think nothing of walking to Clydach or Brynmawr.

Over at the siding lived Ted Edwards and family. His wife was the laying out nurse for the District for many years, his grandson, Harold is the manager of Cwm Colliery today. Mrs Susan Roberts, a widow also lived at the old Gelli siding, reared a big family much to her credit after losing her husband. Down along the Gelli Yard lived Nick Price and family, also Sergeant Potter one of the Old Contemptibles of the First World War. Then there was the old pub The Colliers Arms considered very old from the time of the old coal masters. As I remember Benjamin Prothero was the licensee from the time I was a small boy till some years after I was married in 1921. He had two sons and a daughter, I was very friendly with the youngest son from school days, we had much the same interest.

We left school at somewhat the same time being the same age and worked some years together at the same colliery, the Waen Nantyglo Company. We took our first Aid Certificate for mining at the same time under Doctor James of Blaenavon after which we were selected by the Waen Nantyglo Company to become members of the rescue team for the collieries of the Blaina District. We were sent to the Crumlin School of Training under Mr. Wimboure which we did until the Colliery closed. After which we worked at Glascoed still seeing a lot of each other, we had much in common in those days.

Armit’s older brother built the first little place in Darrenfelen selling soft drinks on the bottom floor with a bagatelle table on the top floor being a carpenter by trade. It was quite a boon for us as young lads in those days having no other form of entertainment outside of our own homes. We made much use of this place as youngsters. We formed a club called the Cork Club, a fine of one penny was put if any member used a swear word or was not able to produce his cork on request, it was all good fun.

One rather dour character that stands out in my mind was an old stone mason by the name of John Wall. He was a gruff old man standing about 6 feet. When i was a lad of 15 he must have owned half of Gelli Felen. All we children were scared still of old John. During the 1914 war there was quite an influx of families come to the Gelli, some came from Hereford where they had heard there was big money to be earned in the mines. My own aunt came from Bristol, her husband having been called up for the forces. She came to stay with my mother at Darrenfelen. She had two children which made us rather crowded so hearing that a cottage was going vacant I went with my aunt to see if he would let it to her. We arrived at John’s house and I gave a timorous knock at the door. John came to the door; he glared at me then said in his gruff voice, “What yer want?”

I was about to introduce my aunt when he cut me off with “You shut your cakehole; I don’t do business with kids”. Knowing John I didn’t say no more. Turning to my aunt “Yer can come in”. “I’m not coming in without him” said my aunt pointing to me so in we both went. We both stood, my aunt came straight to the point. “I have come to see if you will let your vacant cottage to me. John looked at her and grunted, “It all depends how many kids yer got”. My aunt was getting her dander up. “I don’t rear kids” she flared, “I leave that for nanny goats”

John looks up sharp, “Where’s yer husband” he said next. “Out in the war” said she “fighting for such tykes as you”.

“Well” said John “if yer husband got as much guts as you the war will soon be over”. He reached up, took down a key, gave it to her then said “I expect my rent every Monday morning at 12 to the clock, now a good day to yer”. That was John Wall, he built the Wesleyan School Room some 80 years ago, it is still there solid as old John.

Another man and his family that came to the Gelli was George Seal, he came from the borders of Hereford with a typical country drawl. The first pay he drew from the mines made him exclaim “Good Lord, they must have given me the masters pay”. He had never earned so much money in his life. Another family that came to the Gelli was a coloured family from Crickhowell by the name of Thomas Christian who worked at the Waen Nantyglo Black Vein Co. At this time three places were working coal, the Pinchy Level, the Black Vein Slope and New Slope. Between the three places and the three shifts there were quite a lot of boiler men and haulage men required.

A very respected family of the Gelli was Mrs Margaret Walter who for many years was a member of the Congregational Chapel at Darrenfelen. David, one of the boys had an excellent baritone voice, Llewellyn was a preacher at one time; very nice people to know. One of David’s girls is still teaching at one of the schools. Their mother was one of the oldest inhabitants and was chosen to cut the tape when we had the opening of the railway halt at Gelli Felen. Across the road lived Mrs Margaret Williams and her two sons Alfred and Thomas John who opened a seam of coal by the Racehorse Pub at Waenafon which they worked for many years. Then Thomas John became the last landlord of the Miners Arms at Llammarch. His son Cyril built up a fine haulage contracting work at Ebbw Vale. In the long row of John Wall’s houses lived Fred Clare a lay preacher of the Church of England with the church at Darrenfelen and Blackrock. His wife was a Wesleyan; this kind of thing would often happen on the hill top, the lady would still go to church or chapel after marriage as before and vice versa. There was that tolerance between them and I never heard of any friction. This pair was particular friends of my parents and I would go there very often for a chat.

One day when I called in Fred said to me “I would like if you would do me a favour”.

“Yes, certainly” I said “if I can.

“Oh, you can do it alright” said he, “we have a good lot of children coming to the church now and I would like to hold their interest with something like a small children’s opera”. Would I try and get something like that for them. I knew my father always had plenty of adverts like that, as a conductor for many years he was always having samples sent to him by different publishers and I soon selected one for Fred called “Queen Lily and her Subjects”. Little did I think what was coming after. “Now,” he said “I want you to conduct them” I had never done any conducting before. “”You can do it right away” he said “and I have a splendid player for you, our lady lodger, Miss Rees from Cefyn”.

She was teaching at Darrenfelen School, well she was all that Fred claimed and helped me quite a lot at my first venture. I was 20 years of age then and I am still conducting at 77 and have never had any regrets and over the years have made many friends, some are still alive and we often talk of the glories of the past. Our first venture was quite a success and soon we did a few Anthems as well at the church at Darrenfelen. Then Blackrock got a bit envious and although they were not strong enough to form a choir, we did manage to put on a few good plays at that church so everyone was happy.

Chapter 3

Well, there were some very good families at Gelli Felen in those days who did much at the different chapels in Darrenfelen to promote a good spirit in the whole of the district and preachers and entertainers all spoke of the warmth to be found in this scattered and isolated parish of Llanelly Hill. A long row of cottages stood next to the shale tip of the Gelli Yard where at some time or other the older families had bought over the years their own cottages and had repaired them until they were quite snug and warm, lived happily together. True, we had no lights or tarred roads when I was a lad but we did much to help ourselves. In those days men that had occasion to use pony and cart could often be seen dropping stones in the ruts made by the carts and many good foundations for roads were laid in this way. Women would often carry their ashes *(from their home fires)* some distance to try and absorb the slurry of the old shale tip where they would have to walk. We called the long row in Gelly Felen Johnny Jones' Row; he owned the first two houses there, a hard working miner who worked many years at the old Pinchy Level. Evan, his son had very bad eyesight and took a job on the top of the colliery. The son in law Naboth Williams was an examiner at the Milfrain Pit, this was the man that for years kept at the Railway People for a halt at Gelli Felen and by his persistence eventually got it which was a boon for Gelli Felen, Cwmnantgam and Darrenfelen. He was a Calvinistic Methodist and was as stubborn as John Calvin himself once he set his mind to something. Good for Naboth.

Another man of note living in this row was Reg Harris, a man from Garn yr Erw, he married a Miss Roberts and came to live in Johnny Jones' Row where her widowed mother lived. I soon made friends with Reg, he was a likable fellow and was a Physical Culturist. I owe much to Reg for his interest in me when my health broke down. I had been working under some very bad conditions for some time; we had struck what is known to miners as a fault underground. As a result the coal of about 5 feet thickness *(about 2 metres)* had petered right out, we were faced with a great barrier of iron stone that would have to be got through before we could pick up the coal again. We worked at this fault three shifts a day, a day shift, an afternoon shift and a night shift. A post machine was used to bore holes into this very hard rock; very often the drills would break under the strain of boring the density of the rock was so hard. While the work was so hard and we were down on the minimum rate of £2:8:0. *(2 pound and 8 shillings, about £2.40)* per week. It was not the hard work that broke down my health but the foul air we were breathing all the time. We would fire our Samsonite or Gelignite at the end of each shift which meant each following shift would have to work in those fumes because there was not enough fresh air travelling to take it away. I had got so ill the doctor ordered me out straight away, the bloodstream had become poisoned. It was two years before I could work again, there was no compensation. I went to several doctors but there was no improvement. I had got to a very low state. One day after meeting Reg Harris he suggested that I took a course of deep breathing which he had thought out himself and a few light exercises. I began to feel an improvement in myself but Reg wouldn't let up on me. He would call on me and take me up on top of the mountain

until I became quite fit again. I have much to thank Reg Harris for. Another man that did a lot in getting work for men in the Gelli was Dai John Davies, an examiner in the Tredegar Valleys.

In 1929 we lost two neighbours out of Johnny Jones Row in the Milfrain Explosion, two young men, David Rickets and Cliff Edmunds; it was a shock for this little hamlet of Gelli Felen, indeed it set a gloom over all the hillside we were so closely knit as a neighbourhood. If one family was hurt we were all hurt that was the spirit that was.

On moving up from Gelli Felen to Blaen Gelli you crossed the Gelli Yard and up a very rough piece of road called Pentwyn a little cottage with a steep garden where lived old William Edmunds. It was in this garden I first saw a dead donkey. William had tethered the donkey with a chain on his neck. Owing to the garden being so steep, retaining walls were built across the garden to take away some of the steepness. After William had raised all the produce out of the top of the garden he would tether the moke there but this night the donkey had tried to get into the lower part of the garden, slipped over the retaining wall and hung himself. William said it was o deliberate ease of suicide while of unsound mind.

Turning to the right we now come to Ivy Cottages where for many years lived a much respected family Thomas Hadland. Thomas was a haulage driver for Waen Nantyglo Co. also his son Tom while Dan was more or less in charge of Bush Ironmongers until he retired. The one sister married the conductor of the Congregational Chapel in Darrenfelen. Another of the sisters married William Morgan, another able conductor of Carmel Calvinistic Methodist Chapel. Both places were very active churches at this time, giving good account of themselves especially on Anniversary times under Morgan Morgan and William Morgan.

Moving on to what was a very rough road we come to some cottages in a field where the Davies family lived. I think they too were Methodists. Then here also lived William Evans and his family, William had a good bass voice and would help out in that capacity at Chapel and with the Male Voice Party we had at Llanelly Hill in those days. This family too lost a son in the Cwm explosion Ebbw Vale. We all felt sorry about it at the time. Then, very firm adherents of the Carmel Methodists were Thomas Davies and family. Thomas was an able preacher in English or Welsh and was for many years very popular at my own chapel, the Wesleyans. Every Christmas Night he would be asked to preach at our chapel; he seemed to have something new to say about the Christmas message every time he preached it. His son, Owen was a fine young man; he was a school master at Beaufort school when he died at 33 years of age. He was a very good musician and composed some nice hymn tunes and a very lively Sunday School March. He was the conductor of our Male voice party. A man we sadly missed for many years. His brother John was an examiner at the Milfrain Colliery, a younger brother Abiah became a referee under the Abergavenny District League. David and his father had leased a piece of coal that lasted some years and supplied all the chapels and the board School with coal.

Next door lived Gwillym Williams and family who again were Welsh speaking, Gwillym was the precentor at Carmel; he also had a very able son, their organist for many years also a player for the Male Voice Party and the Sunday School superintendant for many years. The whole family did much for Carmel church until it closed. Following again up this rough road we come to Will the Van as we used to say, his name was William Walters, Will was quite a comic and we would often call at the van for a chat with the old boy. He would make a cat laugh with his quaint sayings and the different things he would do but a very inoffensive man. Then we come to a cluster of houses. Two very Welshy men were David Davies and brother Tom. They would rear a few sheep, do a bit of hauling from the old Pinchy Level and I think they were very contented with their lot on the whole. They were a pair of comics in their way; on one occasion David took Boxer the horse to the Pinchy Level to pick up a load of coal to a house at Llanmarch. On the way he had to cross a very wet shale tip when one of the wheels sank down to the axle in the old shale slurry pulling the poor old horse down on his side. A deep ravine lay between where John lived so David shouted across the ravine to tell John that Boxer the horse had fallen on his wrong side. So John ambled over and with the help of some more people and a lot of Welsh flowing from David and John got Boxer on his way at last.

When we were young we would walk from the Jolly Collier's to the Miner's on a fine night, singing all the latest songs we would hear at Dicky Dooners in the Market Hall at Brynmawr with the aid of a mouth organ. Well, one of our local wits struck up this ditty of John and David to the tune of Sweet Rosie O'Grady which went:

> John, Davy and Boxer went down the Rywer road
> John fell into the lime kiln
> And David fell off the tail board

By John and David lived two nieces, Linda and Maggie Jane. Linda married Thomas Davies' son, we knew as Dai the Coal, Maggie Jane became Mrs Albert Paynter. Maggie Jane had a splendid soprano voice and took the principal part for me in a Cantata which we did in character called "The Healing of Naaman". It had been many years on the hill since anything of this kind had been done but folks rallied around me and it was quite a success for which I was very grateful for to Mrs Maggie Jane Paynter, Edna Miles and Miss Bessie Matthews who also took prominent parts. It was not only their good voices but the way they dramatised their parts so well and we certainly enjoyed the practises in those days. Another family of Carmel was John Watkins and his wife and two daughters who contributed so much to Carmel Church in those days.

Chapter 4

The Ravine.

Here I bring the reader to the ravine that divides the whole district between Gelli Felen and Darrenfelen. Starting at Waenafon it becomes wider and deeper in its rugged decent to the gorge of the Clydach River. It is a tributary of the Clydach river starting from a little spring in the Milfrain Mountain and the little streams shed from the mountainside. One day, following this water I wrote this little poem;

A little spring am I that bubbles
Up through the ground, you see my fuddle
A stream I form from underground
As I wend my way with murmuring sound
Through heath and heather that abounds, some fern
I find a rock, now I must turn
And meet a splashing little brook
Somewhere from Milfrain, a stately nook
Together we find a man made culvert
So under the railway line we convert
And through the archway at Waenafon
To slither down to the streamlets haven.

Similar stone bridges as the one by Sam Woods place at narrow points in the stream are to be found at the junction of one or two roads to the upper Gelli from Llammarch. Where the ravine drops very steeply and widens, then again at Bongam Bridge *(Bont Gam?)* a stone bridge to Gelli Felen from Darrenfelen with a fine structure built by the London & North Western Railway. Two fine bridges were built half way down the ravine, one for the stream and the other for the up and down line of their railway. This ravine to my memory has claimed three lives. When I was a lad a man by the name Woods fell over the ravine on the Bates side one very foggy night; there was no fencing at all on that side of the ravine just a narrow path. Another man I knew well fell over on the same side and died with a broken back. Then over on the Gelli Felen side a lad of 13 was killed, the same age as myself, by the name of boycott. People must have had strange notions of building houses where they did years ago right above Bongam Bridge. Three houses were built not a half dozen yards from the edge of the ravine, Mrs Bates, William Bevan and Jayo Evans. Yet none of those families ever put a wrong step all the years they lived there, it was people who were not so well aquainted who lost their lives. One family that lived on the other side of the ravine and whos house was built right in the ravine turned out to be a very sad case. On coming to work from the Gelli Felen where I lived at the time; on arriving at Turf Houses on my way to the Black Vein Colliery I looked across the ravine and could see the roof of the house all smashed in. Little did I realise the tragedy that had taken place in the night. A huge stone rock had fallen out of the side of the ravine, weighing about two tons, smashing through the

roof killing a mother and son. The father would have proved a third victim only for the fact he was working night, what a shock to come home to.

Where the stream emerges from under the railway bridge it joins the Clydach River at a small cave called Shakespeare's Cave on the left going down; there's a very high rock of about 80 feet on the top of which terminates Archie James field that runs along to his house just above the Devil's Bridge at Blackrock.

I will now finish my outline of this rugged ravine with another little poem I call "The Brook" that carries a summer feature and a winter feature. From Bongam Bridge now in the autumn the trees are a maze of colours. There is one thing more i would like to mention about this ravine, from the second bridge down from Waenafon there is an unregistered seam of coal. I have worked in many seams of coal but never have I seen so many pretty colours, as well as silver and gold and it burns like a cigar to a very fine ash.

The Brook.

By Darrenfelen runs the brook
Down deep ravine it bubbles on
'Neath stone built bridges, shady nooks
With little waterfalls, little ponds.

The oak and ash, irregular line
Its mossy banks on both sides
Protruding rocks with steep decline
O'ershadow where sweet violet hides

In summertime the children come
Down a steep path where sheep have climbed
They reach the water brook and run
From pool to pool in summer sun.

The brook runs on to cascade down
To swerve round Shakespears cave and toss
Its sparkling waters in the froth
Of the Clydach River's deeper sound.

With winter storms, mad runs the brook
A smashing torrent against the rocks
Its waterfalls great powers have took
A majesty with strength that shocks.
O Gentle brook tour torrent power
Hath made you brown, your frothing dour
But winter storms will pass away
You will subside with gentler days.

W. J. Williams

Darrenfelen was the hub of all our activities when I was a lad and for years before I came on the scene and for many years after. Later we did have a miners Hall and ground and a Co Op stores but up until then we only had our churches for worship and the Board School for secular activities. At Darrenfelen were built three chapels and a Church of England Mission Hall. As a lad I was always of the impression that Darrenfelen was a village but was left with a big doubt on this score as I understood the whole of Darrenfelen was built on the Penffwddlwm Estate. The farm itself must be over 400 years old, most of the chapels were over 100 tears old. But be that as it may, as a lad going to school it was the custom for an inspector to visit the school and ask the pupils questions. The inspector picked me out and wanted to know what the difference between a hamlet and a village was. I told him I thought a village would have more people living in it but he blew his top and shouted No, NO, No. He turned on Miss Johns, my teacher and asked "Do you know?" "I think the boy is right" said she. "No, No, No." he yelled again, "How can he know if you don't know" he shouted at her. But she put her arm around me as she replied quite cool, "We stand to be corrected sir and what is your version?" Where upon he stated that before you can call a place a village it must have a church in it. Evidently he did not think Darrenfelen mission Church gave it enough status for it to be called a village. So today (1977) we haven't even got a Mission Hall, we are just a small collection of Hamlets. Still, it has not taken from the people any of their good standing as a warm hearted lot.

Chapter 5

. On arriving at Darrenfelen the first house you come to was an old lady called Mary Lenard. Apart from cleaning the Mission Church she kept a little sweet shop to try and get a few shillings. There were no scales; every sweet was counted out, five for a half penny, ten for a penny. For a sweet bag a piece of The Echo paper was twisted into the shape of a sweet bag like a cone which she could do very deftly. The we had Miles Row, Will Miles we knew as the Old Flower. He had a wonderful bass voice with a good range up or dawn, many people that heard him would often tell him to take his good gift seriously, he could have been another Paul Robeson but he never did. He just buried it in the mundane things of life. He was a well built man and would have made a fine opera singer having the right physical build for the job. He was a good rugby player and very strong. One of his favourite games was "pulling the poker" in the pubs which he was very good at. Then he won the big price with the "News of the World" Sunday paper with a pigeon he gave 1/6d for. It was quite a scoop at the time. His brother Oswald was a very good sprinter but didn't keep it up for long. The brother in law, Thomas Penry Roberts also had a good tenor voice that seemed to have two registers, he would sing bass one minute and tenor the next; also he was a good sight reader with the tonic sohfa. When my father started a new cantata he would often come and help the choir with the male parts. Another fine man of Darrenfelen was Richard Roberts one arm, (as he was known by in those days). Not a lot of schooling had he but he wrote quite a few hymns for festival singing putting his own words and tunes of an evangelical setting that used to go very well at that time. He was a Baptist and at that time the Baptists were very strong at the Darrenfelen Chapel and had a fine choir under William Luther.

There were a lot of families living at the lower end of Darrenfelen, the Roberts and Wallbank family and the Ellis family. Some of the lads did a bit of soldiering; Edmond Ellis and his brother Reg Wallbank were honoured with the Military Cross. Harry Jones was killed in the First World War, Henry Hill lost his life in the Second World War and Ivor Roberts was one of the Desert Rats that came back. His brother was also in the forces, all from Sparren Point as that part of Darrenfelen was called. Other young men from Llanelly Hill would hold smoking concerts on occasions when they came home on leave. Even the churches kept a Roll of Honour as their contribution to these young lads.

Another family was Thomas Waters; Thomas was an old ganger man on the stretch of line with the old London and North Easter Railway. Until his conversion Thomas was a rough handful, after that to put it in his own words he dissolved partnership with Satan and joined the church and never looked back. He nearly did once with a new School Master that came to Darrenfelen school, he had been harassed by the School Master over some job he had to do at the school, but Thomas took off his coat and soon gave to understand that if he had put the tools away (as he said) he hadn't forgotten the way to use them; he didn't bother Thomas after that. Laura his wife made many urns of tea at the Wesleyans schoolroom for chapel teas and Sunday school teas; they were all a staunch family of Wesleyans. Sarah Ann

was one of the first to get our local Post Office at Darrenfelen for some years; Rebecca was for years a member of my father's Choir and an active member of the church. Although her husband Tom was a Baptist they still attended their different chapels after marriage as before and were quite happy in that way. There was that tolerance with them and there was never any friction. The brother, Albert Waters was a jovial character with a very ready wit, he was an old rugby player himself but when the younger men took to the soccer game he took just as much interest in them being on their committee for years. It is said of him that on one committee meeting a certain player was put up as a right back. "No good at all" said Albert, "put him in the front, he's a good dribbler and he's got two left legs so nobody can take the ball off him but don't put him at right back, he couldn't kick a hole in a wet Echo." That was Albert.

On another time while working at the Milfrain Pit water had broken in from some old workings and Albert and some of his mates were cut off. As soon as the management were alerted they went as quickly as they cold to that part of the pit and shouted to Albert and his mates "Are you alright?" whereupon Albert started to sing to an old Sankey tune;

> "Over the river faces I see
> Manager and deputy looking for me"

"Now Albert" shouted the manager, "this is serious." "Aye" shouted Albert back "it is serious and not a ducking draws between us." He always saw the funny side of everything.

For many years lived Tom Jones Rocky at Darrenfelen, he worked at Marhams Colliery, a very experienced miner in house coal and steam coal working. His brother Lewis Jones I worked with as a boy, two of the sons still live in the same cottage today. Then our Midwife, Nurse Evans also lived next door for some time. Across the road lived my father and mother, he gave his whole life from a very early age as a Sunday School teacher and as a conductor of the Wesleyan Chapel. I could recite many incidents of his life that made me admire his great character.

Now I come to a much respected character of Darrenfelen that I knew so well from my childhood, Mrs. O. T. Davies who was the school mistress at Darrenfelen School for many years. She was the wife of O. T. Davies of Upper Gelli felen that I have already spoken of. A lady that not only lost her husband in three short years but lost a brother and brother in law in a very short time, enough to shake anyone's faith, but not this lady. Her fortitude was never of complaint; in fact her whole life was one of Christian service to the church and the community. As a member of the Zion Wesleyan Church she was our organist for about 50 years and a Sunday school superintendant for many years. As a Circuit Representative she was held in high esteem at Ebbw Vale and other places.

I would now like to mention a lifelong friend, we were near enough the same age, went to the day school together, to the Sunday school and up till we both got married. We never had a quarrel and like most boys got up to mischief now and then over which we have a

good laugh even today, but with all we never hurt anything or anybody. Annoying sometimes with our tip-tap on the windows of people's houses or knock on the door and run away. I remember one amusing incident at Sunday school one day. We were 6 or 7 lads in a class of 10 year olds, an old chap was teaching us by the name of Tom Boyer. He would give us a few verses to read out of the bible and then he would invite a few questions. Then more than once he would doze off. Then we lads would be getting up to our pranks. This particular Sunday we had got a bit noisy and were disturbing the other classes so our superintendent shouted, "Keep those boys quiet there Boyer". Tom suddenly came to himself, swung his right arm round, knocked three of the lads off the form *(bench)* which had no backs to them, they in turn knocked against a girls class that were sat on similar forms until in all we were about nine children down on the floor. There was more commotion after that than before. The times Jim and I have laughed over that little scene.

It was common in those times with the chapels to hold a little singing competition or eisteddfod as the Welsh would say and in the day school they would hold this kind of thing on the end of term. There were some excellent boys and girls voices and efforts were keen. A lad by the name of Hughie Roberts had an excellent voice and I had a good voice as a boy and had run a very close second. Hugh lived at Gelli Felen and I lived at Waen Llapria at the time. Naturally the Gelli boys were quite proud that they had won whereas Waen Llapria was disappointed. Hearing all the arguments one of the teachers wanted to know why and advised us to accept the adjudication. "In any case" said he "both boys and girls sang well. There was only half a mark in it but Jim Roberts said "There's no such thing as half a mark" and after the teacher had gone the argument got worse than ever. So the lads thought Hugh and I should fight it out. So they formed a ring and Hughie and I soon went at it hammer and tongs. The result was Hugh went home with first prize and a black eye and I went home with the second prize and then forgot all about it.

Just after leaving school at the little place that Joe Ben Prothero built, we youngsters formed a Cork Club. This was an idea that Jim Roberts had and any that didn't produce his cork at any time on request was fined one penny, or if he used a swear word three pence. As a result we built up a football team with football shirts and a brand new soccer ball and called our team Rip Shirts and were proud of our team, but I found even in those days Jim was a good organiser and still is today in our old age. Pensioners, he organises their holidays each year which in these days involves a lot of correspondence, a quiz and things like that for our entertainment. He built a Billiard Hall with a full size billiard table at Darrenfelen; he was an examiner for many years at the Milfrain Colliery and Garn Drift, always active. At Darrenfelen also lived my father's brother, John Williams; a local preacher for many years with the Baptists eventually became ordained taking a church at Wryford for many years. When he died, well into his 80s his wife still carried on his pastorate. She also preached at many places, well known to Brynmawr as a speaker and singer at sisterhoods. In her younger days sang the soprano solos in Cantatas for my father.

Another fine family of Darrenfelen were the Puddles, Seth the father lived to a good age and was one of the earliest J. P.'s He worked for many years as a check weighman for the Wain Nantyglo Co. Many times acted as an arbitrator for men and management, he was a very versatile man that would turn his hand to anything. At a very advanced age he took down the signal box at Gelli Felen, carted it all the way to Darrenfelen and turned it into a very good bungalow. He had a son, Seth who followed his father a good deal in that way. Another son, Wyndom became a member of many committees for the Labour movement and council at Blaenafon. Two of the girls were splendid singers, Dulcie the youngest of the girls was a soloist for the old Gwalia Male Voice Party at Brynmawr under William Lewis. She became Mrs Bishop.

Mrs Panter was also a good soprano and a regular member of our choir at the Wesleyan, helping my father with his Cantatas and later when I took over the choir she did the same for me. Here again was a good organiser who did a lot of work at the Welfare on Llanelli Hill for many years.

Another fine family of Darrenfelen were the Rossers, Ezekiel the father was a ganger plate layer on the Abergavenny line, another staunch Wesleyan with his wife and children. A bass member of my father's choir, a quiet man but you always felt the solidness of his presence. His oldest son Albert became a Wesleyan minister passing through the Cleveland College, Bristol, a hard college in those days. Then the sister whom I have already spoken of as Mrs O. T. Davies, our school mistress. Another splendid sister well respected as a good worker in the church all her life, another good singing voice as a soloist and a choir member was Mrs Hannah Matthews. Her one son a teacher at a Gilwern school, the other an R. O. At Brynmawr. Another sister I will speak of later, Maggie Jane who later was Mrs Morgan. A brother William and Ezekiel whose wife was also a very accomplished pianist. She was the daughter of Barry from Blaenavon, the composer of some beautiful religious solos.

Chapter 6

At this time Joseph Thomas lived at Penffwyddlwm Farm, we children would often give a hand at harvest time and very well repaid with a good harvest supper in one of the fields. Then there was Black Rank which today is known as New Rank, most of the houses having been modernised and a new generation of people living there. Then we come to the Mount after a pub called "The Mount Pleasant" and a grand view is to be seen of the Clydach Valley from here with the Sugarloaf in the background. Two splendid characters lived here, Mr John Phillips an old conductor of the Congregational Chapel of Darrenfelen. His son Tegreth became a minister of that movement with a church at Abercarn, his wife was Margaret, a very nice lady. John was an examiner at the coal face of the Black Vein and a shot firer for Samsonite Explosives when required. Albert Jones who lived next door was quite a good elocutionist especially with comic recitations. His wife was teacher Sarah from the Cwm Nant Gam. Then we have Ben Evans and his wife, staunch Congregational couple and at that time John Cross, James Powell and William Evans all living next door to each other and all miners. They all bore evidence of this way of earning a precarious living. William Evans had Nystagma and had to keep his light underground always behind him. Jim Powell was left with a stiff leg and could never kneel on that leg and had to take a light job in the return at a much lower rate. Compensation was hard to come by in those days. Jim Powell's son took his examiners papers at a very early age and at that time was the youngest examiner in mining in South Wales. He was also a very nice baritone. His brother Jack was a good musician with an advanced certificate and conducted at St. Mary, a church at Brynmawr.

Our next notable character was John Williams the shop. He kept the grocers shop for many years supplying Waen Llapria and district. Here again was a good conductor of the old school that often had to be taught words as well as music but turned out some good cantata work just the same. He had a strong bass voice, it was a pleasure to hear him in the services in the Wesleyan Chapel on Sundays, he would sing as good as two or three.

Crossing an iron bridge we come to Llewellyn's Row, a cluster of cottages with another mining element, Isaac Jones, Tom Davies, John Eynon and Sam Evans, all victims of the worst thing that could happen to a miner, silicosis that bound up the lungs like cement that made them struggle for breath as if something was strangling them from inside. Thrown on the scrap heap of human waste, no more use to industry, not recognised as an industrial complaint so no compensation. These people were all of the Baptist element which were very strong on the hill side in those days. William Evans had later bought the bungalow off our school master and some of the children live there today. Then there was Penrhyw Farm, their fields stretching to the Dinas; a much respected family again and strong members of the Baptist cause. I well remember the mother riding a nice brown mare side saddle to Brynmawr more than once. Ivor and myself attended school the same time, the girls were older than me and very smart as I remember them attending the Baptist Chapel. At that time William Jenkins and family lived next to the farm, they were also staunch Baptists.

There were a lot of girls, very gifted some of them with good soprano voices especially my Aunt Maud and Mrs Dan Gunter. The other girls took more to the contralto line. Florence taught me in the upper classes at Darrenfelen School, later she also became my aunt when she married my Uncle Joe, later the Rev. Joseph Williams with a church at the Forest of Dean. Doris is a very good accompanist and plays at the Calvary Baptist Chapel at Brynmawr, today she is Mrs Alfred Sillman; the strain still goes on in this family. Ethel's daughter is an excellent singer by the name of *(name is missing in the text).* Will Jenkins was the only boy of the family and here again was a good tenor voice, he did much singing in and around the district for many years, a very gifted family.

So we come to another outstanding family of the Baptists from Waen Llapria, the Coleman's family. The old lady I shall always remember as a good living lady, sometimes in those days there would be after the service on a Sunday night an after meeting in which prayer would be offered on behalf of people that were sick or in trouble of any kind. I would wait in the porch of the Baptist Chapel as a lad for some of my pals and more than once I heard that dear lady pray with much earnest feeling for the revival of the people ill and at a young age would feel very much moved by her outpourings; to hear a woman pray would move me strangely as a boy. Two outstanding characters of this family was a son who gave us much pleasure as an elocutionist and a good bass voice. He was one of the founders of the dramatic society on Llanelly Hill who produced some good works like The Poacher, The Silver box, Strike, a Welsh play, the Great Experiment and other plays. A very sociable man very well liked in the neighbourhood. Then the sister that taught for many years at Darrenfelen School and another good accompanist at Beersheba Baptist Chapel for years and a very active member of the church, a well spoken lady.

At the time my uncle Will Walker lived next up, his son Dean had an exceptionally good voice as a boy, a voice that never broke as most boys' voices would at 14 but just glided into the tenor register. He became a fine tenor singer, well known in the district and out of it, on a few times taking a principal part for Mr Carr in Abergavenny with his operas. After moving to Blaenavon (after) some time he became Mayor of the council but he never forgot Llanelli Hill and brought us many new concerts for one cause ar another, He moved to Govilon where he died' a leader of the church at Llanwenarth and still singing under his son at 80.

Ted Lewis lived in the house after, Ted's mother was our nurse and midwife for many years and she brought me into the world in 1900 and again my son in 1922 so I owe her quite a bit. At that time my Uncle Jack lived at the Chapel House and we lived next door to William Luther. In those days I think we were the only Wesleyans at Waen Llapria, they were mostly all Baptists. My father and William Luther were very friendly and would spend hours in the parlour (as the best room was called then). They were both conductors and Luther's son Emlyn would be playing their cantatas over for them for hours at a time. He was a fine man for his time was William Luther; he had a very bad chest and took a job as check weighman at the Field Colliery. It was a sad day for the Baptists when he died at an early age; but the

Baptists at that time was full of talent and a young man by the name of Tom Samuel Woods carried on very successfully for many years.

Josh Lewis and family were Baptists at the top of the road. I would like to mention Charlotte, she was the only one with a literary bent and she wrote a few very good essays to date. Then Jake Jones and family were also of the Baptist community. I remember Ron and Violet quite well.

Niven Macintyre was another character that stands out in those days, a real Scotch man; he was a packman that sold clothes out of a pack they carried on their backs. He married one of the local girls from the Jolly Colliers pub. He decided to turn to mining and in no time got he could cut coal with the rest of us. We found him very good with income Tax returns and (he) could be very knowing of certain twists of the law which could save many from having to consult a lawyer.

Another family of interest that was very active on the hill top was Thomas Jones, new House. He built this house in one of his fields, today it is surrounded by many council houses. Thomas was again one of our early J.Ps, a man that worked very hard as a miner and councillor. He lost some of his children at an early age, I worked alongside one of his boys, all good boys to work but afflicted with bad chests which was bad for lads underground.

William James worked hard at a level he owned over at Pwlldu. He also started a bus service, did much to build up the welfare movement on the hill and other activities but died a comparatively young man. Llewellyn was also of the Dramatic Society and a reporter for the Abergavenny Chronicle until he went to the Midlands. A member of our ambulance class was Rosser Rosser, opposite lived Sam Prosser at that time. Up above Tom Watkins built a bungalow; Thomas was a haulage driver and Boilerman for the Waen Nantyglo Co. for many years. He lost a son, Willie John early in the First World War, he was a scholar of the Wesleyans Sunday School and his name is on the Roll of Honour.

A man that did much for the Sunday school and chapel was Thomas John Williams, for many years he kept the Sunday school register, gave many prizes to children who collected the most for foreign missions, helped his mother who was our chapel cleaner, lighting the boiler every Sunday to keep our chapel warm. In those days our light in the chapel were paraffin, there were at least a dozen lamps to light in winter and he saw to those things for many years

Opposite lived William Cross with two daughters, Elizabeth and Rebecca, two well respected girls that gave their whole life for the church at Mount Zion. They were both very nice singers and sang many duets together at the chapel and if any were sick they would not only visit but often give a hand Rebecca became Mrs Tom Prosser and Elizabeth Mrs Fred Clare.

Chapter 7

We come now to one more of the grand ladies of this time in the person of Mrs Moses Thomas who lost her husband under tragic circumstances at a young age; another splendid example of Christian service with the Congregational chapel as an organist and worker for this movement for many years. Then also was the Eynon family with three boys and a girl, Lilly. The father Benjamin was a very good miner and a man as straight as a gun barrel as we would say. He was no chapel goer but I never found a more honest man in my life and if he saw anything that was doubtful, if you were the King of England you would have to be told. Joe Ben, the oldest son today is a Grand Primo with the Buffs for many years and fought in the 1914 – 18 war. Tom was another brother I worked along side of in the Blackvein Colliery for some years and then we met again at Glascoed at the ordnance Factory until we retired. Tom by the way was one of the Old Blues that played on Llanelly Hill. The younger brother, Gerwyn was a school teacher in Abergavenny and also played for the Blues when they had developed into a very good soccer side with lads his own age.

A very fine character lived at Twynbarllwyn by the name of George Weeks; he came from Bath near to Bristol. I worked with him sometimes in the return airway; he told me that in his younger days he had been quite a rover; had crossed the Atlantic twice and had worked in coal seams much thicker than in this country with men of almost every nation. He had to carry a pistol to his work in the mines in America, men were so rough and your life was in danger from some men that were the elements that you worked in. The coal was so thick it was worked in galleys that tunnelled under the ground for miles. He was an old herbalist, his old mixings were horrible to take and they must have done him good he lived to be 89. When we would hold a prayer meeting on a weeknight, being the oldest member of the church nobody dared open the prayer meeting before him; he always selected the hymns, he didn't know many tunes, and one night they sung four hymns to the same tune. The younger elements have laughed over that many times. Lucky for George the hymns were all the same metre. He upset my grandmother awful one night, she being the next oldest member was expected to pray or give a testimony. They were all on their knees waiting for my gran to start but I don't know wasn't she in the mood or what she was a long time. So George Weeks stood up and said to my grandmother quite sharply, "Hasn't thee got anything to say to the Lord Mary?" At that my gran got like Will Rees's donkey, real stubborn, "You wait my time George Weeks", she snapped. That was their way in those days, straight to the point.

Now George had a son that was a very different cup of tea; he was an examiner at the Blackvein Colliery for many years; he was a lecturer for the Brecon County Council at Darrenfelen and Clydach and at that time for the Ambulance Brigade as well including Gilwern. He went further and took a masseuse certificate at the Leatherhead College. He set many fractured bones in our district, attending to many hurts which mining people would

have. He was sadly missed when through ill health he had to retire. He was also captain of our rescue team that trained at Crumlin under Mr W. Wimbourne.

My next call is a well known couple, Will Williams, Waenafon and his wife Gertrude. Here again is a lifetime of service to Mount Zion Wesleyan Chapel on the hill and is still going on after their 80 years of age. An incident happened in the life of Will when he was a young man that he never forgot. His father had died under tragic circumstances and a blizzard that arose at the time made it impossible to bury for some days. But people gathered around until this was overcome. It made him so grateful he determined to assist people in this way and has done so ever since, attending somewhere near 700 funerals. This has been the length of his gratitude. Not only attending but rendering service at the same time in many little ways. I was more that gratified to see that this was recognised on the television. His wife is still active as leader of the Bright Hour and is still doing much to influence young people to the cause; her own daughter is one with others that will carry on the good work I'm sure, it is the only one place left and it would be very sad to lose the last citadel of these things that mean so much to this fine community of Llanelly Hill.

Next door was another family that for many years meant so much to the church; George Sillman and his wife. They were very good friends of my father and mother all their lives. George was chapel steward for many years; his wife often took in our local preachers and ministers. The children with ourselves were always friendly and are today when we meet, those ties we had with the church as children still hold us.

Just a garden separated our next family who was my grandmother's brother, William Davies. He was a club footed man but as active in the mines and out as anyone else. William and his wife Margaret were the most contented people that I even knew and were strong Baptists. They were a gifted family, Minnie who later became Mrs Wilkins taught at Darrenfelen School and at Blaina and was a good accompanist and music teacher and a splendid organiser doing much work for the Welfare Movement an Llanelli Hill and she was our first lady J.P. her brother Jonah was a teacher at London. Another sister married David Matthews our County Councillor, another sister married John Turner, manager of the Co. Op. John Turner was another splendid worker of the Sunday School at the Wesleyans and would often take service at the church when it would be required. Yet another sister was teacher Maggie who taught me in the infant department, another very kindly person we children liked very much who later became Mrs Ernest Puddle. This girl had a very good contralto voice and did a few cantatas for my father in that capacity.

Then Jim Davies and Mrs Wilkins was also one of the old drama society and contributed much in those days. Our local grocer at Llammarch was John Collet, a man of substance as my father would say, a good living man and a fine local preacher even as a youngster. I always admired his discourse not only that he was a fine orator and a deep thinker, he seemed to grip the congregation when he spoke. His son Frank seems to follow much in his footsteps and for many years was much on the Wesleyans plan at the surrounding towns

and villages; another good worker at the Wesleyans and kept things going for some years. He was almost the last of that generation and was sadly missed.

My Uncle Will when after leaving Waen Llapria built a bungalow in one of Penffwyddlwm fields; later, on going to Blaenavon he sold the bungalow to David Roberts who added much to it and started his own electric light, the first lights we ever had on the hill. I can still hear the little engine going pop pop pop now in my memory. He also fed our wireless batteries for years, he was a very versatile man that got a flare for many mechanical things and regularly attended our heating system at the Wesleyans even to mending the old clock. Not only that he was a fine worker in the church and Sunday School; a chapel steward for years and taught me and other lads of my age in the Sunday School. He was a haulage driver and boiler man. His son Claude too has done much in that way.

Another family living close to the bungalow was Joseph Jones Durham, the wife and Joe never lost their Durham twang but the children who came to Wales very young all spoke as we did. They were nice people; Mrs Jones joined us at Wesleyans and attended many years. I think she found it strange at first, in those days at a prayer meeting, if someone was praying man or woman the folks around would often make in a sort of undertone such murmurings as “praise God”, “True”, “Thank God” or “Amen” as the one would be praying little comments would be made by the others. When they came out of the meeting Mrs Jones said to my mother “Whatever were they moaning about?” So my mother explained they were pleased at what the prayer had said in his or her prayer. Mrs Jones thought it all very sad, she too lost a son in the early part of the First World War by the name of Jim. The boy of that family I was friendly with as a youngster was Frank, he was a fine soccer player of the Old Blues on the hill at that time.

Then there was the Miner’s Arms which Evan James Matthews kept for many years; it was always a well conducted pub, the family were Carmel Methodists; Cliff the boy was my age and was our goal keeper for the old Blues in his younger days. Ivor the other boy opened a level at the Race Horse Cutting, the same seam of coal as Will Rees and others. Then there was Beatrice who like her mother before her had a very good soprano voice. I had a party of children at Brynmawr, 40 voices a grand bunch of kiddies. We did Jack and the Beanstalk, so good we were asked to repeat at Ebbw Vale, my two outstanding artists were Beaty (Betty?) Matthews and Edner (Edna?) Miles. I took the part of the giant and had a heavy baritone voice but both girls held their own with me and gave me all the way to go.

We seemed to have singers in every hamlet, another such was Edward James Wood that did a lot of duet singing with Bill Jenkins; on his own Bill used to sing “Father O’Flyn” very well. Down in the hollow lived Mrs Griffiths, a widow with her son Reg, another family that paid heavy for the price of coal, loosing her husband and a son at the same time. On descending the Milfrain Pit one morning the cage tangled with the guide rope tilting the men to the bottom of the shaft killing them all. Reg was a very clever boy on the piano from a very early

age yet could not play from music but was in such demand for dances because of his good timing and touch. His sister Mrs Bristow was a very good worker at the Wesleyans.

In those days many people reared their own pigs on the hilltop as a means of supply to their small income as miners. Our local slaughter man was John Powell, a good clean butcher that killed as humanely as possible but woe betides you if you didn't have plenty of hot water to hand. His son, Sidney was the same; they lived in a cluster of houses at Llammarch where ample evidence again existed of old workings from the old Balance Pit that had emptied their shale right up to the cottage door almost. In the very old days of mining pits were sunk in pairs called the upcast and downcast so that air could travel down one pit and up the other. Coal would be raised on a balance system; a big heavy tub of water lowered down one shaft could lever up a tram of coal up the other. A very crude method of bringing coal to the surface.

Chapter 8

Here lived a few families when I was a lad, Matthew Williams and his son Ashwin became one of our district councillors. David Walker, when i was a lad, was the examiner at the old Pinchy Level, he was also a local preacher with the Wesleyans. Tom, his youngest son and I went to school the same time. Lenard an older son was a deacon and conductor at Libanus Chapel in after years at Brynmawr. He was also an examiner with the Blaenavon Co. for some years; a very likable lad was Lenard, his oldest sister had lived at Markham almost from the time of the sinking of that pit in 1913.

When the Waen Nantyglo as a Co. finished it left a lot of us out of work so I with Albert the oldest son moved to Markham and stayed with Lizzie the oldest girl till we got fixed up and moved our families over. Then a younger girl Emily took up local preaching on the Wesleyans Plan and was very good. She married a young man living in a cluster of houses in the yard by the name of Tom Jones. Living right by the Pinchy Level Tom had a little brother killed by horse drawn drams of coal that were pull to an incline ready to be drawn up by a steam haulage rope to the Waenafon line for trucking. I think the children of the Sunday school sang at his funeral. Another brother taught at Crickhowell School for many years by the name of Lance. Some more families of interest lived in this yard, Richard Morgan who also was of Carmel, he moved my bit of furniture to Markham's with a little mare and float. I didn't have much in those days having been idle with the 1921 strike. My wages in Markham was £2:4:0d per week. *(£2. 20p in today's money).*

A house I used to like to visit was Trevor Mizzens; he was quite a wit in his way and would tell me some amusing stories of the old hill Top. James Rees and his wife are a very nice couple of Carmel Methodist Chapel for many years, Jim's mother before him. Jim was also a haulage driver at the new Slope until it ceased to be; so was Evan Roberts who drove the top engine for many years under the Waen Nantyglo Co. At one time his must have been a very busy occupation when there were journeys of coal to be picked up from the Pinchy Level and the black Vein Slope that at that time was raising 12 trams of coal 12 times a shift from this slope. Then there were also journeys to be picked up from the New Slope; his brother Bill Roberts doing the same on the afternoon shift.

An outstanding character employed by the Williams Caleb and Thomas Williams and Charlie Williams who were the Waen Nantyglo Co. on Llanelly Hill, who had been their clerk and right hand man was Mr Brown, not only a servant of the Co. he was regarded as a friend by them and he was very respected by every workman at the colliery. I understand he was a Church of England man and though I never saw him attend from good authority I learned he was very generous to the church and we children were never turned away when we went to him for a subscription on our foreign Mission Cards whatever denomination we belonged to. He came from a very good family that I think gave him his gentlemanly ways.

Will Roberts married Miss Maggie Fanner who was another of our very fine ladies of the Hill Top. She was a school teacher for many years, became our lady J.P. and sat on the bench at Brynmawr for some time. Here again was a lady that gave a lifetime to the Wesleyan's cause, a Sunday school superintendant for many years and other activities in the church and was sadly missed when she went to Gilwern. Still, she keeps in touch with us when she can.

Another family that came to prominence in the sporting world were Standly *(Stanley?)* Williams, he joined the Pill Harriers at Newport and won a cross country race of 15 miles three times to win a beautiful cup that was put up for the event and won many medals. He'd done service abroad in the Middle East for some years in the First World War. He always attended the Wesleyan cause from a young man and on going to Brynmawr to live he joined up with the Wesleyans there, got on the plan as a local preacher which he did till he died.

Gis younger brother Lewis was very good at this too and was cross country running at a very advanced age. Then the cousin, Rufus Williams from the Balance won the Powerhall Sprinting which was considered then a fine achievement for a local lad. I was very fond of a 80 yard dash and collected a few prizes at that myself at 18 but my father was always against this sort of sport because he always saw the danger of men betting on the side, which was of course illegal. But it went on just the same up on the mountain top.

When we were young lads no policemen could come up on us unawares so I came to learn how to play cards but one day we started to play for money. I was down to my last 3d when I won the bank. I didn't have enough money to cover the bet but one of my pals lent me enough money to cover the bets. In no time I had paid my pal for my first lay out and I just couldn't go wrong after. I had a capful of money and had just covered the bets again when I felt someone was looking on and noticed the gang had gone very quiet. I looked up, my father was leaning on his walking stick. He said "You got a lot of money there son". I hung my head in shame, I knew how dead he was against this sort of thing. He picked up my cap and money and said to the lad near to him "How much have you lost sonny?" "Oh, it's all right Mr Williams, he won it". My father repeated until he had given all the money back. He said to me, "I think your mother wants you at home" and waited until I walked sadly away. I thought when he comes home I'll be in for a good lecture but he never mentioned it again. Needless to say I never gambled on cards again.

Across to the Race Horse pub, the landlord at one time was Lou Lewis. He was cursed with a bad stammer and a short temper. One Sunday morning he had taken a short walk as far as Waen Afon Bridge that span in those days the railway line by Waen Afon station. A spruce young man walked up to Lou to inquire where the Wesleyan's Church was, he was a young minister that had just arrived at Brynmawr and as it was his first visit to Llanelly Hill was uncertain where he would turn off the Waen Afon Road. Well, he didn't have his dog collar on so he was anybody as far as Lou was concerned but Lou did try and explain: "You t t t turn here" said Lou "and thththen you gggo..." Lou got so embarrassed he suddenly blurted

out “Bugger off man; you’ll be there before I can tell you”. The minister thanked him and went away smiling.

The station master in those days was Mr Smith, at Clydach Mr Order. The stations were well kept with very nice flower beds along the platforms. The porters saw to good fires in the waiting room, paraffin lamps were used for lights on the stations. Next door to the Race Horse pub lived Herbert Ayllet. Right by the station was the Heathbush Farm where in later years the Co Op stabled its horses. Will Phillips was the owner of the Heathbush and the manager of the Co Op, His wife Clara was a fine singer and was well trained. They lost their only son in the first World War which broke Mrs Phillips up badly, she hardly ever sung after that. Across the mountain side was another farm called Waen Whyn *(Waen Wen?)* where lived two more brothers for Will Phillips, John and Matthew. Two old bachelors, they owned some cottages on the farm where a family by the name of Southcott lived for many years. The father and mother were big built people and the children took after them. The one lad, Arthur was all of 5 feet 10 at 13½ years of age. He towered over many of our teachers at school and I well remember we were all in lines one morning at school when one of the male teachers, who had taken a keen dislike to Arthur and had provoked him for some time, got the shock of his life when Arthur picked him up off the ground and threw him down quite heavily and started to lay into him. It took the headmaster and another teacher to pull Arthur off. Another brother by the name of Fred was killed at the Milfrain Pit. Another brother, not as tall as Arthur too up boxing, he was heavily built and became a sparring partner for Georgie James of Cwm and for other heavyweights but took this sport up rather late in life.

On this same mountain side lived for many years Mrs Rees who was a widow and must have worked hard in those days to rear a family until they could fend for themselves. Her son Will, also worked a level on the Waen Afon road. Another son of my own age was Redvers, as a boy he was an excellent swimmer, if he had the chances of children today he would have gone a long way.

It’s a long walk from Mrs Rees to Blaen Ddaear but a character lived there it would br wrong to leave out. He was Thomas Lewis, he was once described to me as one of God’s gentlemen which he surely was. He lived in this out of the way spot with three daughters who were all by the name of Baldwin. Every Sunday morning and night you would see him wending his way to the Wesleyan Chapel with about a dozen or 14 children to the service. They always sat in the first two seats in the middle pew of the chapel. A bag of sweets would be handed along the two rows of children, each child would take one each and the bag with what was left was handed back to the old gent. Sometimes the youngest would drop off to sleep, the old chap would pick him or her up, nurse them to the end of the service. He was very kind to the children and was well respected in the whole of the district for his kindly ways.

As I cross the mountain side I see a figure behind me with a peculiar gait, he is carrying a heavy bend of leather, he is our local cobbler and shoe maker. When he measured you for a

pair of boots or shoes you had something that would last. He was a club foot man but he certainly knew his job, only the best for Joe Button. He had just carried his bend of leather from Waen Afon station, a distance of nearly three miles, a wonderful craftsman and quite a philosopher when you could get a chat with him.

As he ambled on and disappeared in the distance I reflected there had not only been gold in dem darn hills but culture also.

W. J. Williams. 1970.

There seemed to be a section missing, this is a short piece I came across though unsure where it went in the memoir.

A farmer come miner that lived at Waen Llapria was Rosser Rosser. Quite a few had double names like this, I often wondered as a boy Morgan Morgan, Robert Roberts, Richard Richards, Evan Evans and others I can remember. It must be a Welsh custom. Well, Rosser did a little farming, a good miner, remaining a bachelor and was very interested in many things and was well read. A keen ambulance man and content with his lot; his fields around his cottage were small but with good mountain rights, his few sheep always looked well. In one of his fields in the old days was a spring in where a baptising pool had been built by the Baptist fraternity. It was used for some years although some distance from Beersheba Chapel. There is a lady living in Brynmawr that with her father and mother were the first people to be baptised at this pool. She is coming up to her 98 birthday *(this is in 1970)* and is Mrs Rees Pritchard and well remembers this occasion, she was 16 years old at the time. In later years a baptising pool was built at Darrenfelen outside the school room of Beersheba Church. The presiding minister was the Rev. Tegreth Phillips who did the baptising at this particular occasion. He was I understand the son of John Phillips that lived at the Mount.