

Memories

Of

Ty Sara

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It is a long time since I thought about the visits made to Ty Sara of the people I went there with and of the happy times we had together.

Most of the boys and girls – possibly not all – were members of “The Woodcrafters” (The Order of Woodcraft Chivalry) an organisation that fostered a healthy way of living for young people, walking, camping, cycling, cooking and cleaning when necessary! It was hoped that under such influences we would grow up to be accredited members of the establishment, most of the friends I remember did.

Once or twice weekly young people met, most of the times at Community House, King St., Brynmawr, opposite the fish shop. Community House is no longer there it burned down some years later. We always sat in a circle usually on the hard wooden floor around an imitation fire made of red electric light bulbs and listened to stories told by our leaders, sang songs, read poems and discussed events, we all were encouraged to take part. To us, this was an exciting, interesting, happening, we met our peers and mixed with our seniors, we never drank alcohol and never smoked. I cannot remember ever having had anything to eat although there was a fish and chip shop opposite and we went home early after the meeting was over.

Our uniforms, those who were lucky enough to have them were all green like the countryside and symbolic of a green way of living. I had a green four gored corduroy velvet skirt and a beret it is hoped I had a top as well but that does not come to mind. I still had that skirt many years later.

At week-ends during the summer and at school holidays we were able to meet – by arrangement – our leaders at an old double fronted derelict stone house on the Llangynidr/Crickhowell mountain, the house was called “Ty Sara “ and belonged to “The Society of Friends” who restored it somewhat by relaying a new wooden floor upstairs, possibly they did other repairs, that I am not certain about.

There was another house some distance away called “Blaenonau”, I never visited there, the same organisation owned it, but that was used by “The Boys Club” and Mr Stan Morgan, Twyncynghordy Farm, Brynmawr ran it solely for boys. Stan Morgan later went into the Navy. Rumour had it that “Blaenonau” had a swimming pool – if it did, I never met anyone who had used it or had even seen it.

The qualification for a few days or a week-end “ treat” at “Ty Sara” was in the form of a test – one had to be able to walk or cycle, whatever the weather, over the Llangynidr Mountain road or moor in a specified amount of time with a rucksack of a specific weight on one’s back. The rucksack contained a sleeping bag and a selection of foodstuffs, which were to be pooled for the benefit of the others staying at the same time, they shared theirs and we shared ours, no one ever complained, it was very fair and we learned many lessons.

It always seemed to be hot during those summers. On my first visit my friend and I decided to cycle to the house, it would be quicker, and easier the “test” was going to be “snipsy”. Getting there was strenuous enough but returning home we found it was not just the achievement of getting there, it was the effort of getting home as well, even without the groceries the return journey was real hard work, very little riding and a lot of pushing up all those hills and it was hot. Cycling was not a good idea.

Upon arrival at base there were twigs to be collected, fires had to be lit and the house opened up, sometimes it had to be aired and put in order ready for our first meal which was cooked in the open, It never rained, maybe I was lucky or perhaps times were different for me then. Time spent there consisted of both duties and pleasure, the boys chopped wood and kept the fires going, the girls learned household duties, we all helped each other and we all enjoyed the fine, sometimes cold, evenings around the camp fire, usually singing. All too soon it was time to return home travelling by the same method – shanks' pony or cycling. It was a privilege and we were proud when we were asked if we felt capable of doing the "Test" and thus earning a visit. I only remember doing that test once but although I visited the house many times I am sure it was at the suggestion of some of the elders.

The older boys and girls visited "Ty Sara" more often, they were expected to supervise and take care of the younger ones, boys slept under canvass and the girls slept indoors unless the weather was wet then we were all segregated within the house. I seem to remember two large bedrooms and one or two rooms downstairs, we all had sleeping bags not the type we have today, our sleeping bags were thicker and heavier, and we used them to sleep on the floor, there was the minimum amount of furniture downstairs, one large table and one or two benches I have no remembrance of a kitchen but I was one of the younger ones not expected to cook a great deal, bit of a risk I imagine. Water, which was very cold, was available from a mountain stream, which ran behind the house, this on occasions was dammed to make a small pool in which we were able to bathe. Toilet facilities were outside in a shed and when used a bucket of water was provided, but that is unclear, not a memory anyone would wish to dwell upon.

Sadly some of our older members of those days are no longer with us, two who were in charge of the group I belonged to Jim and Marie Werrett were a young married couple, they must have spent many hours with other groups as well. Many of the leaders were also our seniors at Brynmawr County School one I can think of – Joe Pritchard, mainly because Joe told such interesting stories, some we believed, some we didn't, but there were many others, many were children of people closely associated with the "Society of Friends" a religious group, Quakers who came from many parts of the British Isles to help the townspeople of Brynmawr during the depression, much of which has recently been accurately or inaccurately written about.

Once a year a "Folk Moot" (a gathering) was held, these were "Woodcrafters" from everywhere –from other countries as well, all joining together, meeting and socialising with each other and making new friends for two days. I remember two "Folk Moots" during my time with the "Woodcrafters" one at Salisbury and the other at Normandy – unfortunately, my mother was "not entirely happy with the whole thing" as she expressed herself, so I was not allowed to go, that is not a happy memory, mainly because my best friend was able to go, (she was still my best friend until last year, when she died very suddenly) we were friends for most of our lives, her mother had no qualms it would seem.

My husband and sister-in-law – also fellow woodcrafters – reminisce with me when we are together their memories are much the same as mine.

Many of the children who were able to enjoy the privileges offered to them during these times went on to become doctors, lawyers, teachers and professional men and women, many went into the armed

forces during World War II later making their homes away from the area. In 1936 – 1939 when money was short and the future seemed bleak for young people this organisation filled a gap that was sorely needed. The house is now a complete ruin, it is difficult to find. At the outbreak of war all the leaders left many going back from whence they came, others going into the armed forces the younger ones not in a position to take on responsibilities, especially at such a time. As it happened the war went on for longer than anyone expected, the house and the intention became forgotten.

I am told "The Woodcrafters" still exist but not to my knowledge in this area.

One small coincidence that comes to mind, our greeting upon meeting each other was an outstretched right arm and the words "Blue Skies" – we never marched!

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