

CHAPTER I

Viewed from the Llanhilleth mountain, a section of Abertillery looks like a giant sarcophagus whose head lies near the bald Cefn Hill while the rest of the body sprawls athwart the slopes into the valley. The grey-blue of roof tiles and the faded red of the crests create this illusion.

A hundred years ago a very different panorama would have emerged. Ty Samys Farm nestling under the brow of the hill, the historic Blaenau Gwent Baptist Church and other scattered buildings formed a pattern amid green tones much more pleasing to behold. Even the Wooden Houses, overlooking the cricket field seemed more important. The narrow Ebbw River winding along the bottom of the valley would have shown a sparkling life, now sullen in its flow. The mantle of the towering Aracl mountain was not so threadbare.

The Wooden Houses sheltered the unwitting executioners of this delightful pastoral scene - the workmen who sank the Roseheyworth Colliery shaft in 1851. The peace and quietude of the valley was shattered by the roar of explosions as they dynamited the hard rock. These workmen waged day by day an unceasing war so that others might wrest from nature the black wealth of the coal seams. These operations brought death to beautiful scenery, but death paid a dividend. The Lancaster Iron, Steel & Coal Co., owners of the Roseheyworth Colliery, erected five rows of stone houses at Blaenau Gwent in 1883. Tudor, a building contractor, added numerous houses and so did Meeker. Between them they filled the green fields with their long rows of houses of monotonous design.

The Roseheyworth Colliery was significant for its unusual isolation from dwelling places of a modern kind. The nearest group was the Blaenau Gwent Rows, about a mile away, but before they were built the Wooden Houses, or Huts as they were more familiarly known, were the closest.

The Wooden Huts are worthy of remembrance because they housed men and their families who worked underground and on the surface of the Roseheyworth Colliery. These members of the mining community shared the low regard in which it was held by some of the educated, wealthy and powerful members of society. The quaffing of immense quantities of beer, the brawling in the streets, the use of obscene language and the beating of wives and children was viewed with displeasure by the Church dignitaries. They seemed to overlook the tremendous economic importance of the labour power of these people, from which stemmed the wealth of the nation. Conveniently enough they overlooked the wine cellars and passion for liquor of the rich and their Foreign Policies which drenched mankind in blood.

A flight of stone steps led steeply down into the yard of No. 5, Wooden Huts. The house boasted a tiled roof with a stone chimney and stone foundations. The walls were made of overlapping sections of wood,

while the interior consisted of a kitchen, two bedrooms and a parlour. The kitchen was spacious and the parlour would be more truthfully described as a bed sitting room. The bedrooms were narrow, each allowing space for only one bed. There were two windows at the front and two at the back of the house, a front door, back door, small pantry, coalhouse, outhouse and a henhouse completed the picture of the house frontage. Behind the house were long gardens reaching almost to the railway line. This dwelling place was typical of all the rest in the row. There were at one time twelve houses in three groups in this row, with a reasonable safety margin in case of fire between them. They were completely exposed to the elements, being devoid of any sheltering belt of trees.

CHAPTER II

The winter wind howled with unrelenting fury as a silent figure ploughed through the mud and slush of the Roseheyworth Road. Slowly he made his way onward in a Southerly direction until he reached the Big Tree. Passing this, he eventually came to the Stile which was set between the wire fencing. There was no sign of the familiar Black Road as he climbed over the stile and heaved himself forward. The road was obliterated by the blinding snowstorm. Vast aerial columns hurtled against the impregnable earth and a sea of whiteness and darkness enveloped him. Invisible needles pricked his ears and cheeks as he moved downward over the field. He plunged into a snow filled hollow and struggling out of it floundered over a bank. Recovering, he shielded his face and peered ahead. A small narrow roofed building covered thickly with snow appeared to his seeking eyes and gave him his bearings in the storm. This building was the lavatory which was the only convenience for four families and primitive in its utility. This tarred wooden structure was built against the rough track which served for a road and was isolated from the houses. He knew now that a dozen paces from this place would bring him to the steps of his house. At last he was almost home, but when he reached the top of the steps he hesitated because he was a short man and the snow was very deep. He cautiously went down the first few steps but was soon waist deep in snow and each movement found him deeper still until he was in it up to his neck. The house was in darkness and he shouted aloud for help from his snowy tomb. It seemed ages before a light suddenly flickered in the kitchen window and the door opened.

"My goodness gracious", exclaimed his wife, "snow! well I never did. Is that you Jont?"

"Aye its me mam, I'm in a bit of a pickle. You'll have to dig me out." Mrs. Jones found the small fire shovel and hastily attacked the wall of snow in front of her. A strong, well built woman, she soon made it possible for her husband to free himself. Once inside the house, she set about lighting the fire while he divested himself of his outer clothing and improvised leggings. He was

soon warming himself by the blaze. They drank hot cups of tea and felt none the worse for their early morning adventure. Their baby in bed, missing its mother's warmth, began to cry and Mary went in to console it. Jonathan hitched the Dutch Oven to the bottom bar of the fire grate. The older children awoke hungry, the fragrance of egg and bacon wafting to their nostrils from the kitchen. They stole out to the fire and watched their father eating his breakfast. They were, of course, awake much too early but he did not scold them. Before he finished he cut thick slices of bread and dipped them into the savoury bacon fat. They devoured the portions while stealing affectionate glances at their stern looking father.

Children who get up early go to bed early was the rule in the Wooden Huts. It was customary for mothers, after tucking the children into bed, to pay neighbourly visits, but such a custom was to have fatal consequences. On Saturday night, 11th April, in the year 1911, a fire broke out which destroyed the block of houses nearest to the Railway Crossing. Two children belonging to Mr. & Mrs. J. Flook were burned to death. Both of them were boys. It was rumoured that a candle flame had set alight the bed clothes. Billowing clouds of smoke filled the bedroom and someone attempting a rescue broke the window. The whole house was soon ablaze. Strong men watched helplessly while the tragedy was enacted. The occupants of the other houses in the block were desperately trying to salvage all their belongings. The fire spread to the adjoining house and great flames shot up through the roofing. It was an act of desecration because the people involved had already tidied the graves of departed loved ones and the following day was Palm Sunday. When the fire had spent itself, two houses were completely burned out, while the third was rendered almost uninhabitable. Only the fourth and last house was untouched. Three families on that tragic night were rendered homeless and full of despair. The parents of the two victims were plunged into heart breaking sorrow. A wave of horror spread over the neighbourhood which was followed by charitable deeds for which working people are always famous. The families were given shelter among friends and neighbours and when accommodation was finally found for them, sheets, blankets, bedsteads and even furniture were given to them. The last house soon became vacant for obvious reasons and was pulled down.

The process of elimination had begun in a most horrifying manner. There were once twelve houses and now only eight remained. The eight houses were in almost direct line with the County Grammar School and could not have been more oddly contrasted. South American history reveals that several of the great cities which once flourished were destroyed in the march of time, but a remnant of the Mayan Indian Civilization survived and dwelt in houses of clay and wood. This seems to point out that the qualities of endurance and adaptability in human experience are the most important factors. If such reasoning be valid, it is also true of the people who lived in the Wooden Huts. They were the Lloyds, the Perretts, the Yemms and the Jones'. These lived in the first block of Huts nearest to the County School. Then in the centre block the Jones', the Thomas', the Axfords and the Haytors.

Mrs. Lloyd was a jolly woman who enjoyed life immensely. She was a widow with six children. The youngest, named Frank, died when quite young. Arthur, the eldest, was listed as missing during the First World War. The day when she received the news was fateful to her peace of mind. She was not alone in this, for children everywhere were uneasy when they gazed into so many sad faces. One of these children one day was esconced behind an angle of the foundations of one of the destroyed houses. He was surreptitiously eating currants from a small bag which he had stolen from the pantry. He imagined that Germans were great earwigs which would soon be crawling up over the White Cliffs of Dover, mirroring in his little mind the anxiety of older people whom he had heard discussing the first battle of the Marne, when the German Armies threatened Paris. Mrs. Lloyd to her dying day was a determined opponent of wars whatever their designation and hated the very sight of uniforms. Even the pillbox hat of the Boys' Brigade and the white haversack and belt proudly worn by the boys would bring forth grim warnings to the wears, 'don't you wear those silly things, they will only make soldiers out of you and get you killed.' Mrs. Lloyds' lodger, old Tom 'Tackler' was very absent minded and was the cause of much innocent fun.

Bill Perrett, George Thomas, Francis Yemm and Owen Haytor were called to the Colours, but they returned. George Bennett from Frome in Somerset, who lodged with Mrs. Thomas was also called away. He did not return to the Wooden Huts. William Axford who hailed from Yorkshire was a veteran of the South African Campaign. Mrs. Perrett and Morgan who lodged with her were the oldest occupants. To the boy who often ran errands for them they seemed to belong to a different world. The tight waisted voluminous dress of the old lady and the frock tailed coat and bowler hat of the old gentleman gave this impression. Old people always hold a curious attraction for the young ones and the errand boy was fascinated by the shuffling walk and keen glance of Morgan and the shrewd but kindly attention of Mrs. Perrett. However, a ride in Morgan's low flat cart and the jingling of the harness as the horse plodded along was the most captivating experience. One cold, dismal morning the old horse was found dead in a ditch near the school.

Everyone seemed to keep poultry and it was not unusual to see chickens confidently strutting around the kitchens on the sanded flagstones. Indeed, when they were hungry and the housewife's attention was distracted they would fly up to the table and peck away at the bread or whatever they fancied and even desecrate this sacred spot by leaving their droppings in sugar basin or butter dish.

Mrs. Lloyd had a hen which laid eggs with unfailing regularity, but one day it disappeared. Her children searched everywhere along the fields and in the long grassy banks of the railway line but failed to find it. For days they kept a look out but there was no sign of its whereabouts. Mrs. Lloyd resigned herself to the loss, but one morning after releasing her poultry from the henhouse she saw a hen with a small brood coming towards her. To her amazement it turned out to be the one that she had lost.

Several yards between the steps of No. 3 and the rough track was a stable. Mr. Yemm kept within it a horse and trap. His son Francis served overseas in

the First World War and was attached to the R.A.M.C. He was employed at the Roseheyworth Colliery and was a surface man. One day, he was involved in an accident and lost a hand, but undaunted he overcame this disability. He served the constituents of the North Ward as a Labour Reform Councillor for many years and was a loyal, energetic representative. Mr. Charlie Jones was probably the most successful gardener. His long gardens teemed with all kinds of vegetables. He kept a lot of chickens and had a hand machine for crushing pieces of broken crockery to make grit for them. He was an Onsetter at Roseheyworth Colliery. He and his wife lived at No. 4 the end house of the first block.

If in those days you had a tolerable reason for visiting No. 5 you would have been admitted, without delay. While sipping your cup of tea you would have seen upon the top shelf of the dresser a large meat dish. You would have remarked upon its excellence and regal dignity in such humble surroundings. A truly noble dish and if you asked about its quality you would have been told that it was Crown China. None of your glazed earthenware, but honest to goodness china, hand painted and a work of art. Grandmother Stafford had it given to her while in service at a well to do house. Six dinner plates which accompanied the wedding present became so faded and cracked that they were thrown away as useless. The dish survives without a flaw. They tried but could not ascertain its date or age.

Mrs. Jones sometimes related a remarkable story about her father John Stafford. He claimed that he was of Norman descent and had in his possession a will and testament which he believed contained sufficient proof. He was known to state that not only was he of noble descent but that there were millions of pounds held in Chancery that rightly belonged to him. There were others who believed that he and his family should have resided in Thornbury Castle, not 103, Tillery Road, Abertillery. John Stafford had a roaming disposition and despite family ties he went as far afield as Russia. He worked in a mine owned by an English Company. He returned for a holiday and afterwards went back. When he finally reached home he was penniless and the soles of his boots were worn completely away and the insides covered with blood. He had been compelled to walk from Liverpool, where the cargo boat had docked, to Abertillery. He was driven from Russia by an upsurge of National feeling against foreign ownership of the mines which reached a peak of violence in 1905. Originally of great strength, he was now a broken man. In 1898, he had taken two of his sons, George and Tom and a son-in-law Jonathan Jones and a Mr. Bryant to Ireland. They worked in a coal mine probably owned by an English Company which was situated six miles outside Dublin town. Unhappily for them there was angry feeling against foreigners and on one occasion stones were thrown at them. The deputies at the Colliery were equipped with firearms to protect themselves. Strange to relate, Jonathan went alone into Dublin one Saturday evening and returned unmolested. The working conditions in the mine were bad and they came away sadly disillusioned, and penniless to Monmouthshire. They all had to walk from Liverpool. John Stafford lived only two years after his return from Russia. He was stricken with a blood disease and was attended by Dr. N. Rocyn Jones. He was buried in Blaenau Gwent Churchyard on 7th June, 1907. The grave is unique because it contains the only Staffords of that name buried in

the whole cemetery. Mary Stafford, the wife of Jonathan, was thus possibly of noble descent.

Jonathan Jones was born in Blaenau Gwent Rows and played for the Blaenau Gwent rugby team before the turn of the century at inside half. He tried to join up for the South African War but he was too short. He had also belonged to a boxing team which had its headquarters in the cellars of "The Glyn" public house. A broad minded, intelligent man, he never swerved from his loyalty to his wife and family. He was respected by the workmen at Roseheyworth. Door boy, collier's helper, collier, haulier, master haulier and deputy fireman were his varied employments. He was deeply religious and more than once debated with the Evolutionists in the corn shop at Abertillery. On one occasion he was opposed by a clever student of Darwin. The owner of the corn shop was the chairman and he called upon the young man to open the discussion. He rose and confidently dealt with the subject matter and delved into the primal facts of Evolution. The small audience was carried away with his eloquence. He gave a chemical formula which he believed provided irreputable proof of his contentions and sat down very pleased with himself. Jonathan's eyes had glinted and a faint smile puckered his mouth when the formula was announced. He was a keen bird fancier and possessed many breeding cages at No. 5. He stood up and congratulated the young student on the way he had presented his case. He then attacked the proposition. "Young man, you have evinced knowledge and have shown us things which we did not see before, but I doubt very much whether you understood what you were talking about. For instance, the formula which seemed to mean so much to you is an explosive mixture which could blow us all through the roof of this cornshop. You must take much more care when you are speaking. The muffler-wearing miner could be very disconcerting at times and took a particular joy in deflating conceit.

Jonathan was a member of the Abertillery Choral Society which was under the conductership of Mr. Stephens. The choir was competing in an Eisteddfod. It merited resounding applause and was confident that the honours of the contest would come to Abertillery and Monmouthshire. The North Staffordshire choir was next and filing on to the platform stood waiting. A great hush fell upon the audience as an old man with white flowing hair was pushed up the aisle in a bathchair. He was placed before his choir and when he looked up every eye was fixed upon him. The silence was almost unbearable. He nodded with a gentle smile at the pianist and the first chords rang out. Lifting a withered finger he beat the time and glorious singing filled the air. It captivated the listeners with its thrilling awe inspiring mastery. The old conductor's face glowed with pleasure and emotion and finally with a last gesture from that tenuous hand they were seated. Joy and happiness surged through that great throng. They had experienced fulfilment in the most wonderful singing that they had ever heard. Although the competitive spirit was keen no-one begrudged the English choir the honours in this blood stirring affray. There was displayed the most perfect and pleasant compulsion that they had ever known in a conductor. So commented Jonathan and his wife. He was a choir leader himself in after years and he rarely used a baton.

CHAPTER III

The Holly Wood had a peculiar charm for the children of the Wooden Huts. It was adjacent to the Big Tree and the County School playing fields. The ragamuffins gathered forget-me-nots, violets and primroses among the trees and dust laden would drink from the gurgling spring. In the season of drought they would carry its ice cold water in bottles, kettles and earthenware jars loaned by Saxons of Brynmawr.

On summer evenings we watched the dancing couples sedately twirl around the Bandstand while the music enthralled us as we lounged on the garden seats.

CHAPTER IV

At No. 6 resided Mrs. Thomas and her three sons and a daughter. George and Jim worked at the Cwmtillery Colliery and Jack was an A.B. in the Royal Navy. Mr. William Thomas before his demise was a haulier underground at Roseheyworth.

Mr. William Axford was a life long worker underground at Cwmtillery. His son, Lionel, served in the R.A.F. Mr. Haytor lived in No. 8 with his son Owen and daughter Elizabeth. Owen was a romantic character to the children of the neighbourhood because he found employment with visiting fairs and circuses and travelled far afield with them.

Mr. Jack Flock of the ill fated No. 9 worked underground at Roseheyworth and was a keen rugby follower.

Mr. Walter Perrett, lived in one of the burned out residences and ever since the fire, in the Bottom Row, Blaenau Gwent. He worked long and faithfully as a surface haulier at Roseheyworth and since his retirement his son Frank has taken his place.

Mr. Jones, 'Beard' and his family and Mr. & Mrs. Phillips who occupied two of the Huts had to find dwellings elsewhere in Abertillery.

When Mr. James Butler and his wife vacated No. 7, they lived there prior to Mr. & Mrs. W. Axford, they resided in the third row, Blaenau Gwent.

Mr. Haytor and his daughter also left after the fire and No. 8 was then occupied by Mr. & Mrs. Richard Gibbs.

The people of the Wooden Huts had a good view of the cricket ground and some of the older ones were content to watch a game in progress from their vantage point. The youngsters invariably liked a close up of such an event especially when Hugh Jones of Panteg was wielding the willow, and smiting the leather high to fall on to the Railway track or on to the bank near the Pavilion. We marvelled at the dexterity of Wilcox who kept the batsmen's feet pinned to the white line, and weebetide the one who ventured out and missed the ball.

CHAPTER V

Sometimes we were given the privilege of visiting the Cider House Farm at Haymaking time. Mrs. Lloyd's sister Liza Ann was the farmer's wife. We would worry our parents for some sandwiches and away we would go down over the railway crossing and up through the park until we came to the Roseheyworth tip. Here we crossed over the footbridge from which it was believed in the year 1906 two boys had fallen into the Ebbw which was in full flood and were drowned. Moving up the pathway we soon arrived at the cow shed adjoining the farm, the pungent smell of cow's dung assailing our nostrils. Afterwards we revelled in the hay and later gathering luscious blackberries from the hedges were in our seventh heaven.

Due East from the Wooden Huts there sloped upward two large fields divided by a narrow strip called the Black Road. On occasion a horse or two would be pastured in these fields. Many young people found them convenient for football practise including the County School pupils. Full scale matches were also played by the young men in the vicinity. Rarely were the fields unoccupied in the football season. Soccer and rugby football were played. When the football which served the boys of the Huts was under repair, they would be on the look out for someone entering the field with one. On one such occasion a youngster donning an old pair of working boots belonging to his father sallied forth. The good natured students allowed him to enter into the play and when he dribbled the soccer ball Tom Waters and Bill Abrahams laughed heartily and dubbed him Puss in Boots. We held our Winter sports on a marshy, uneven part of the field. When it was frozen over, it was difficult to negotiate so out would come the home made toboggans and even old tin baths in which we would shoot down over the ice. Those fields were a boon to children and parents alike. Of course, there were people strange and fearful to boys and girls who visited the Huts such as gypsies from whom they would hide behind their mother's skirts. Formerly when the fields were cultivated and they were sent to get warm sweet milk from Juke's farm, the stray sheep or cow would frighten some of the children. When the man in clerical clothes appeared amongst them while they were at play they were at first startled and afterwards pleased. His reassuring smile and the gift of pennies added to their happiness. The almost legendary figure of the Rev. Towy Evans on his way to comfort these rather out of the way folk. When Mrs. Lloyd's son was missing and others too were anxious about their soldier sons he came to minister to their needs and was with them on the tragic occasion when the fire had occurred a few year's before. He wielded great ministerial authority in Blaenau Gwent and was not aware of the almost complete change that was to take place after the 1914-18 war came to an end. Both in the authority of the ministers and allegiance to the Church for he died in 1916. But of the need for better and more houses he was surely aware. Great plans were put forward in the Abertillery Council Chambers which included a new housing site and a new tarmac road. Already Mr. Tudor had erected some fine big houses which fronted the County School and displaced the solitary farm which belonged to Farmer Jones. The tumbledown little farm set within a morass of mud and cow's dung came to an end and not too soon for Mrs. Jones carrying her baby over the field on a dark night had fallen over a sleeping cow.

The new plans brought light in darkness and probably a new status in society for the people of the Wooden Houses. They were looked down upon by people who resided in more portentous homes.

The growing lads and lassies saw in the encroachment of new houses upon their playing fields a challenge to their prowess in climbing high walls, tall trees, and the roofs of the Wooden Huts. When the carpenters finished their day's work and had departed for home the ragamuffins evading the watchman's eye would enter these new structures and start acrobatic tricks. A fall from the joist's only added to their desire to try again.

The laying of the new road attracted them and they watched the workmen laying stones edge down to form the first solid bedding. They listened to the grinding noise the steam roller made on its relentless journey and watched with awe the black moustached driver sweating on his perch near the hissing boiler. The smell of hot tar and eventually the long winding ribbon of the new Roseheyworth road stretched into the distance, a white gleaming phenomenon.

The Wooden Houses were doomed by the new building project. Mr. & Mrs. Jonathan Jones were first to leave and moved their belongings on a home-made wheelbarrow. It was a hot sweltering day and everyone of the family were glad when the task was completed. The Black Road never was so long or difficult to climb as on that day in the summer of 1921. The steep pull up Ty Bryn road to No. 28, Blaenau Gwent Rows exhausted everyone.

The year 1925 saw the last of the Wooden Houses doomed by the new building project and pulled down. (Better houses were built on their foundations). For seventy years they had borne the brunt of storms and hot sunshine.

The old rutted waggon road of Roseheyworth disappeared too for progress with its kind unkindly wand had touched them.

Twenty seven years have passed by but still they are remembered. Mr. & Mrs. Charlie Jones must surely bring to mind the happy as well as sad times that were spent in them. Mrs. William Axford widowed and aged but still pleasant and active often must recall the time when her children were young, when everything which she held most precious filled her life. The neighbours which then lived on each side of them and helped in the common need have passed on by, but the children who themselves are ageing or beginning to grow old still think of those joyful times they spent within and without the Wooden Houses.