

Telling Our Stories: The Welsh in Washington
By Alan Upshall, Puget Sound Welsh Association

This is the first in a series of the “Telling Our Stories” feature to celebrate the 25th Anniversary of the Ethnic Heritage Council. The Filipino community will be featured in the October issue.

In the mid 1990s, members of the Puget Sound Welsh Association realized that much of the history of the Welsh in the region was in danger of being lost forever. We decided to make a start at compiling the stories of some of the older members of the community--and of anyone else with a Welsh story to tell. We wanted to shed light on how the Welsh lived, worked, and survived in their new homeland. **We wanted to know more about newspaper accounts that described “selling off the Welsh tract” in Seattle and the fact that Haller Lake was originally called “Welsh Lake” on the old maps.** So we bought twelve tape recorders and formed a team of interviewers and transcribers to travel the state.

Our team was on a part-time mission that took over two years. We recorded conversations and collected photographs. We heard wonderful stories of life, travel and personalities, many of them having a profound effect on us. One day I was interviewing David Davies, when he pulled out a scrapbook of his visit to relatives in Wales. My eyes nearly popped out of my head when I saw that his first picture was of William Street in Ystrad Rhondda, with my father’s grocery shop and our house right in the middle. No, we were not related, but he was related to a family further down the street.

Reading the headstones in the cemeteries of Black Diamond, Roslyn and Snohomish tell us that the main immigrant influx to the state came in the mid- to late-1800’s to early 1900’s. Black Diamond and Roslyn had significant Welsh communities because of coal. Welsh miners were trained in the coal mines of South Wales and often came to Washington via the coal mines of Pennsylvania or California. They were highly valued workers and took leadership roles in the mines. The Black Diamond Museum has excellent displays of photographs and histories of the roles Welsh miners took in the industry and in the townships. Most of the Welsh in the mining community came from South Wales, while emigrants from North Wales tended to be farmers. Pike Place Market in downtown Seattle had several stalls run by Welsh immigrant families who sold dairy and meat products.

These occupations did not last long, however. The children soon assimilated into other walks of life and into business and leadership roles in city life.

For many of the early immigrants to the Seattle area the Welsh Church was the focal point of life. The first church built in Seattle quickly became too small, and a second was built in 1893 on the corner of 10th and John Streets. It was demolished in 1956 because of declining membership and because children and grandchildren were becoming “American” and losing the native language. While ‘mams and dads’ spoke in Welsh to each other and often to the children, English was the future.

Many Welsh immigrants found other things to do on Sunday, but once a year even they would congregate for the annual traditional Gymanfa Ganu (Gum-an-va Gaanee) (Hymn Sing), a carry over from their Welsh heritage. In the 1880’s the religious revival was particularly strong in Wales. During this period, people would gather and just sing hymns, sometimes all day. Today, even amongst the non-religious, every Welsh community across the globe has its annual Gymanfa Ganu. The Puget Sound is no exception. There are records of Welsh hymn sings in Seattle and Renton in the 1920’s and at the World’s Fair in Seattle in 1952. The Puget Sound Welsh Association keeps the annual tradition alive holding its Gymanfa at the St Andrew’s Church on 80th St. N.W. (Without a Welsh Church, where better to go than to our Scottish cousins?) St. Andrews also plays host to the annual March first (or nearest Sunday) St. David’s Day concert celebrating Wales’ National Saint.

Some of the stories we collected have been compiled into a publication: **Notes from the Past: Conversations with the Welsh of the Puget Sound Region**, published by the Puget Sound Welsh Association. There is much more to do. We are still collecting material with a view to a second volume that will include more historical details as well as stories of more recent immigrations. We also wish to describe what has become of descendants of the earliest families. For more information, please contact Alan Upshall at aupshall@hotmail.com.

Alan Upshall, Ph.D., was born and raised in Wales and emigrated with his family to Kenmore, WA in 1984. He is a consultant to the biotechnology industry.