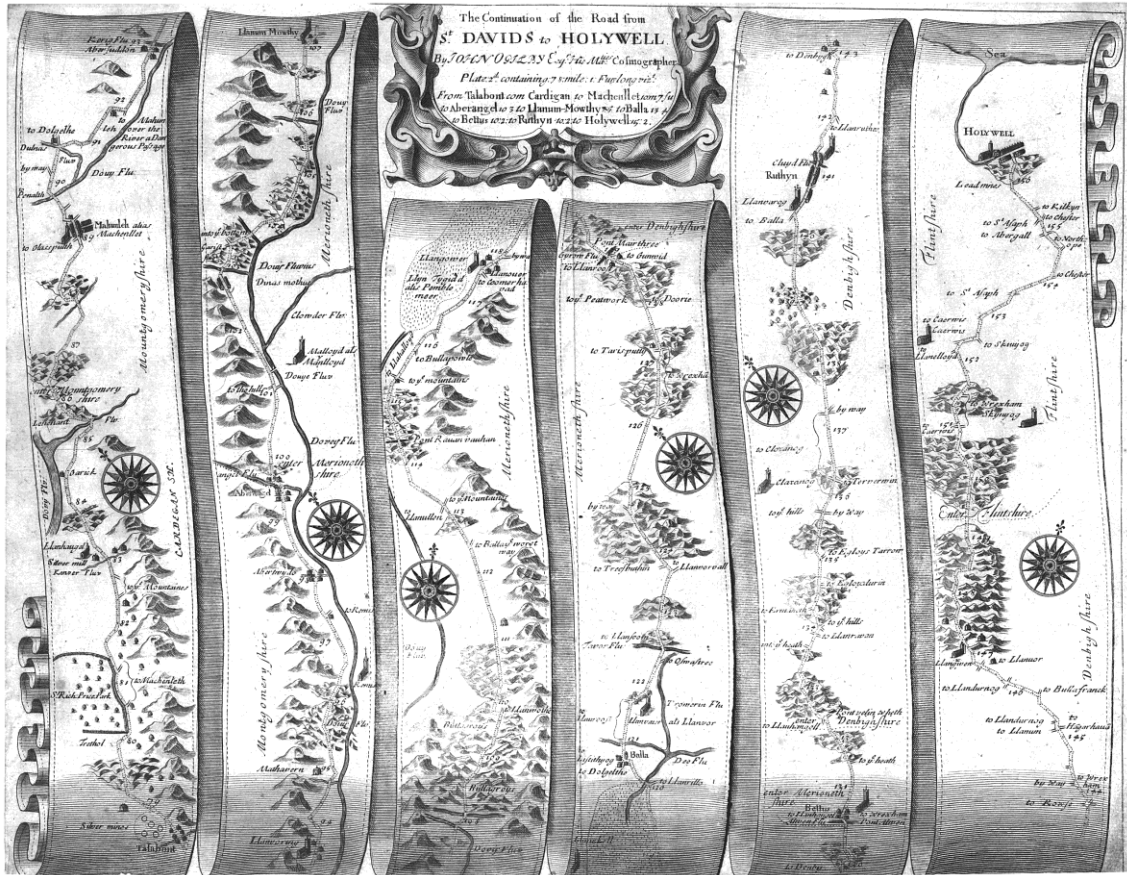


TALES OF WALES

by

BILL NORRINGTON



Dedicated to my wonderful Welsh wife, Val, whose advice still rings in my ears:
"Keep right on to the end of the road; keep right on round the bend!"

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INTRODUCTION

I remember a '70s *New Yorker* cartoon that depicted a group of affluent parents at a cocktail party. Each one of them was holding a “craft” item, such as a candle, or a leather belt, or a wood carving behind their back. And one was saying, “My boy graduated from Yale in '65. You should see what he's doing now!” It rang a bell.

My craft career began with a solid liberal arts education at an American Ivy League college that was designed to make me a “well rounded man.” We're talking about the 60's--about the time of Vietnam and hippies, flower children and the Beatles, about students being killed at Kent State by the National Guard, about riots at the Universities of California. The smell of marijuana drifted across college campuses, students became politically aware and active, the establishment became reactionary, and all the answers, to quote Dylan, were “blowin' in the wind.”

While at Dartmouth College, I majored in French, minored in English, and, apart from one non-credit session in sculpture, I ended up with no experience in art, art history, or any of the so-called crafts such as pottery, woodwork, or whatever. In 1967 I graduated and went to a West Coast University to do graduate work in English—well, it gave me a 2 year deferment from the draft, and the university was closer to my parents, a lot cheaper, and (minor details) had a campus beach.

I received my Master's degree in English at the University of California Santa Barbara in 1969 and was promptly called up for the draft. But the quota system was kind to me, and I was exempted from service due to physical problems regarding knee surgery. Not knowing what else to do, I resumed graduate studies at UCSB and passed my PhD oral exams in 1971, but, after three years of being a Teaching Assistant for freshman English during turbulent times, I swore that I would do anything but teach. I was disturbed by my inability to make literature “relevant” (a 60's and 70's buzzword) to freshmen, dismayed at the vicious infighting within academic circles, and depressed by both the paucity of jobs and the low rate of pay offered for newly minted PhDs in English anywhere.

And then I met Val. Elfin face, long legs, and beautiful body. She was Welsh, she was passionate, and she didn't ask how much my father made. Val was educated, artistic, very liberated, and definitely not just a pretty face. We played bridge, we played footsies, and we ended up playing house.

The rest of the story is really more hers than mine. Val was in Santa Barbara en route to Berkeley, via the University of Birmingham, UK, in the early seventies. She had received a foreign student grant from Berkeley for an MA in Library Sciences and had landed a summer job in Santa Barbara for the interim. And then we met and ended up living with each other. At that point, the Governor of California, dear old Ronald Reagan, axed all foreign student grants from the UC budget. Val's visa problems became complicated, so we cut the Gordian knot by getting married on the beach in Santa



Barbara by a Franciscan Friar who read our vows in Medieval Latin, and we've spent the past 35 years being "artsy-craftsy."

Like all wannabe craftspeople, Val and I originally had no idea of how to make, cost, market, or sell our craft items. The hard part was just starting, and Val dove into the deep end by making sand candles in our tiny apartment in the Isla Vista student community next to the UCSB campus. She'd seen people doing it on the local beach (sand candles, that is). All you had to do was scoop a hole in the sand and pour in wax that had been heated to near the flash point.

Filling an ice chest with sand, hauling it back to our apartment, and melting wax on the stove was the next "logical" step. Our budding craft career nearly came to a premature end when Val tried to douse a pot of molten wax that had gone up in flames by pouring water on it. I know, it doesn't bear thinking about. Suffice it say that Val had minor burns, that the landlord was abusive (but had good insurance coverage), and that we learned from our mistakes.



Val continued to make sand candles, despite her wounds. Of course, no two were the same, but they sold well (to friends) and were fun to make (barring catastrophes). But that was the rub. Val kept a record of her material expenses, but treated time spent on production as "free time"—and there's no such thing. She grudgingly acknowledged this the day she watched helplessly as her sand candles began to melt in the ferocious sun and heat at one of her early outside craft shows. The cost of a

professional stand to provide shade had never entered into the costing equation; nor had the problem of replacing/repairing damaged stock ever been a problem. An awkward first step on the painful road to professionalism.

Silk screen-printing seemed safer than candle making, and was certainly more "artistic." Val started with her own original art work, augmented it by reproducing original brass rubbings she had done in the UK, experimented with photographic stencils, and ended up with an expensive collection of pigments, screens, and paraphernalia which we couldn't even give away in garage sales twenty years later. This was a major stumble on the road to professionalism, and it hurt. We thought that the original artwork was great, that there would be an insatiable demand for reproduced brass rubbings, and that our only problem would be that of keeping up with demand. Imagine our chagrin when, after several months, we had only managed to sell one piece to a softhearted and well-off friend. Another painful lesson.

Being more observant than I am, Val then noticed that macramé was not only popular, but that a local store was doing a brisk trade in one-off macramé owls. So Val

made her own version of a macramé owl, and a friend bought it. And she made another and sold it before it was finished. And, you guessed it, macramé owls took over our life.

It got to the point where I spent more time working on Val's owls than studying or teaching, and would come home exhausted from the university, ready for food, sex, and booze, only to be cajoled into helping finish off "a couple more owls." Two pieces of driftwood, a few feet of jute, a bit of cane, two large beads, and, voilà, we had a product that couldn't keep up with demand! Of course, Val didn't really have to make owls to survive. And, of course, outside of material costs, we had no idea of how to price them properly. But fools rush in.



We immediately took our gold mine to a craft store that we felt could extract ore for both our benefits. It was "The Stone Balloon" in Santa Barbara. We loved the name—very trendy, very 70's, just the place that we figured anyone with any class in Santa Barbara would spend their money. The person who seemed to be in charge at the time explained to us that, while our owls were "cool" and would definitely sell, the store was actually a craftsman's cooperative (this impressed us at the time). The good news was that they would stock our owls on the spot. The bad news was that they worked on a "consignment" basis, meaning that we got paid only after our goods had sold. And they took a 20% commission on all sales.

We were flattered, confused, and innocent, and we gave them what we considered a lot of stock on the spot. Then we went home and costed the owls out more realistically. Our original price was far too low, and the twenty percent commission added insult to injury. We immediately raised our prices. But then The Stone Balloon sank without a trace, and we lost several weeks of sales, plus all the stock we had entrusted them with. And we actually felt guilty at the time for harassing them with our petty loss, when they, a big, high street shop of fellow craftsmen, were under such dire financial pressure.



Val and I were married on a UCSB beach in 1972, and we "eloped" to North Wales and the world of crafts the same year. Val's owls, when all was said and done, at least paid the airfare for our honeymoon trip and gave us a blurred glimpse of the real world of arts and crafts. After all, it was just an artsy-craftsy hobby. Or so we thought at the time.

CHAPTER 1: OH WHAT A GOOSE I AM

“You’ll have to come over to Segrwyd and have dinner with us when you get settled in,” the solicitor said when we’d signed all the documents and written out the check.” “Great closing line,” I thought to myself. “The British version of ‘have a nice day.’ ”

It was 1972, and my wife and I had just taken freehold possession of The Old Smithy in the village of Nantglyn, county Clwyd, North Wales. The solicitor shook hands with us in dismissal and eyed my sandals without comment. I eyed his double-breasted suit and wondered if there was life after thirty.



The Smithy was an eighteenth century property that included a two-story house, an adjoining blacksmith’s workshop, and a cart shed where the horses used to be shod. The Old Smithy was certainly old. The entire house was built of slate and oak. The slate walls were nearly three feet thick. The slates on the sagging roof were held in place with hand-carved oak pegs. Even the floor in the front room consisted of huge slabs of slate laid on bare earth, and I noticed Cambrian fossils trapped in the stone.

Being from the New World and full of romantic ideas about the old one, I loved the place from the start. Val, being both Welsh and realistic, agreed that it had “character and possibilities,” but wasn’t too happy about not having hot water or an indoor toilet. But we were newlyweds, in our twenties, and very sure of ourselves. And, after three months of living with Val’s parents, we were delighted to have a place of our own.

We were also self-defined craftspeople and loved the fact that The Smithy had belonged to a long line of craftsmen before us. As an American, that gave me some sense of belonging, though I knew that the people of time present would be more grudging with

their acceptance. Still, the British Council for Small Industries in Rural Areas believed in us enough to give us a loan for our house/workshop, though I'll never forget the look on the face of CoSira's financial officer when I showed him the receipts of our fledgling candle making business and admitted that I had no idea of what "cash flow" really meant.

The solicitor's wife called us just after we moved in, and invited us to dinner. Val accepted with delight. Easy for her, she knew the ropes. But, as the foreigner, I was nervous. After all, my stereotype of the British was based on the novels of Charles Dickens and Jane Austen. How were a stuffy Welsh lawyer and his socially correct wife going to handle an American hippie? Val told me to just be myself. I told her to set my watch back a hundred years.

Segrwyd Hall was an Elizabethan manor house about two miles away, just outside Nantglyn. I was intimidated by the name, the size of the estate, the whole situation. But



David and Eirlys Hooson were adept hosts. We were ushered into a massive living room with an ornate ceiling, antique rugs, and a roaring fire in an open hearth.

“There’s sherry if you like the stuff, but I’ve got some decent bourbon. Prefer scotch myself. No matter, pour your own poison,” David boomed at me, showing me to the antique bookcase which served as a bar. Val had already hit it off with Eirlys, and the two of them were sipping champagne. I took David at his word and poured myself a large Jack Daniel’s and water. David clinked his crystal glass to mine and said “cheers” with a grin as we eyed each other. He was still in his suit, but minus the tie. It made him seem younger. Sort of.

“Glad to have some new blood in the neighborhood,” David went on. “You know, you two are the second youngest people in Nantglyn. But then, I doubt that the population’s over 40, and at least you’re legitimate,” he guffawed. “Not that it matters around here. In my father’s day, no respectable farmer would dream of marrying a woman who couldn’t bear children. And there was only one way of finding out.” He winked at his wife. Eirlys rolled her eyes in mock exasperation and continued talking to Val. I was beginning to like this guy, even if Val and I didn’t have any plans for children.

“What I really like,” and he winked at me, “is that you’ve not only had some education, but have been further than London. Something in common.” He refreshed both our drinks generously. “You know, your neighbor, Ellis Roberts, once had the distinction of being the only person in Nantglyn who’d ever been to London, except of course for the Wynn-Rogers family who used to own the whole bloody village. Course, Ellis never got beyond high school. You want to look out for Ellis, by the way. He can be downright difficult.”

Eirlys interrupted David’s monopoly of the conversation by introducing their two daughters. Karen was a cute, freckled, nine-year-old with a snub nose and red hair who obviously took after her father. Her older sister, Jacky, was a budding femme fatale with long dark hair and her mother’s beautiful eyes. They were disturbingly formal and polite, at least compared to what I remembered of my own sisters. Their father obviously adored them.

The daughters shook our hands and sipped black currant juice from crystal goblets, Val and Eirlys cracked another bottle of bubbly for themselves, and David didn’t look when I poured myself another bourbon at his insistence—the definition of a gentleman. David had covered about a hundred years of the history of Segrwyd Hall and the environs when Eirlys finally announced that dinner was served and marched us all into the dining room.

The dining room was as big as the living room, but a lot more formal. Eighteenth century stained glass windows, Adam’s grate fireplace, fine antiques everywhere. The dining table was the centerpiece. It was twelve feet long, exquisitely crafted, and surrounded by matching balloon-back chairs with green velvet cushions. I eyed the gleaming silverware nervously. What do you do with two forks, two spoons, and three knives?

David broke the ice by ordering us to help ourselves to the food while he poured the wine. A good Barolo from his friend in Italy. The sauvignon blanc would go with dessert. I watched and took mental notes as the Hooson family unfolded their serviettes, picked up their utensils in a definite sequence, and passed things clockwise. Val seemed at ease, but I felt awkward, out of place. “Just be yourself,” I remembered her saying.

The two bottles of red were excellent, and the sauvignon with the apple and gooseberry cobbler was even better. The vintage port with the stilton removed any

remaining inhibitions. Karen and Jacky had been quiet during the entire marathon dinner, eyeing Val and I occasionally, but staying firmly in the background as the grownups found more and more in common and the conversation became animated. But I noticed that the girls paid a lot of attention when I talked about anything, especially anything to do with America.

“Have you two ever heard of ‘The Siamese War Chant?’” I asked, feeling relaxed and addressing them directly for the first time. Both of the girls were shy, blushed at the attention. I rolled on, too late to stop now. “When I lived in Hawaii, my sisters and I were all taught it. We were about your age then.”

“Wow, you lived in Hawaii?” Jackie piped up. “What is it?” Karen asked. I told them a bit about Hawaii, made up more, came back to the War Chant. “I’ll teach it to you if you’d like.” Their shyness evaporated.

I rose, told the girls to stand up side by side and follow instructions. “Okay, raise your arms over your heads and say ‘Ohwhatagoo.’” It took a couple of tries to get the chant right, work up a bit more volume and enthusiasm.

“Now remember, this is the Siamese war chant, so you’ve got to say ‘Siam’ and bring your arms down, like you were bowing to the Queen, at the end of the chant. Let’s take it from the top.” Arms up, “Ohwhatagoo.” “Siam,” then a bow.

They mistook their parents’ laughter for applause, kept saying the Siamese War Chant faster and faster until the penny dropped. “Oh, you,” they shrieked and pretended to be hurt. But they couldn’t keep the grins off their faces.

Eirlys shooed them off to bed then. They kissed their parents, politely said goodnight to us, then stuck their tongues out at me and ran upstairs, giggling.

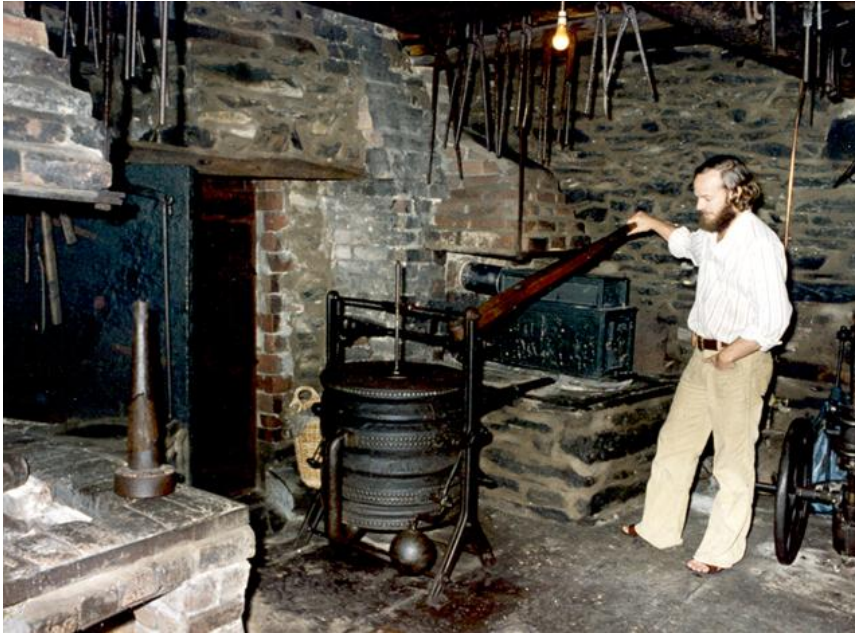
Eirlys and Val cleared the table as David ushered me back into the front room. He poured brandy for both of us, beamed at me and said, “You made a terrific hit with the girls. They’ve been looking forward to meeting the Yank for days now. To be honest, Eli and I were worried that you’d let them down. You didn’t.” He held up his brandy snifter and toasted me. I liked this guy, liked his family, despite all my earlier reservations. I returned the toast and the smile, thinking to myself, “Oh what a goose I am.”

CHAPTER 2: THINGS THAT GO BUMP IN THE NIGHT

It sounded like an old Boris Karloff movie. Clank clank, clunk clunk, the sound of chains rattling, something heavy dragging. Then a god-awful gasping and wheezing. And then it started all over again. And again. I thought of vampire coffins, Frankenstein, the dead competing with the living.

“Go see what it is,” Val whispered, pushing me out of bed. So much for women’s liberation. It was a bitterly cold January night in North Wales. I slipped on a bathrobe and slippers. What a way to die.

Val and I knew we were on to something when the estate agent gave us the key. It was very big, very old, and very simply designed. We were looking for a house to match just such a key, and “Ty’r Efail,” The Smithy Cottage, was perfect. For one thing, it was located in a tiny rural village, five miles from the nearest town, and we hankered after what we envisioned as “simple” country life. It was also big, by our standards, what the Welsh call a “two up, two down.” Half of the two-story building was the house proper, with a lean-to kitchen added on to the back. A boxed-in staircase led upstairs to two



bedrooms. The adjoining half of the building consisted of the original smithy downstairs and the remains of a ceiling which was once the floor of a large upstairs room.

When I’d asked our solicitor about Ty’r Efail’s actual age, David said that the main cottage was definitely 18th century. “But the

smithy itself could well be older. After all, a smithy was often the oldest building around—someone had to turn weapons into plowshares, make nails and whatnot for building, horseshoes, you name it. Local church records go back to the 13th century, but then I’ve found Roman coins and Stone Age arrowheads on my own place. The dead compete with the living around these parts, just ask the archeologists.”

The estate agent’s write up described “The Old Smithy” (as the collective property was generally known), as “a quaint detached cottage of considerable character and including the old village smithy...with some amendment the existing accommodation would lend itself to total residential accommodation.” We learned later that “quaint” and “character” meant that it had no modern conveniences, and that “some amendment” meant that it needed a total remodeling.

But we were young and in love with our vision of the good old days. Actually, Val had her reservations. She'd been born in Wales, preferred modern conveniences to what she grew up with. But I was American, remembered visiting my grandmother's farm when I was a kid, and was in awe of anything old.

What really sold us on the place was the smithy part of the property. The doorway was arched, the door itself a two-part "stable door" with an old wooden lock box. Inside, the smithy featured two "hanging forges" (the brick hoods were suspended from either side of a massive central chimney running up the side of the building) and a huge, pear-shaped bellows. The floor consisted of broken slate slabs and discarded horseshoes. Over our heads, a twelve by twelve-inch oak purling spanned the twenty-five foot length of the room, supporting the remains of the ceiling above. A small side door led to an adjoining cart shed where horses had originally been shod.

Val and I glanced at each other, read each other's minds. We were craftspeople; had talked the Council for Small Industries in Rural Areas into a loan for a craft workshop. And the smithy would be an ideal workshop for candle making. No problem with fire insurance here, since it had survived as a smithy for over two hundred and fifty years. This was it.

I wasn't just guessing at the age, by the way. While inspecting the outbuildings, including a rickety wooden coal shed, a slate pigsty and a "Ty Bach" (outhouse, or, literally, little house), I noticed that some of the slate slabs were carved with names and dates. "Recycled tombstones?" I wondered. The oldest date was 1746, thirty years before the American War of Independence.

I later mentioned this to David Hooson. "Actually, we prefer to call it the American Revolution, but that's beside the point," David pontificated. "I doubt they're tombstones--we're too religious and superstitious to allow such desecration." He winked. "They probably have more to do with the old slate quarry on the moors. Quarrymen used to over winter in Nantglyn, probably practiced carving slate in hopes of becoming monumental masons, moving up the social ladder." It sounded plausible.

Nantglyn was a tiny village and had less than forty inhabitants, including outlying farms. It was probably established because it was originally the last stop between the fertile and low lying Vale of Clwyd and anything beyond the Hiraethog Moors. The moors were high and treacherous, though I later learned that the Welsh name roughly translates into "the moors of longing." The Old Smithy stood on the crossroads. Location is everything.

We spent three days hauling our things from Val's parents' house in Wrexham (the largest city in North Wales, about an hour away), and trying to make the place livable. At least the house sported two electrical outlets, but there was no hot water and no indoor toilet. We bought a portable propane water boiler, a chemical toilet, and a heavy-duty flashlight. We could cook on the Victorian range in the huge Inglenook fireplace in the front room, and at least we had our own candles.

I swept about a hundred years of soot off the smithy walls, reorganized the coal shed as temporary housing for our chemical toilet, and finally got a fire going in the Inglenook. Val cleaned cobwebs, hung sheets up for curtains, and organized our minimal possessions. We ceremoniously washed each other down in a big basin in front of the fire at the end of our first day at "home."

Our first night in The Old Smithy was special, and not just because we were newlyweds. Val and I cuddled up under the duvet, cold, tired, and exultant. We'd done it. Our first house, and what a house! If only the walls could talk. I reminded Val that they did, reminded her of the carved slates, David's comment about the dead competing with the living. We shivered with mock horror, held each other, made love, finally slept.

I was dreaming of ancient Celtic forges when Val woke me, prodding me in the ribs, hissing "listen!" I listened, tried to focus. And then I heard it, the chains rattling, the bumping and scraping sounds, the terrible gasping.

I found the flashlight, stumbled downstairs, and opened the front door. It was pitch black and freezing. The terrible noises were louder. I shivered.

Then I froze a Welsh sheepdog in my flashlight beam. He'd evidently been chained to a farm's iron field gate opposite our house and been forgotten. He'd managed to pull the gate off its hinges and was in the agonizing process of dragging himself and the gate back to the farmhouse where he belonged.

I braced myself and went outside, undid the chain with icy fingers, and pushed the gate to the side of the road. The sheepdog whined, licked my hand, and streaked to its own house. I streaked back to my own bed, and ignored Val's protests when I wrapped myself around her warm body. Some things that go bump in the night aren't scary at all.

CHAPTER 3: SECOND PRIZE

I rested on my shovel, flexing my blistered hands, the monarch of all I surveyed. It was March in North Wales, and the first sunny day of my life in this new land. It was also my first garden, and I was proud of my effort. And then I noticed Bill Jones, our neighbor, peering over the hedge. “What do you think, Mr. Jones?” I asked with enthusiasm. He spoiled my day by shaking his head slowly and saying, in a heavy Welsh accent, “I think you know better than I.”

The soil was stony, but fertile, and the garden plot was about fifty feet along each side. I’d just double dug the entire thing and planted my first ever vegetable garden. Using Mr. Jones’ field as a model, I’d carefully created undulating rows of parallel trenches and mounds, but had been uncertain where to plant my seeds. I decided to plant in the mounds and use the trenches as irrigation canals.

Val said that, if I’d grow the vegetables, she’d grow the flowers for our new home. And then spring arrived. Snowdrops were the first to appear, by the hundreds, all around our house. Next came celandine, primroses, and crocuses; followed by the stunning revival of a rampant honeysuckle near our back door. Shortly after, an old fashioned climbing rose began to bud by the front door and exploded into bloom along with the wild hedge roses around the garden. And then came daffodils, a spectacular and heavily scented bloom of a mock orange tree by the old outhouse, periwinkles, wallflowers, and foxgloves.

I marveled at the proliferation and realized that generations of Welsh women before Val had planted flowers around our property in times past. When I mentioned this, she gave me her usual impish grin and said, “Well, I’ve taken care of the flowers, so perhaps you should attend to the veggies.” This was on par with her once telling me that if she cooked, the least I could do was wash up--and if I cooked and made the mess, the least I could do was wash up. I decided to cultivate our garden.

As an American military brat, I’d never lived in a place long enough to learn much about gardening. My mother had always loved flowers, especially roses, but I couldn’t remember anyone in the family having the time or inclination to grow vegetables between moves. But this was farm country where everyone had a garden. How could I go wrong?

As it turned out, I couldn’t go wrong, especially on a plot of land that had been carefully cultivated for home produce for at least two hundred years. And it turned out that it made no difference where I planted my veggie seeds, because the richness of the soil and the abundance of the rain made it a moot point. My first crop was not just successful, it was overwhelming.

Like most beginners, I didn’t have definite ideas of what I wanted to grow, so I grew a bit of everything. And it all came up. Needless to say, ten carrots and ten broad beans weren’t enough, and ten zucchinis and ten pumpkins were far too much. But I was enthralled with my success. Val cooled my ardor by presenting me with a list of preferred items. At the top of the list was parsley and a Welsh saying that roughly translates: “whoever grows the parsley wears the pants.” I took the hint.

My second garden didn’t feature rows and mounds, because I’d learned that my neighbor only did that for root crops, such as potatoes and turnips—and because he had a tractor and farm machinery. I decided to only grow things that we liked, that were

relatively expensive in the local stores, and that would give me a good yield. And I didn't forget the parsley.

We decided to concentrate on broad beans, runner beans, zucchini, and "perpetual spinach," a relative of chard. Our neighbor, who I now knew as "Billo," gave me about a half a ton of cow manure in exchange for some of the candles that we made for a living. One of my sisters in California sent me hybridized seeds of a new variety of large, yellow zucchini. And I bought two packages of parsley seeds.

I double dug again, incorporating Billo's cow manure. I planted two full rows of parsley, two rows of spinach, two rows of runner beans, and four rows of broad beans. And I dug the rest of the manure into two enormous mounds where I planted the zucchini.

Val let me wear the pants that year. We ended up with so much parsley that we made wine out of it. To be honest, I thought it tasted better that way. And everything else was a success. We had beans coming out of our ears, we ended up freezing several pounds of spinach, and then there was the zucchini.

Squash isn't commonly grown in Britain, though I've been told that the Welsh claim to have introduced pumpkins to America. But the British do grow a type of squash that they call a "marrow." Marrows are distinguished by their singular lack of flavor and their enormous size. You can eat them if you stuff them with something to give them flavor, and you can make country wine out of them, if you don't have anything better. Most people settle for seeing who can grow the biggest ones and then feeding them to the cows. Not that the cows are partial to marrows.

The Nantglyn Show gave me my first shot at horticultural fame. Run annually by the Women's Institute and the Young Farmers Association, it was a showcase for everything from homemade wine and jam to needlework and garden produce. The village of Nantglyn only had about forty inhabitants, but the show was open to anyone within a four and a half-mile radius—which excluded the nearest town of Denbigh, Nantglyn's only threat.

Val and I had entered our craftwork in the show when we'd first moved to Nantglyn. We were awarded blue ribbons, but were quietly advised that it was not really fair for professionals to compete in the craft category. We took the hint. The competition in such rural shows is not only ferocious, but can result in serious feuds as well. As newcomers, we chose discretion over valor.

Nantglyn had a church, two chapels, and no pub. The Nantglyn show was always a huge success with the locals, if only because it was the one occasion of the year when they could drink without driving. The tent for the Women's Institute and the Young Farmers was larger than the beer and spirit tent, but the traffic in the latter outdid the former at least twenty to one.

Val encouraged me to enter my garden produce in the horticulture division of the show. I balked, because I knew that I was a real amateur in this field. I'd seen some of the entries from previous years, such as runner beans fourteen inches long, leeks that weighed over five pounds, and lettuce heads you'd need a wheelbarrow to move. None of my produce was "show standard."

But I'd forgotten my zucchini. My two manure heaps had produced such a jungle of zucchini foliage and fruit that we'd never been able to keep up. And, of course, a couple of them had gotten away. Anyone who's grown zucchini knows this phenomenon.

You start off with three or four plants, and you systematically pick all the fruit when it is about eight to ten inches long and tender. And then, one day, you discover one that has gotten away, meaning that it's the size of a watermelon.

Val and I studied the entry forms for the show and then examined my garden. I had quantity, but the kind of quality that shows prefer was lacking. And then I discovered the yellow zucchini that had gotten away. We studied the show forms again. No category for zucchini, but there was one for marrows. We looked at each other and grinned.

I filled out my entry form and paid my fifty-cent entry fee. The morning of the show, I hauled my zucchini to the judging area and instantly knew that I couldn't win. Sitting on the trestle table behind a sign saying "marrows" was a monster that dwarfed my twelve pounder. I set my offering down and retreated to the beer tent.

Val tried to cheer me up.
"At least you tried. And they don't even know that you have a handicap, using Yankee zucchini."
We laughed, toured the rest of the show, and, after the judging, finally came back to the horticultural section.

The monster marrow I'd seen had a blue ribbon on it. My zucchini had a red ribbon on it. There were no other entries. At least I won second prize.



CHAPTER 4: DAI THE DEATH

When our newly installed phone rang for the first time, I answered, wondering who could know our new number. The voice was obviously Welsh, the sing-song accent foreign and confusing to my American ear. It sounded like he was asking for “die the death.” “I’m sorry,” I cut in, “I don’t speak Welsh.” Whoever was calling got irritated: “I’m not speaking Welsh, I’m speaking bloody English!” I hung up in confusion, wondered if I’d heard him right.

Until I met Val, I thought that Wales was an island off Ireland. Looking back, I think I was right. Wales is a sort of Celtic island, at least in terms of preserving its Celtic heritage and language. Ireland, Scotland, Cornwall, and Brittany are also Celtic in origin, but only Wales has managed to preserve its native Celtic tongue as a living language. Less than ten percent of the Irish now speak fluent Gaelic; nearly forty percent of the North Welsh speak the Celtic equivalent—Welsh.

The first year that Val and I spent in North Wales was a bit like camping. Our house sure had character, but it was definitely lacking in amenities. But, by the second year, we’d earned enough money from our candle making business to at least rewire the property, patch the slate roof, and replace the original lead pipes that supplied our water.

We were cuddled up in front of the Inglenook when the front room ceiling fell on our heads. Actually, it was just the plaster, but it was the final straw. We got three estimates from local builders, accepted one, and put ourselves at his mercy. We were fed up with falling plaster, not having an indoor toilet, and not being able to take a real bath or shower in our own house. It had come to the point that we were selecting friends on the basis of whether or not they would let us use their bathroom.

Being an American in a tiny, rural Welsh village had its drawbacks. Despite the fact that my wife was Welsh, the local constabulary took it upon themselves to check on me at least once a week for about a year, until I finally got an official document that pronounced me a “legal alien.” I produced this new document to the next policeman who came snooping, and asked him how long the police harassment would continue.

He was very young and very honest. “We see a lot of American stuff on the telly, you see. And, well, we sort of wondered why a Yank from California would want to live in a place like this, unless maybe he was into drugs and suchlike. Besides, it’s something to do.” I smiled wanly at the young man and decided not to send my letter complaining about police harassment after all. I shook his hand and asked to be reminded of his name. “Emlyn Roberts,” he responded, “My mates call me Emlyn Mochyn.” I later found out that *mochyn* means pig. Some slang is universal.

Welsh names are problematic. When the English finally subdued the Welsh, they not only imposed massive castles on their landscape, but also tried to ban the customs and the language. In an effort to “Anglify” the Welsh, the English set about to record all Welsh names in an English fashion. The Welsh used patronymic names. A name such as Dafydd ap Dafydd (David son of David) did not fit in with the English scheme of things, so the name was Anglified to “Mr. Davies.” Welsh wasn’t allowed to be spoken in schools, even in Wales, and it was not even recognized as a foreign language in English universities when my wife was an undergraduate.

The fact that nearly thirty percent of any Welsh phone book today consists of the name Jones pays tribute to the fact that the English had been both subversive and

successful in their effort to Anglify the Welsh. Or so the English thought. Scratch a Jones (or Roberts or Williams or Davies) anywhere in the world today, and you'll find a full-blooded Welshman lurking in the background. Of course, the Welsh have their own way of dealing with such matters. The oral tradition is strong, the language is alive, and the Welsh are wizards when it comes to linguistics. Dylan Thomas was not a Welsh speaker, but the cadence and love of word play that he is so well known for are distinctly Welsh. Indeed, the Welsh produce more famous singers and actors per capita than any other country in Europe.



Mr. Roberts, our builder, came from a long line of cabinetmakers. His particular specialties, so we were told, were windows, staircases, and doors. But, of course, he could handle such mundane things as a house extension. A versatile man. We felt that we were in good hands, shook hands on the deal. "Call me Dai," he said. Dai or Dewi is short for Dafydd, just as Dave is used for David in English. And it's the most popular male name in the country, because the patron saint of Wales was Dewi Sant or Saint David. This makes it confusing when the last name is Jones, or Roberts, or Davies--well, you get the picture. We'd only lived in Wales for about three years, but we already knew about twenty "Dai's" and "Dewi's," about a third of which were also Joneses.

The Welsh solved this problem by using nicknames related to the person's profession or any outstanding feature of the person in question. David Jones, the proprietor our "local" pub, had an extensive collection of antique bottles. So he was known as "Dai, the bottle." David Jones, a self-proclaimed communist and the current mayor of the nearest town, had established an exchange program of artists and performers between North Wales and Cuba. You guessed it, he was known as "Dai Cuba."

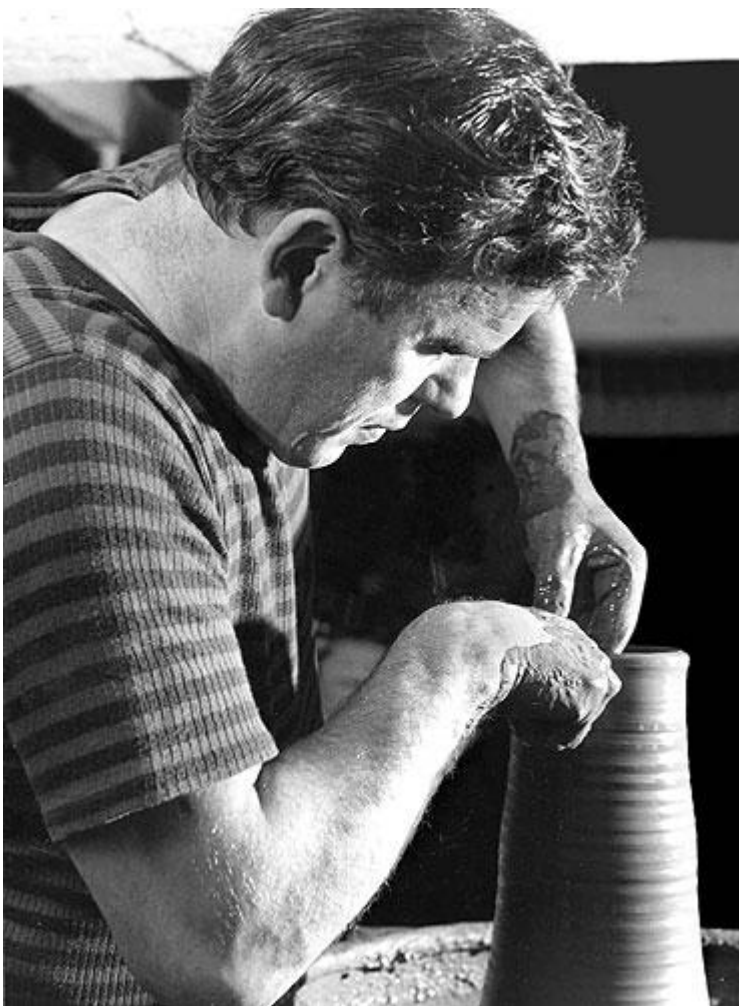
These nicknames weren't confined to common names. There was a "Larry the goat" in our village. I never learned his last name, but he did keep goats. "Paxo Jones" had a mother who was renowned for serving stuffing with every meal, and it was always made by using instant "Paxo," a British commercial brand name. And some nicknames were more mundane, like "John the school" (a teacher), "Alan the pot" (a potter), and "Bill the bag" (I made handbags, though I was usually just called "the Yank").

This love of word games even extended to the names of Welsh towns. Truckers, using citizen band radios, referred to Denbigh, our nearest town, as "mental town," because it featured a major mental hospital. Rhyl, a sort of Coney Island of North Wales, started off as "Sun City," but ended up as "Sin City." And even our village, Nantglyn, became "Wet Candle Town," because Val and I lived on the crossroads and had put up a sign with our business name: "Candles in the Rain."

But the best nickname I ever heard turned out to belong to our builder, Mr. David Roberts. Evidently, it was common for joiners and cabinetmakers in rural Wales to moonlight as partners with morticians. Who else would build the coffins? Dai would literally jump for joy when he got a call asking for his funereal services. I learned to bite my tongue when he did this and abandoned work on our house--after all, he made a lot more money out of coffins than building.

Three guesses what Dai's nickname was. You've got it. "Dai the Death."

CHAPTER 5: TAFFY



Everyone called him Taffy, but his real name was Rhys. Taffy is a nickname for a Welshman, just as Mick is used for the Irish or Yank for the Americans. Unfortunately for the Welsh, the name became popularized by an old English nursery rhyme: “Taffy was a Welshman, Taffy was a thief. Taffy came to my house, and stole a side of beef.”

Taffy was not a thief, though local gossip had it that he owed money to a lot of people. Taffy was a potter. Moreover, Taffy had a golden tongue. When he spoke, he sounded like a cross between Dylan Thomas and Richard Burton. Even when he exaggerated you didn’t care, because the images and ideas were so beautifully presented that you wanted to believe in them. He had even managed to talk his college art teacher

into marrying him, despite the fact that she was a gifted and otherwise sensible English girl.

But Taffy did love to exaggerate. Some of his detractor’s called it lying. To me, as a Yank, it was more like listening to Will Rogers or Mark Twain spinning a tall tale. But I must admit that he often blurred the boundary between fact and fiction, assuming that it exists in the first place.

We became good friends shortly after we moved to the Vale of Clwyd. Val isn’t really of Welsh extraction, but she was born there and that was good enough for Taffy. And Taffy was impressed with me, if only because I had a couple of university degrees in literature—and he loved literature. But what really brought us all together was the fact that we were all fellow craftspeople, trying to eke out a living in rural Wales.

“For art, you must pay,” Taffy was fond of declaiming in Welsh, translating it in sonorous and lilting English. He said it so often that we once carved it on a leather belt for his birthday present: “am celf, rhaid talu.” And getting paid for one’s “art” was a serious problem for all of us. Taffy and Jean had tried to strike it rich on everything from teapots to piggy banks. Val and I ticked over on sand candles and hippie-style handbags.

We all bemoaned the artificial distinction between art and craft, which the British Arts Council seemed to define and defend with an iron fist. Actually, pottery could be “art” if it was confined to one-off, “studio” pieces, but leatherwork of any kind was strictly craft, according to the Arts Council. Candle making, needless to say, was beneath contempt.

Taffy would rail against the distinction between studio and production work. “Michelangelo was a bloody production sculptor,” he would rave. “Had all his little boys do his dirty work. And look at Picasso. Jesu mawr, he couldn’t even be bothered to hand stamp his name on his mass productions half the time!”

But Taffy had a good business head as well. When a series of painted standard tiles that Jean designed and Taffy produced failed to take off, Taffy decided to go for broke. “Right, boyo, they complain about the tiles being standard, I’ll bloody well make my own. They want one-off designs, Jean will give them one-off designs. They want the whole damn thing to fit inside their cloakroom, I’ll make it fit. And they’ll bloody well pay for it.”

And he pulled it off. His first major coup was a mural for a fancy hotel in Chester. It consisted of three panels, each about three by five feet, depicting the city’s coat of arms and major architectural features. The panels were made of sheets of clay which Jean had decorated and hand cut, jig saw puzzle fashion. The glazes were hand painted, each piece of the puzzle was individually fired, and the whole thing was reconstructed and mounted in situ. We were impressed.

So was Taffy. We never found out how much he got for this first effort, but Taffy assured us that it was enormous, like the tip of an iceberg made of English pound notes. He told us that he had approached all the city councils in England and Wales, and that they were falling over themselves to give money away for the artistic enhancement of public buildings. The money was rolling in.

But Taffy did have a tendency to exaggerate. And, when he hit us up for a loan of fifty quid to pay his electric bill, I began to wonder.

I phoned him a few days later. The British never identify themselves when they phone someone. They seem to think that their voice is so unique that you will immediately know who is calling. I was at a disadvantage in this scheme of things, because they always recognized my voice. For sheer devilment, I put on a pseudo Italian accent.

“This is Mario,” I said, in a voice assimilated from old American Mafia movies. “I hear you make fancy murals, seen your stuff in Chester. Anyway, the wife, she thinks we need to add a bit of class to the fish and the chip shop. I think maybe a big fish is a good idea if you don’t charge too much.”

To my astonishment, the accent worked. “Well, Mister Mario, it would be an honor and a privilege to visit your establishment and present you with some possible designs and estimates at your convenience,” Taffy purred.

Too late to back out now. “Okay, okay,” I continued, really adlibbing it now. “Just want to know if you can do the job. First I got to ask the wife what sort a fish she wants, figure out where to put the thing, you know, all the details. I’ll give you a call in a couple days.”

I’d barely hung up the phone when Taffy phoned me. I knew it was Taffy because of the voice. “Just got a big contract for a fancy Italian restaurant in Chester,” Taffy

crowed. "They want a mural depicting the fish of the British Isles. You like fishing, maybe you could give Jean a few pointers. Might even be some money in it for you guys when we really get off the ground."

I don't like being patronized at the best of times, but what Taffy was doing to me was unbelievable. "It's good of you to think of us. Congrats on the big contract. How much?" I asked. "This is big time, boyo. I'll give you the bona fides in a couple of days. Cheerio." He clicked off.

Val and I talked about it. Sure, Taffy exaggerates. But at least he has the gumption to think big. Yes, he owes us money, but he's a friend. We decided to leave it alone, keep it a private joke.

And we did, partly because Taffy did land some lucrative jobs with city councils, partly because we could forgive Taffy almost anything. But our tolerance unraveled about a year later.

We were all invited to a formal dinner, provided by mutual friends who managed a major estate in the Vale. The wine flowed freely, the food was exquisite, and we all got a bit expansive by the end of the meal. Taffy, of course, dominated the table talk, and the rest of us, of course, were willing to let him do it. The sylvan words, the beautiful voice.

But Taffy went a bit too far that night. He discussed the need for "vision" in the world of arts and crafts. He quoted his saying about getting paid for art. He recounted his recent success with one-off murals. And then he looked at me and said, "And your problem, my dear boy, is that you can't think big. Such a waste."

I choked on my wine and stared at him. Hell, he was probably right, but did he need to shove it in my face now? Our hosts were smiling, anticipating the conflict. That did it.

"This is Mario," I said, in a voice assimilated from old American Mafia movies. "I hear you make fancy murals, seen your stuff in Chester. Anyway, the wife, she thinks we need to add a bit of class to the fish and the chip shop. I think maybe a big fish is a good idea if you don't charge too much."

Taffy's eyes dilated, the golden tongue still for once. He stood up very carefully and walked out of the house. Jean stood up to follow, then paused and turned to the rest of us. "He does have a tendency to exaggerate, you know," she murmured before leaving.

CHAPTER 6: AVON CALLING

“Would you be interested in making some specialty candles for Avon Cosmetics, UK?” the caller asked. Of course we were interested, but we sure wondered why Avon was calling us. “We want to add a scented rose candle to our line and need a candle maker who can deal with two part molds and hand finishing on a quantity basis.” I waffled appropriately, and the caller made an appointment to visit our workshop and explain things in detail.

Val and I had a profitable handmade candle business going at this stage, but our facilities were rudimentary and our production capacity was limited to what the two of us could do, or stand to do, in a twelve hour day. A big order from a big company was tempting.



We talked it over with our friends from Vancouver, our first house guests since we'd moved in. Mary Ann was impressed that Avon was calling, but Harold, the lawyer, had reservations. The Epps had been with us about a week, sleeping in a makeshift bedroom and coping with our outdoor toilet and lack of bathing facilities.

“No offense meant,” Harold began, “but you guys aren’t exactly set up for mass production, assuming that you’d even want to do it. And Avon didn’t call you because they thought you were the only candle makers in all of Great Britain who could do what they wanted.” Val and I were secretly hurt by such realism, but Harold had a point.

Harold and Mary Ann Epp were friends from Santa Barbara days. They’d been neighbors, confidants, and friends with a capitol F. I’d seen Harold jump from a second

floor balcony into a first floor swimming pool on a dare, I'd been fed and emotionally burped by Mary Ann in my days of bachelor depression, and I'd envied both their togetherness and love even after I found my own.

But the need for a bath transcends friendship. Val and Mary Anne ordered the men folk out of the house while they prepared their ablutions in front of the fireplace. Harold had grown up on a farm. He had no qualms about heading to the nearest creek and bathing in any pool deep enough to allow his head to be underwater. I had my reservations, but tagged along behind him as usual.

I say "as usual," because I admired Harold, had done so ever since I first met him. Harold had always been convinced that he was "ugly," and he'd always compensated for his self-perception by being excruciatingly humble, brave, and honest. As a result, he was a man a man could trust, even if Val and several other women I knew considered him dangerously sexy. It was an awkward subject, and, because I considered his wife one of the most beautiful women in the world, we didn't explore it very often.

We went to The Kinmel Arms that night and talked about bathing, about Avon, about commercialized standards of beauty, fashion, and taste. And artistic scruples. We were well into our third round of drinks, when Eddie Wynn approached our table. "Couldn't help but overhear some of your talk," Eddie smirked, swaying from drink and the effort of standing. "You want to stay out of those pools if you don't want to get liver fluke. Why the hell do you think we dip the sheep?" Harold invited Eddie to sit with us, offered him a drink, despite my negative body language.

Eddie began to divulge the horrors of liver fluke to Harold as I left to order drinks at the bar. I knew that Eddie was a pig farmer, but he was still a Welsh farmer and knew about sheep—and liver fluke. The latter is a parasitic worm that thrives in riparian environments, can kill sheep, and infest humans, resulting in symptoms ranging from skin inflammation to pneumonia. Harold was fascinated.



I knew that Harold was a bit of a hypochondriac. While listening to Eddie and waiting to be served, I eyed the impressive collection of bottles behind the bar counter, and a malt whiskey labeled "Sheep Dip" caught my eye. I couldn't resist. I bought the unopened bottle from the landlord at a price which made me flinch, but which Dai the Bottle assured me was a bargain, and had him wrap it in newspaper.

We left for home, and, sure enough, Harold began to talk about liver fluke as soon as he was in the car. He'd had some indigestion while staying with us; he remembered a similar problem on his father's farm in the Frazier Valley in British Columbia; he told us about relations who had suffered from ringworm and even tapeworms. Yep, he was paranoid.

Val ushered all of us foreigners into the front room, stoked the coal fire, and gave me a wink. I don't know how she knew what I was up to, probably didn't; but you never know with a

Celt. Anyway, once Harold and Mary Anne were settled in front of the inglenook, I produced the bottle.

“Harold, I know that you’re a hypochondriac, know that Eddie got you wound up about liver fluke. But while you were talking to Eddie, I talked to some of the experts in the pub. Sure, it’s possible to contract liver fluke, but it’s rare, and there’s a cure, and here it is.” I unwrapped the bottle and thumped “Sheep Dip” on the coffee table. Harold eyed me, the rest of us, and the bottle, and then poured a good three fingers into his glass. It’s hard to read a lawyer, but I sure saw the twinkle in the eye of a good friend.

Avon called at ten in the morning the next day. He was middle aged, dressed in a suit, and looked decidedly unhappy as he eyed our surroundings. I ushered him into the Smithy workshop, offered him a stool, and left him to contemplate our facility while I fetched coffee for him and more aspirin for my hangover. Val and the Epps had disappeared.

Mr. Avon looked morose when I brought his coffee. I tried to put myself in his place and looked around. Cobbled floors on bare earth, unfinished stone walls, propane stoves and second hand fish kettles for melting the wax, a raised bed sandbox on the floor. Not exactly state of the art, but it worked just fine for us.



He sipped his coffee, adjusted his tie to no effect, and got to the point. “Avon markets a scented rose pomander. It’s currently made in the US, and Avon UK has to import them. We’d like to cut out the middleman and have them made for us in the UK. We’re talking big volume, big money. You people seem to have the expertise, and we think we can work with you.” I heard the unease in his voice, saw his distaste for his surroundings and his company in his body language. And the decision was easy.

“Thanks for considering us, but no. We aren’t interested in mass production, we don’t need the order, and, even if we did, we wouldn’t want all the eggs in one basket.” I was thinking of Harold’s comments, thinking of wanting to be my own man. It was my own movie and I was the good guy.

Mr. Avon took his time replying, but he had a lot on his mind. “You’re young, think you’ll live forever, like telling the older generation to piss off. But you’re going to be like me someday.” His anger and resentment began to rise with the volume. “Christ, we give you an opportunity like this and you say you don’t need it. Well, maybe you shouldn’t be in business, because the last I heard, business was all about taking advantage of opportunities.”

We stared at each other in silence, different people, different worlds. I apologized for wasting his time, tried to explain that I wanted to be my own boss. “You twit,” he hissed. “You’re the boss of all the dump around you, and you’ll never have more. Sure, I work for someone else, even jump when they say jump, but at least I own a real house and can put my kids in a decent school and...” He stalled, collected himself, and left.

I told Val and the Epps about my confrontation with Mr. Avon. Val remained silent, but Harold applauded my decision. He figured that Avon UK was violating copyright and wanted a patsy to take the fall if it ever came. And even if that wasn’t true, he figured we couldn’t have dealt with the order, whatever it was, without being swallowed up by big business. We got the Sheep Dip out again that night, and we all toasted friendship—and independence.

CHAPTER 7: WHAT DO YOU DO?

I was alone in the laundromat in the nearest town that had such things when the two little girls came in. Val and I had no children of our own, but I guesstimated the kids' ages at around eight, give or take three. They were poorly dressed but certainly healthy, if vocal cords are anything to go by. I pretended to ignore them, but, with the instincts that all children seem to have, they saw through my feigned indifference.

They studied me briefly, then huddled by my chosen drier that had been humming ever since I'd arrived, and began whispering and giggling. They kept glancing at me, I looked away, they got louder. I wondered if they could tell if I was a foreigner, a Yank. I got self-conscious about my hand made leather sandals, my blue jeans, and the old US Navy jacket my Dad had given me. "Silly," I thought, not sure if I meant myself or them. And then the two little girls went into their song and dance routine.

"What do you do, when you've got to go to the loo, in an English country garden? You pull down your pants and you fertilize the plants, in an English country garden." They sang the words in tune to some British movie song, even accompanying them with crude dance steps. I tried to hide my grin, but they saw it, and the lyrics continued and became increasingly and disturbingly obscene in such young mouths. I was relieved when a new customer bustled in and the song and dance came to an abrupt halt.

I finished my laundry and told Val about my experience when I got back home. "Kids love shock value, say things they don't even understand just to get a reaction. You were probably a surrogate father." I wondered how she knew that stuff, how an only child with no children of her own could be so wise. I let it rest.

But it all reminded me of when we'd first moved into our new house, the day I'd first met our new neighbor, Ellis. We'd just taken possession of The Old Smithy, and it was winter and there was a coal strike in progress. There were only two electrical outlets in our entire house and the coal hole had been emptied long ago, so I scavenged damp wood from the nearby fields and woodlands to feed our fireplace.

Unfortunately, the massive inglenook fireplace sported a Victorian grate that could only be stoked by coal or pieces of wood that would fit in the small fire pit below. I needed an axe, so I turned to my new neighbor for help. He was loading bags of cattle feed into an outbuilding when I approached him. I'd noticed him watching us as we moved into our house, had wondered why he never introduced himself or even spoke to us at the time.

"Hi, I'm Bill, your new neighbor," I said, extending my hand. Ellis shook it with obvious reluctance. "We've got no coal because of the strike, so I've been hauling in wood but don't have an axe to cut it with. Would you let us borrow one of yours for a while?"

Ellis stared at me for a long time and then gave me a slow and unsettling grin. "Do you have any family," he asked, deadpan. Was this guy nuts or what? I just wanted to borrow an axe and he wants to know about my family tree. "Sure," I humored him, my parents are alive and well in California and I've got two sisters." His grin became even more strained.

"I mean," he said, "do you have children?" The odd question, coupled with his odd demeanor, unsettled me. "No," I blurted. "We just got married and haven't had time for children yet." He laughed, led me across the lane to one of his tool sheds, and gave

me my choice of axes. “Let me know if you need some help,” he said, and I knew he wasn’t talking about firewood.



It took a long time for me to admit that England and America were truly divided by a common language. I’d known my British wife for nearly three years before we moved to North Wales, thought I’d heard all the malapropisms, thought I could fit into an English speaking country. My basic mistake, of course, was to assume that there was some sort of “standard English” in Britain to start with.

My mother-in-law was the final revelation. Ellis’s wife had come over to see us and the

house and to meet Val’s parents. Minna was a senior nurse at the local hospital, was well versed in local gossip, and knew or knew about anybody worth knowing in the area. Mother-in-law was out of her depth socially and extremely impressed with Minna. “I’ll bet she makes a good screw,” she confided in me, just after Minna left.

What do you say? I knew that my mother-in-law didn’t mean what I’d heard, knew that there was something missing in the equation, something that I would never detect until the next time the equation came out wrong. It turned out that she was using an obsolete word meaning salary or payment, not that it really mattered. You can’t really translate different languages, different cultures.

I remembered asking for the bathroom in the first British pub I’d ever been in and being advised not to take a bath in it. I knew that a local version of breaded and fried sausages were called faggots, but had an aversion to ordering them by that name. And every American tourist to the UK giggles when asked if they want to be “knocked up in the morning.”

Different folks, different stokes. It’s easy to fall back on clichés, blame the difference on the difference. We were coming out of a local restaurant owned by good friends on our first Christmas evening in Wales, full of gourmet food and good cheer. Then I heard the words, saw the faces. “Fucking faggots,” one of them said as Tony and I stepped outside into the cold, our wives bundled up behind us and urging us to make a run through the snow to our car.

They were kids by my standards, not well dressed, not in the season to be jolly. I called them “assholes,” and they attacked me. A blow to the face, a kick to the legs, trying to take me down. My wife screamed, Tony waded in, the kids backed off an inch. “You bastards treat us like scum,” one of them shouted in my face before running.

And I thought about it afterwards. Val and I and our friends had enjoyed an extravagant Christmas dinner, had had a good time. Then the ugliness. I would have been afraid for my life in any city in the USA and would probably have been beaten and

robbed at best. But these kids didn't want to rob or kill, at least not yet. They wanted to fight for something that was denied, wanted to hurt in order to hide a hurt, especially on a Christmas evening with them outside.

I sort of sympathized, being an outsider myself. But what do you do?

CHAPTER 8: WOOLY BOOZY

The goldfish pond looked as if it had been mined. The tops of about twenty corked wine bottles bobbed just above the surface. They swayed gently as Koi carp undulated around and between. Val let out a shriek when the first one exploded.

Wendy made huge batches of elderflower champagne every summer, at least fifty bottles at a time. She brewed and bottled the elixir in an old dairy shed and let it mature for all of four weeks. Everyone loved it.

The best “champagne” I’ve ever tasted was a bottle of Wendy’s sparkling gooseberry wine. And the best “cabernet” I’ve ever encountered was one Wendy made with wild blueberries, known as “bilberries” in North Wales. That may not say much for my wine acumen according to wine buffs who scoff at “country wines,” but I still see no reason to limit the definition of wine to fermented grape juice.

We met Wendy and Derek through the Welsh “grapevine,” better known as the “Taffia.” It was hard to find a pub in North Wales that served wine by anything except a bottle in the early 70’s. It was also impossible to buy a “cheap” bottle of wine at a store, due to UK taxes that elevated mediocre Spanish plonk to the same level as good French. But we knew there was a market, and we were high on the list. And, because we asked, the word soon got around.

Wendy produced over five hundred bottles of homemade wine a year--and none of it was made from grape juice. Our first introduction to country wine was a concoction that Wendy and Derek called “Bravery’s,” a recipe taken from a book on the subject by an author of the same name. Bravery’s was made from wheat, raisins, and oranges (plus the obligatory sugar, yeast, water, and, in this case, tannin in the form of strong tea). Not only was it good, it knocked our socks off.

Val and I decided to have a go at making our own. We weren’t quite ready to tackle Wendy’s exotic brews at first, so we compromised and bought a wine kit. Our first effort was “Boots Burgundy,” Boots being the name of a chain of drug stores who sold such things. The kit consisted of a gallon glass jar, a fermentation lock, wine yeast, “Campden tablets” (which had something to do with killing the yeast and settling the wine), and a can of concentrated grape juice. The label promised us “a rich, red home wine” in six to eight weeks.

We began the fermentation in May, followed instructions to the letter, and tasted it six weeks later. It was definitely wine, but it was definitely harsh, a bit like boiled “boots.” We bottled it, used it for cooking only, and spent a lot more time with Derek and Wendy.

Wendy was the vintner in her family and was tickled that we were interested in wine making. She encouraged us by lending us books, giving us tips, and, above all, giving us free samples of her own creations. Her wines ran the gamut from globe artichoke and rose petal wine to rice and strawberry wine. Grape concentrate was only used as an additive on rare occasions.

“Why mess around with imported grapes when you have all this local produce?” Wendy said as we strolled in her extensive garden. We eyed her large orchard, vegetable plot, and caged berries with envy. “Easy for you to say, with all this land,” I retorted. “We’ve only got room for about three apple trees or a decent crop of runner beans and sprouts.”

But Wendy wasn't talking about her garden. She waved vaguely at the hedgerows surrounding the property, the fields and hills beyond. "You don't need a garden, just look around. Elders, gorse, brambles, bilberries, wild roses, sloes--I could go on, but the point is that it's all free and makes damn good wine."

And so it does. Val and I sampled Wendy's blackberry wine, dandelion wine, gorse wine, and sloe wine. The list was endless, the wines often excellent. We found out that carrot wine didn't taste like carrots, that a mix of blackberries and elderberries produced a red wine that rivaled a good burgundy, that mangle-wurzel (something akin to a turnip) wasn't a disease, but a useful ingredient in country wine making. We were hooked.

But we had some logistical problems. Our house was built of solid slate. It was certainly cool in the summer, but it was an icebox in the winter. And wine needs even temperatures in the seventies to ferment. We finally solved this problem by buying a Victorian wardrobe from a local junk shop, installing shelves, plugging in a seventy-five watt light bulb and closing the doors. It not only worked, but also could handle up to nine gallons of wine at a time.

"Ploop, ploop," pause, "ploop, ploop" is a wonderful sound to a home wine maker. It means that the yeast has done its stuff and that fermentation is taking place. Each "ploop" is a release of carbon dioxide gas through a fermentation lock, an alcoholic fart signifying the production of alcohol by the action of yeast. We ended up with two "wine wardrobes," and they both made wonderful sounds.

After our first year of experimenting with basics, Val and I got serious about country wine. We made rose hip wine, birch sap wine, parsley wine, rhubarb wine. We bought special strains of wine yeast, used isinglass to clear cloudy wine, added tannin and vitamin C and tartaric acid to some brews, got involved with hydrometers and specific gravity. We had a collection of 50 one-gallon glass jars, had local restaurants and pubs saving empty wine bottles for us.

The exotic country wines were fun to play with and sometimes surprisingly good. But our staple wines ended up being made from apples, blackberries, sloes, elderflowers, and elderberries. All of these grow wild and in abundance in North Wales, but elder is the most commonly used ingredient for country wines. We're talking about elder trees and not ground elder, which is the bane of every gardener in Britain.

The elder tree produces enormous masses of creamy white blossom in early summer. You pick the blossom when it's turning a pale yellow and comes off easily in your hand. For a five gallon batch of elderflower wine, you need about four to five pints of elderflowers, about fifteen pounds of sugar, and hock or champagne yeast (plus a few other arcane ingredients, including a bit of grape concentrate or a couple of pounds of raisins or even bananas, if you're fussy). The resulting wine



resembles a German Spätlese, according to the experts, and the bouquet is deliciously floral.

In the fall, the elder trees produce masses of tiny red fruit that hang in large bunches like grapes. Elderberry wine resembles a good burgundy, and needs at least three or four years to fully mature. To be honest, we never tasted any that had been kept that long, because almost all country wine makers are drinkers and not collectors. Fortunately, blackberries reach their peak when the elderberries are ripe, and a combination of the two results in a Beaujolais style of red wine which can be drunk when young.



“Elderflower champagne,” however, is the most famous British drink made from the elder tree, though you’ll have a hard time finding a recipe in books on wine making. It’s a traditional brew that was and still is served to farm laborers and even children during harvest time on warm, early summer days. And its popularity is based on the fact that it has a magnificent floral bouquet and a hint of sweetness, is thirst quenching, and behaves like champagne.

No, it doesn’t get you tipsy. Wendy always called it “woozy boozy,” though the alcohol content rarely exceeds three percent by volume. But it fizzes, pops corks, quenches thirst, and tastes great. It’s fun!

Wendy had invited about thirty guests for her afternoon garden party. It was an unusually hot day for North Wales, and only the elders wore wool. A few people drank cocktails, but most of us gladly settled for Wendy’s wonderful homemade wine. Masses of assorted canapés adorned trestle tables covered with floral tablecloths and bouquets of wildflowers. Pigeon pie was the entrée, though the children were told it was chicken. We all dug in.

And then the goldfish pond exploded. Elderflower champagne is weak in alcohol, but high in gas. The first bottle that blew its cork set off a chain reaction. People jumped and shrieked, rushed to retrieve the frothing bottles from the pond. Elderflower champagne is a lot of fun on a hot summer’s day. Even Wendy’s Koi carp survived it. Indeed, judging from their size, they thrived on it.

ELDERFLOWER CHAMPAGNE (“Woozy Boozy”)

Ingredients:

- Two elderflower heads (no green flowers--pick when ready to fall).
- The peel of one lemon, plus the juice.
- One and a half pounds of sugar.
- One gallon of boiling water.
- Two tablespoons of white wine vinegar.
- (No yeast need be added--wild yeasts in the flowers and air are sufficient).

Preparation

- Pour boiling water on the above, cool, add vinegar. Stir gently and cover.
- After twenty-four hours, strain through a bag (squeeze very gently), bottle and cork.
- Keep bottles upright in cool conditions; use wired corks and champagne bottles if your storage area is subject to temperature fluctuations.
- Age for approximately four weeks.
- Serve very cold, lest corks pop prematurely when bottles are exposed to warmth.

CHAPTER 9: RATSO

I first met Ratso in our front room around two in the morning. He had an empty can of cat food jammed over his head and was crashing around our fireplace grate. I was stark naked and holding a flashlight on the top of the stairs when I saw him, and he nearly scared me to death. After all, I was new to Wales and had certainly never been warned about creatures with metal heads that went bump in the night.

Ratso was a farm cat. More than that, he was a gimpy legged runt, which was one reason we named him after the character in the movie “Midnight Cowboy.” If you ever saw the movie, you’ll also know that Ratso was a game-legged runt, a thief, a liar, and a tough little guy who’d do anything to get warm and fed.

“He’s the ugliest cat I’ve ever seen in my life,” my wife stated with distaste. But that’s why I liked him. Ratso was a nondescript black and white mongrel when it came to pedigree. But what really distinguished him were the torn ears, numerous scars, and the impressive musculature on his stunted body. His testicles were so big in relation to his short legs that he walked bow legged.

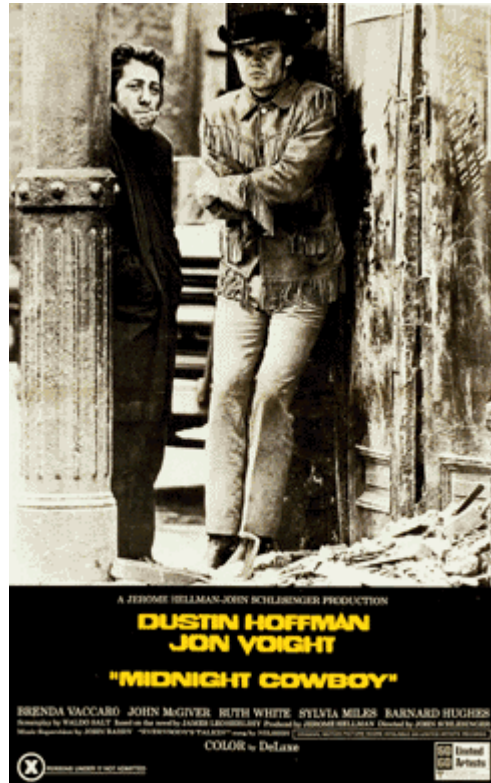
Welsh farmers always keep cats, but they rarely feed them and never waste money on having them “fixed.” Females are preferred, because they’re the best ratters. Litters of kittens are usually drowned in a futile attempt to control the feral cat population in rural areas.

Our first cat in North Wales was an exception to the rule. Fritz the Cat was a city slicker. He waltzed into our lives and our house as if he knew he belonged and wouldn’t take no for an answer. He was long and elegant, jet black except for white feet and a bib, and was obviously used to being treated as the senior member of a family. Val and I cried when he disappeared two years later. It could have been a road accident, but was more probably a fox. We never knew.

Fritz and Ratso were opposites. Fritz had been handsome and sleek, Ratso was ugly and stunted. Fritz demanded expensive canned cat food served in his own dish, Ratso would steal and eat any and everything. Fritz disdained being cuddled, Ratso would jump into anyone’s lap, uninvited.

But the main difference was that Ratso was a country cat--and a Welsh country cat at that. Ratso demanded to be let out at night, no matter what the weather. When we opened the back door the following morning, we were greeted with trophies from his nightly excursions. Sometimes a vole, often the remains of a rabbit, usually the heads and tails of at least two rats. True love.

Ratso’s worst habit was fighting. Looking back, it was our fault for never having him fixed. He’d come home in the morning with another tear in his feathered ears, or



blood crusting part of his pelt, or limping. Sometimes he wouldn't appear for days on end.

Trevor Pritchard, our local veterinarian, liked Ratso and referred to him as "The Ripper," after Ratso had almost bitten him to the bone while being sedated for the first of many stitches. Trevor was partial to our country wine and reckoned that Ratso was worth between one and two bottles per visit, depending on how badly he'd been bitten or scratched. Val and I made it a point of honor to always give Trevor our best.

We'd had Ratso about two years when another cat entered our lives. Val found it while picking blackberries in a field near our house. It was a pure black kitten which was starving and making pathetic "eek, eek" sounds when she found him, and, needless to say, "Eek" also became part of our menagerie. We all adored Eek, and that included Ratso. Ratso, AKA "The Ripper," also known as the meanest and ugliest cat in town, adopted Eek. He played with the kitten, groomed it, put up with having his tattered ears used for teething, and even stayed in some nights to sleep with it by the fireplace. Val was downright jealous.

As is the case in so many families, Val and I had our favorite children. Eek was Val's pride and joy, and Ratso was left to me. Not that Val or I openly discriminated. But when it came time to take Ratso to the vet, he was definitely "my" cat.

Ratso didn't improve with age. If anything, he got uglier. He rarely groomed himself, refused to let us do it for him, and his torn ears and mass of scar tissue didn't help his appearance. Even his nose became misshapen, due to severe burns he'd endured while devouring a roasted chicken fresh out of our oven. This knack for thievery at any cost led to Val banning him from our kitchen.

We even received complaints about Ratso from our neighbors. He snuck into their homes and stole food, he kept them awake at night with his tom catting, and, more alarmingly, he was blamed for the disappearance of more than one chicken. But when he was snoring and twitching with cat dreams in front of our fire, my heart still went out to him. Parents are all the same.

And then there came a time when Ratso didn't return home, even after a week. Val joked that he was probably trying to haul a mountain sheep back to the house. Eek decided to sleep in our bed. I feared the worst.

Ratso never returned. I still remember him scaring me silly in the middle of the night, remember the cat food can coming off his head with a "pop," like in a Tom and Jerry cartoon. I remember throwing him back out into the dark, remember him sneaking back in the next morning. Like his Hollywood counterpart, Ratso stopped at nothing to achieve his dream.

I mourned Ratso, but Val assured me that he was warm and happy, wherever he was. Looking back, I don't think she had cat heaven in mind.

Chapter 10: SKIP TO MY LOO



Minna Roberts, our next door neighbor, was a senior midwife at the North Wales Hospital. And she wanted to show her elderly friend our loo. “But, of course,” we said. After all, we’d used Minna’s bathroom facilities at least once a week for nearly three years. What else could we say?

By the third year we’d lived in The Old Smithy in the tiny village of Nantglyn, North Wales, we were fed up with using an outdoor chemical toilet. Going to the outdoor loo in a howling gale wasn’t fun. Having your butt stick to the seat because of the cold wasn’t fun. Emptying the thing wasn’t fun (though we did grow some remarkable Brussels sprouts as a result). And having to ask your friends and neighbors for permission to take an occasional bath was downright embarrassing.

We added the bathroom above the kitchen and made it the same size. The toilet wasn’t a problem, but the architect insisted that we install a bathtub, “in case you ever expect to sell the place.” We were more interested in a real shower than a traditional British bathtub, but we gave in.

We ended up with both, but the shower was the problem. The rural Welsh like to joke about taking baths once a week, whether they need them or not. But I was a “Yank,” and my Welsh wife had spent enough time in America to back me up when I insisted on having what I considered a “real” shower installed.

The architect tried to fob us off with shower hoses and whatnot that could be installed above the bathtub. We insisted on a separate shower stall. He showed us catalogues of British shower stalls that were available. We were appalled at how tiny they

were, and said so. “You’ve got the space to do whatever you want,” he said in exasperation, “but it will cost you a bundle for a custom-made shower.” And it did.

The bathroom measured about ten by twenty feet. After four years of an outdoor toilet, we decided to splurge. We had a king-size bathtub installed at the far end and boxed it in with mahogany. We figured that we could turn it into a Koi carp pond, if nothing else. We put an enormous plate glass window in, which gave us a view of the moors. When we could see the moors, the locals assured us, that it meant it was going to rain; when we couldn’t see them, it was raining.

We installed double sinks in a custom-made mahogany cabinet with cupboards below. We added beige wall to wall carpeting, an oak toilet seat which we conned my Dad into shipping from California, dimmer lights, roller blinds made from cinnamon-orange tie-dyed cloth we’d brought back from West Africa, and an enormous framed print of Hieronymus Bosch’s “Garden of Delights” that we hung over the tub. The only thing we still wanted was a custom made, tiled shower to fit the five by five foot mahogany alcove we’d forced the builder to install. If it’s worthwhile doing, it’s worth doing well.

Our friend and fellow craftsman, Taffy, came to the rescue. He was a potter who had found fame and fortune by going into the tile business. Actually, that’s not an adequate description—he’d gone into making ceramic murals on a huge scale. He and his wife had first hit the big time by making ceramic murals for large private and public concerns in Britain. When the UK recession hit, Taffy went where the money was and ended up working in the Middle East. His prospects were enormous, but so were his overheads.

We were into leatherwork, so Taffy asked us to make him a leather portfolio cover that would knock the socks off the Arabs. His own material was brilliantly presented and photographed, but he wanted a cover for the whole package that would send a message. Taffy was ferociously Welsh.



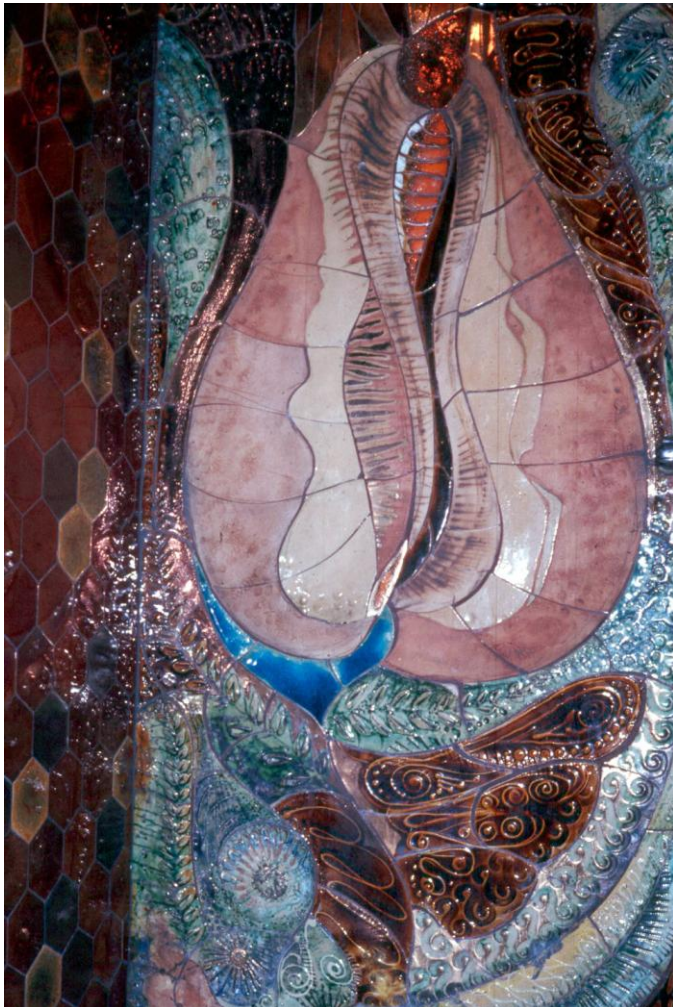
We spent nearly a week designing and executing a Celtic cover for his portfolio. It featured his business name in a central carved circle that was linked to an elaborate border frame of Celtic knot work design. We were very proud of it. Taffy promised to pay us later.

Later turned out to be somewhat indefinite, so Val and I finally asked him for help with our tiles and our shower. Taffy, like most rural folk, infinitely preferred barter to hard cash. “You name it, you’ve got it,” he said. “I’m back to Dubai in a few days, but Jean and the boys can handle anything you want.”

My wife, Val, had very definite ideas of what she wanted. Variegated earth tone tiles around the bathtub and sinks and behind the toilet. The shower stall walls tiled to match. We invited Jean to dinner while Taffy was away and discussed shower tiles between generous samples of our latest experiments with homemade country wine.

Jean was not just “the little wife,” she was the designer and maker of all of Taffy’s murals. Taffy tended to take all the credit for their success, because he was the one who “thought big,” landed the big contracts, and figured out the logistics of shipping and mounting the work. But Taffy was in Dubai. We broke out another bottle of vintage blackberry wine, filled Jean’s glass again, and asked her what she would do if it was her shower.

Jean suggested using some color to add a focal point, creating a contrast to all those mahogany and variegated earth tones. “If it was mine, I’d put a mural on the back of the shower stall and tile the sides to match the rest of the decor. Val refilled her glass, asked what sort of mural she had in mind. I noticed that Jean’s ears were getting decidedly pink.



“Well, something you could live with, something organic. A focal point. I’d go for stylization over anything realistic, add some hot color and gold highlight.” Val handed her a cowry shell we’d found in Hawaii--we had a bunch of them displayed in a big candy jar near the dining table. “How about something like this?” Val asked. Jean fondled the shell, examining it closely, sipping her blackberry wine. “It’s beautiful. Why not?”

Taffy and Jean’s boys arrived about a week later and installed our tiles, including Jean’s cowry mural. The overall effect was classy, and the shower mural was downright stunning. The stylized giant cowry shell shimmered under the overhead light; electric blues and hot sienna were offset by streaks of black and patches of gold. We were delighted. We could certainly live with it.

But beauty and a lot of other things are in the eye of the beholder. Taffy, upon his return from Dubai, gleefully dubbed it “the gold plated vulva.” We ignored his comment, but couldn’t help but see our cowry shell in a new light. The final straw was when Minna brought her friend over to see the mural.

I escorted Minna and Blodwyn upstairs to the infamous loo and left them to their own speculations while I raced back downstairs to answer an insistent phone. When I came back up, the two midwives were giggling like schoolgirls. “What’s so funny?” I asked. Minna had the hiccups, but Blodwyn spoke for the two of them. “It’s just like page 124 in the gynecological textbook we both had to study in nursing school,” she wheezed, between giggles. “You wicked man.”

Chapter 11: READ THIS OR DIE

I'd just eaten my first forkful of wild mushrooms that I'd collected in a nearby field. They were sautéed in butter with a crushed clove of garlic and a dash of salt and coarsely ground pepper. They tasted delicious. And then Val ruined it. "Until you have had identification double-checked, do not eat any of them or you may die," she quoted from Roger Philips' definitive book on *Mushrooms and other fungi of Great Britain and Europe*.

Val was committed to organic gardening, self-sufficiency, and recycling. But she drew the line at "toadstools." I assured her that they were Parasol Mushrooms, unmistakable, and excellent eating. Val refused to try them and droned on as I ate:

"The symptoms occur sometime after eating, from about eight hours to two days. There is then an onset of vomiting, diarrhea, sweating and insatiable thirst, followed by a pale, haggard appearance with cold hands and feet, accompanied by a state of deep anxiety. Death can take up to eight or twelve days and after the first onset of illness there may be a period when the patient feels better. Do not be fooled by this. If you think you have eaten some dangerous mushroom, or if you get strong symptoms, go immediately to a hospital casualty department, taking with you some of the mushroom if possible."

I finished eating and felt a bead of sweat on my brow. "Don't be silly," I thought to myself, "it takes at least eight hours." To Val I said, "Don't be silly. I'm absolutely sure these are edible, and I know you're taking the mickey--you're talking about Amanitas, and these are Lepiotas." At least I hoped so.

Mushrooming became a passion for me one early October in North Wales. The trout fishing season in Britain ends on the last day of September. Sure, you can still fish for grayling and coarse fish, even salmon in some areas. But my little patch was trout only, and the end of the trout season signaled the end of my favorite fishing excursions along tiny streams and through ancient villages in the area.

And then I met Richard. Richard Zurawski was Polish. Fishing bored him to tears, but mushrooming was in his blood. He and his Welsh wife shared the rent with us for a retail crafts outlet in a small village that was en route to a major tourist spot. Richard found it amusing that I would hang a "gone fishing" sign on my door when business was slow.

Being next door to each other, we talked a lot, or as much as we could. Richard's command of English was limited, but so was mine, according to my wife. Richard had survived refugee camps in Siberia and South America as a kid. He'd learned about mushrooms and edible fungi the hard way.

When the fishing season ended, I was always morose. I'd tell Richard that all we had to look forward to was a bit of fall color, a lot of mud and cold, and meager sales. But Richard would have none of it. "Bugger the fish, now's the time to hunt fungi." He never called them "mushrooms," and he never bothered to hang a "gone fungiing" sign on his door. He was later delighted when Lec Lewinski, the Polish labor leader, couldn't be contacted when he won the Nobel Peace Prize, because he had gone mushrooming and hadn't bothered with a sign on his door. Some things are important.

Richard hunted mushrooms the way commandos cover enemy territory. He would scout a field and nearby hedges and/or woods, size up the potential, and then systematically quarter and explore the area in depth. I thought this was silly, until it dawned on me that I did exactly the same thing when fishing.

“Parasols like open fields enclosed with woods, Boletus are always under trees, Chanterelles are usually by streams, Hedgehogs are in shady and wet areas.” He was usually right. I collected the ones he collected, asked him about names and edibility, came home and looked them up in my book. When I’d challenge Richard on the questionable edibility of a wild mushroom I’d managed to identify, he’d shrug and say “It won’t kill you, man. Just don’t eat too many.” That always made me nervous.

I ended up collecting and eating a lot of the edible fungi of the UK, but only the ones which I considered extremely easy to identify and rated as good or excellent in edibility, according to my book, first, and Richard, second. The first person to ever eat a “toadstool” had a lot of guts (but maybe that’s not an appropriate term).



Parasol mushroom (Macrolepiota procera)

My favorite toadstools were Parasol Mushrooms. They taste a bit sweeter and a lot meatier than commercial mushrooms. They’re also easy to identify, because they’re twelve to eighteen inches high and have a shaggy cap up to six inches in diameter. Unfortunately, there are several close relatives that can cause gastric upsets, but they’re all smaller.

Others on my list included the Boletus family, in particular the Cep or “Penny Bun.” These are restaurant favorites, cost up to thirty dollars a pound when fresh in European markets (in the 1980s), and are used commercially in canned soup. Chanterelles have a faint apricot aroma and are equally expensive and coveted by gourmets. And Morels are second only to Truffles in terms of both outrageous cost and gourmet snob appeal.

The problem with all of the above is that they are either close cousins of something poisonous or else bear a resemblance to something that might make you sick or even kill you. And about one third of the descriptions of fungi in any mushroom guide conclude with the comment “edibility unknown.” You definitely want to stay away from those, unless you want to be the first, and maybe the last, to know.

Richard’s method of determining edibility was a bit scary. He would nibble a bit, but not swallow. If his tongue or lips began to tingle or go numb, he would declare the fungus inedible. I’d heard that a single bite of the



Boletus edulis, commonly called Penny Bun, Cep, or Porcini

Death Cap mushroom was fatal, that there was no known antidote, and that it took six to twenty-four hours for symptoms to occur. The “suck it and see” test was not for me.

Of the three thousand or so “larger” fungi in the UK (as opposed to unknown thousands of smaller ones, such as yeasts), only about ten are known to be “deadly poisonous.” As opposed to just plain poisonous. The odds are slightly in your favor, but, if in doubt, cop out, no matter what any expert tells you.

The average person in Britain wouldn’t touch a “toadstool” with a ten foot pole. But “field mushrooms” are an exception, particularly because they look like the things you buy in the supermarket. The domesticated version of *Agaricus campestris* is grown in sterile and controlled conditions, like supermarket tomatoes. Needless to say, the wild version tastes a lot better and is free if you can find it.

Field mushrooms are a national secret in Britain. In the autumn, when just the right combination of rain and sun has occurred, entire hillsides will experience a “white out” of field mushrooms. Literally thousands of field mushrooms will appear, last for about a week, and then disappear without trace.

The phenomenon is sporadic, but certain areas seem to favor the occurrence. And villagers in the know keep such information a secret. Richard and I had been hunting mushrooms for three years when we stumbled across such a white out, only a half a mile from our shop. Everyone in the village knew that we were interested in mushrooming, but no one had told us about the “secret hill.”

I picked at least twenty pounds and hardly made a dent in the crop, which covered nearly a half an acre. But you can only eat so many mushrooms. I froze most, tried drying some, and feasted on the rest for three days. And then a friend from London visited us for a couple of days. I served Tony a mushroom omelet the first morning of his stay, and he raved about it, wanted to know all about wild mushrooms.

Noticing a few uncooked field mushrooms by the kitchen cutting board, Tony absent-mindedly cut one in half. The next thing I knew, he was outside our back door being violently sick all over the honeysuckle. That’s another problem with wild mushrooms which I forgot to mention--flies lay their eggs on them and they’re quickly infested with maggots if not picked and eaten fresh. But it’s all protein.

Chapter 12: THE BERLIN WALL

I was enjoying a scotch when two English staff sergeants gripped my arms and asked me to accompany them to the kitchen of the noncommissioned officer's social club. This was West Berlin in 1979, the British quarter. I opened my mouth, about to demand my rights as an American, but the grip on my arms tightened, my drink was firmly removed from my hand, and I was frog marched out of the club room.

The Welsh Tourist Board has always had an annual convention to drum up tourism. Of course, these conventions are always held outside of the UK, are usually timed to coincide with the International European Tourist Board Association's conference, and people involved in the industry will do just about anything to be invited along for the ride. My wife and I were duly honored and flattered when the Welsh Tourist Board (WTB) asked us if we would be willing to participate in such an event.

The venue was West Berlin, and the good news was that it was scheduled for the last week of February, a time of year when our craft sales were dead. We relied on the tourist trade for the sale of our leathersgoods, and tourists to Britain tend to be thin on the ground in the winter. At least it wouldn't interfere with orders and production. The bad news was that it would cost a lot, and we were poor craftspeople. And, even if we could afford to go, what good would it do for our business?

Val and I said thanks but no thanks and gave our reasons. To our amazement, the WTB presented us with a counter offer. Their public relations department had decided to sponsor a "Welsh Week" in Berlin in order to drum up trade. Why settle for a booth handing out glossy brochures advertising the beauty of Wales, when you could bring a taste of Wales along in person? They wanted Welsh artists, chefs, craftsmen, and musicians to be there in the flesh. But every such person they'd contacted had given them the same sort of reply we'd responded with.

The owner of the Hotel Berlin came to the rescue. He offered the WTB cheap rates if they could guarantee to fill his hotel. British Air offered a similar deal on flights. The WTB dug deep into the taxpayer's coffers and decided that it could afford it. We were offered free air fare to and from Berlin and free bed and breakfast at the Hotel Berlin. We accepted, with the proviso that we would display our craft work in the hotel only if we were assured that potential importers would be notified and invited to view our work. "No problem," we were assured. The British Embassy will handle everything." Right!.

Val and I packed our goods and our bags, filled out tons of paperwork for customs, and left Britain in the middle of a snowstorm. And we arrived in Berlin during a snowstorm. All cats are gray in the night. We dumped our personal luggage in the bedroom and hauled our trade samples back down to the hotel lobby for display.

As it turned out, only five artsy-craftsy people from Wales had ended up at the Welsh Week in Berlin, and we all met in the lobby of the Hotel Berlin for the first time. The Hoads were from Mid Wales and were painters with a decidedly abstract style. Terry owned a woolen mill in North Wales and had brought samples of his latest line of wool sweaters. Elaine was into haute couture and had brought samples of her latest fashion designs. Mr. Phillips made Welsh love spoons and fine furniture. Val and I offered hand carved leather jewelry boxes.

We all viewed the small hotel lobby with horror. The walls were a sea of antique mirrors, probably an attempt to make the area seem larger. There was one antique china cabinet that Val and I could have used, but it was stuffed with German figurines. Mr. Phillips' exquisite chair would fit in, but where would the love spoons go? The Hoads threw up their hands in horror, and Elaine cursed softly. Terry suggested a pub.

It's a small world. We ended up at "The Irish Pub," only a block away from the Hotel Berlin. We ordered pints of British beer, shots of scotch, and got to know each other. The resident musician seemed to recognize our accents and struck up a Welsh song. A group of people at the next table started playing spoons, and one of them produced a penny whistle. The "German" musician turned out to be from London, and the party next to us turned out to be the Welsh musicians whom the WTB had invited along.

By the end of the evening, we'd decided that we could cope, even in the lobby of the Hotel Berlin. If we had to buy our own materials to create a display, we'd do it. After all, we were craftspeople. We knew how to improvise.



And we all did. The lobby of the Hotel Berlin looked like a proper gallery when we were done. All we needed were the buyers we'd been promised. We waited in vain for four days before we began to rebel in earnest. The British Embassy had forgotten us.

By this time, we all knew that Berlin was a very expensive town to live in. The cheapest entree in the Hotel Berlin evening menu was nearly thirty dollars. We began to hoard the bread, cheese, and fruit that we were allotted on our bed and breakfast deal, but got chastised when we took the whole pineapple centerpiece back to our rooms.

WTB members were not much help when we complained. They were all on the payroll, all expenses paid. They preferred the Hilton Hotel, bragged about a menu which included crocodile meat, and infuriated us with their flagrant abuse of public funds.

Judith Hoad led the revolution. She phoned the local press and gave her side of the story. All of a sudden we were in the news, and the British Embassy was not amused. We were suddenly all invited to a grand soiree at the British non-commissioned officers club where "Ar Log," the Welsh musicians we had met in the Irish Pub, would provide the entertainment.

Val had booked opera tickets for the Berlin Philharmonic that evening, and we figured that we could handle both events if we could sort out the logistics. I suffered through something operatic which Val found delightful, and we hailed a taxi to the British N.C.O. club around ten at night. British security was thorough and rigid. We had

to explain who we were, why we were where we were, even though we had been invited where we were.

We finally made it inside the club, recognized a couple of Welsh friends, heard “Ar Log” playing their hip-hop Celtic music in the background. But this was a military club, and I became acutely aware of a sea of military uniforms, coats and ties. I was wearing a floral silk shirt underneath a handmade leather jacket that had cost us over a hundred dollars in raw materials alone and over three days for Val to create. My jeans were genuine Levi’s, and I’d made my own leather sandals. I’d been given more than one compliment on my attire at the opera.

“Sorry,” one of the sergeants said, seating me on a low stool. “Rules around here are coat and tie, and one of the men’s wives had a fit when she saw you.” I said that my dress was good enough for the Berlin Philharmonic, pointed out that I’d been personally invited to his bloody social club, and whined that I would never have paid the taxi fare if I’d known what was in store. Besides, I was an American.

He ignored my last remark and handed me a large scotch on the rocks, a bit smaller than the one he poured for himself. “Sorry to get your knickers in a twist, but I don’t make the rules around here,” he said. “Maybe we can sort it out.”

I settled for a borrowed tie and a borrowed sports jacket, had another large scotch with my jailer, and weaved back out to find my wife and the rest of the Welsh retinue. Val went berserk when she saw me. “What the hell are you wearing, and where the hell have you’ve been?” she shouted. It took a lot of explaining.

The British Attaché in West Berlin not only apologized for the screw-up in arranging for potential buyers to see our goods, but he invited all of us to attend a formal party in our honor at the British Officer’s Club. I flatly refused to attend, even when he assured me that there was no formal dress code at the Officer’s Club. He even offered to lend me a coat and tie of his own; so much for the dress code. Instead, Val and I went through Checkpoint Charlie the day of the party. East German security was even tighter than the British NCO club, but nobody complained about my attire or frog-marched me into a back room. The East Germans we met were friendly, open, and generous. Naught queerer than people, to quote a British cliché...



Chapter 13: ARRESTED

My wife and I were the hit of The Royal Welsh Show, at least in the arts and crafts arena, and the BBC Wales reporter knew it. It was the third day of the five day show, and we were mobbed with customers when he arrived. "We'd like to do a live interview," he shouted over the din. Val and I were busy taking customers' money, trying to make a living. We ignored him--he probably made more money than us. The BBC could afford to wait.

And he did wait, and, during a brief lull in sales, he made his pitch: "It's live radio, you'll get great publicity - just give me ten minutes of your time." Very fast, very insistent, a bit sleazy. Val immediately walked away to a new customer. I knew she'd never do it, knew about her shyness. "Hey, it's OK," the reporter said. "I know your wife is Welsh, but the big story is about a Yank at the Royal Welsh."

I wasn't in the mood, didn't like this pushy guy. "Maybe tomorrow when we're sold out," I said, realizing that it was more than possible. "Great," the pest replied. "Say three in the afternoon. It's less than a five minute take, and I'll just ask the usual about a Yank living in Wales. Try to think up something better than loving scenery and sheep." He smirked and disappeared among the new customers coming in to our tent.

The Royal Welsh Show was and remains a major annual event devoted to Wales' primary industry, agriculture. Builth Wells in Mid Wales might have been a popular spa town in the Victorian era, but Val and I always considered it dangerous when we attended its big show in the 1980s. The town itself wasn't to blame, because the show was held on the outskirts, in an enormous field on the grounds of Llanelwedd Hall, approachable only by an 18th century bridge over the River Wye which divides the site from the town.

But the annual onslaught of several hundred dealers in everything from farm machinery and fertilizers to pedigree livestock and new hybrid corn is hard for the town to ignore. The vendors want nightlife; Builth Wells wants money in its coffers. The Welsh have always been much more pragmatic than the English, so the outcome was predictable. Licensing laws were thrown to the wind, pubs served until supplies ran out, and the old bridge over the Wye shrugged off more traffic in a week than it got in its first two hundred years.

Val and I preferred to camp on the showground. We had the cover of our tented booth, adequate toilet and shower facilities to hand, and access to innumerable food and drink booths during the day. Besides, the grounds were alive at night. Stable hands stayed up all night feeding and grooming, musicians practiced, people partied, and hot food was available around the clock. But greener grass led us over the old bridge our first night.

We wanted to "do the town" and celebrate and unwind after all the stress of preparing for the show, getting there, setting up the display, and having a good first day of sales. We held hands as we crossed the narrow bridge, were jostled by merrymakers, not all of whom were very merry. Builth Wells was awash in a human spa of revelers. Val and I settled for the only pub that didn't have a line outside the door, managed to get a drink an hour later, finally winked our mutual distaste to each other in the bedlam. We held each other closer on our way back over the bridge.

It was the best show we'd ever had, and we came close to selling out on the next to last day. Val disappeared in order to shop, leaving me to man the booth and muse

about the mutation of consumer products into gold. The public had thinned out by this time, but the vendors took their place--especially if they had hot cash in their hands.

I was apologizing to a customer for our lack of selection when the BBC guy arrived. He was backed up by professional types with recording gear and microphones, and I was startled, because I'd forgotten about him. My customer was awe struck. "OK, Bill, you're live on BBC Wales in two minutes, so get your act together," the pushy little reporter said. He seemed to like my discomfiture, obviously enjoyed being in charge of such things. "Just relax and remember what I told you. No bullshit about the pretty country and quaint natives. The audience wants to know why some weirdo from California lives in Wales, and they want the truth."

"Two minutes?" My mind raced like a computer and crashed. "This is John Evans, reporting live from the Royal Welsh Show in Builth Wells," the creep suddenly announced in solemn tones. "An American has taken top honors in the arts and crafts section of this year's show, and it's not just because he married a Welsh girl. But let him speak for himself." The microphone was pushed in my face. "Be yourself," the reporter hissed in my ear. "Bill, what do you really like about living in Wales?" he asked on air.

I wanted to explain about the pretty landscape and the quaint natives and the sheep, only he'd said not to do it. But, like a nocturnal animal caught in headlights, instinct paralyzed reason. "I came here on my honeymoon, and I love the countryside and..." The reporter groaned audibly, rolled his eyes, doubled my confusion, and halved my confidence. "I guess what I really like about Wales is being able to pee out the back door without being arrested on three counts," I blurted. The reporter screamed "cut," and my forgotten customer giggled.

It didn't hurt business, not that we had a lot left to sell. Within minutes, BBC Wales groupies swamped our booth, all asking if I was the Yank who had said what they'd heard on the radio, all with big grins. I was diplomatic at first, but finally shut both my mouth and the tent when we sold out completely around five in the afternoon. And I was worried about Val.

I needed have been. She showed up a few minutes later with a big cardboard box in her arms and an even bigger smile on her face. Had she heard the BBC interview? Was I forgiven? Then I realized that Val was pickled, not tickled.

The big box turned out to be from an importer of fine German wines and spirits. Such people aren't allowed to sell their wares on the showground's, but they're very generous with free samples. Val had tried them all, from Kabinett to Auslese, Sekt to Eiswein, and then on to the brandies and liqueurs. The Armanac was her undoing. "The queen of brandies," she purred, pulling a bottle of Armanac



from the box with an exaggerated flourish and a wink. Wine, cheese, bread, and paté followed in rapid succession, as did the story. “Of course they can’t sell the stuff direct, so I ordered a couple of cases. These are free samples,” she said, triumphantly.

Her jubilation quelled my concern about the size of an order that could justify such freebies. Besides, she didn’t know about the BBC--yet. So we feasted and drank German wine, talked about our success at the show, and snuggled up under our duvets to keep each other warm and sip Armanac. Of course, I told Val about the interview, and, of course, she knew all about it.

I woke up about two in the morning, needing to pee, trying not to disturb Val as I crept out of bed and behind the tent to the nearest tree. Val caught me in the act with her flashlight. “I should arrest you on three counts,” she growled, before stalking off to the lady’s toilets on the other side of the show field. “You already have, my lady,” I said to myself.

Chapter 14: OH SAY CAN YOU SEE

“The only bloody flag that flies in Nantglyn is the Welsh flag,” Ellis told me sternly. I had just hung a regulation size American flag from The Old Smithy in rehearsal for the Fourth of July the next day. Ellis was not just a member of the local village council, he was my next door neighbor. And it’s unwise to cross your neighbor in a tiny rural village anywhere.

I gave Ellis an all-American grin and told him that we were celebrating our independence from the English. He softened at once. “Well, that’s different, boyo, if you’re celebrating beating the bloody Saisnigs and all.” Saisnig is the Welsh word for the English, and Ellis was a self-proclaimed Welsh Nationalist. I invited him to our barbecue, and he granted me official permission to fly the American flag in Nantglyn one day a year.

The Fourth of July was a special occasion for Val and me. Not so much because of the American connection--after all, Val is Welsh. The real excuse was that my parents had just arrived from California for their first visit, and that Val and I had finally had an indoor toilet installed in a brand new, all-American bathroom. We’d managed to survive nearly three years of using a chemical toilet in an outbuilding, but my Mom, who grew up on a farm, perversely refused to visit us until we had “proper” amenities.

During our first years in Nantglyn, Val and I made a living by making handcrafted candles. It’s a messy business, because you end up coated with a film of wax by the end of a day’s production. Washing yourself down in a tub in front of the fire is a laborious and inefficient way to take a bath. And one reason I didn’t want to offend Ellis was that he and his wife Minna had offered us the use of their bath once a week for the past three years. Of course, Ellis had tried to peek on more than one occasion when Val was bathing. But we didn’t take his lechery seriously and still felt we owed him.

My Mom took an instant liking to Ellis when she discovered he was an opera buff. Ellis once had the distinction of being the only person in Nantglyn who had ever been to London--and it was the allure of opera that enticed him to visit the Saisnig capitol. Ellis even played opera when he was milking his small herd of cows. I once asked him, jokingly, if it improved milk production, and he very seriously maintained that it did. Even the Milk Board inspector who checked the cream content once a week thought there was something in the opera story, if only because Ellis consistently had the highest percentage among all the producers in the area.

Mom and Dad were impressed with The Old Smithy and our success in the craft world. My Dad was an ex-naval Captain who took up piano restoration in his retirement. He couldn’t get over the Victorian furniture we had bought for a pittance at various salesrooms in the nearest town. He had fits when he noticed that one of our workbenches was actually a solid mahogany table with Queen Anne legs--until I told him that it only cost three dollars. Mom was a gardening freak and raved about the old fashioned rambling rose outside our back door and the wild roses that made up a good part of the hedge surrounding our garden. She also loved to make pressed flower arrangements, and spent most of her time at our place denuding our garden of anything pressable.

They were over on a three week trip and had only allotted four days with us. Val figured that a Fourth of July barbecue would not only be a fun sendoff, but would give us an excuse to introduce Mom and Dad to some of our friends. Having found out the hard

way that a British hamburger is about fifty percent cereal, I was determined to serve our guests the real thing, hot off the barbecue. Val, as usual, took charge of the hard part and prepared all the finger food, salads, veggies, and dessert. We'd also been making country wine for three years by this time, so we had a good supply of elderberry, blackberry, parsley, and apple wine - all bottled, sort of aged, and labeled "Chateau Nantglyn."

We kicked the party off around five in the afternoon, and it turned into a roaring success. My parents got on like a house on fire with my solicitor and his wife, the Hoosons. Friends from the village itself were delighted to meet my Mom and Dad-- maybe the Yank wasn't a dope dealer after all. Mom found our friend Taffy the potter to be one of the most charming men she had ever met. Dad swapped wood working secrets with our builder, Dai the Death, who had installed our new bathroom. The hamburgers were wonderful, and about twenty bottles of country wine were emptied.

The party ended relatively early. After all, it was mid-week, cows had to be milked, and people had to go to work early in the morning. My Mom was in bed by ten, and Val, having cleaned up most of the debris, left Dad and I to it shortly after.

I freshened up Dad's vodka and tonic, sipped elderberry wine. There was still a bit of light in the sky, and we stood by the glowing embers in the barbecue, speaking the ancient language of fathers and sons. I blithered on a bit about never finishing my PhD, about not becoming the "doctor" my Mom had always hoped for. I saw my life through Dad's eyes (or what I thought were his eyes), remember apologizing for not being the son that he had expected me to be. I almost cried, maybe even did.

Dad just said that he was proud that I'd been able to do my own thing, to carve out my own life, to do something that I cared about. He went on to say that he wished that he'd gotten into pianos earlier, because he felt that he wouldn't live long enough to become the kind of craftsman he would like to be. I thought about that. More guilt.



We stood together by the dying embers, thinking our own thoughts in the dark. Country night sounds began to erupt. The high pitched twitter of a bat, the rumbling of one of Ellis's cow's bellies, barn owls, a sharp cough from a fox. Dad's wristwatch suddenly chimed and broke the spell.

"Hey, it's midnight and we haven't shot off the fireworks," Dad exclaimed. He rushed out to the rental car and returned with a Roman candle. "I smuggled it through customs, thought you'd get a kick out of it. Remember the time you almost got me kicked out of the Navy when you threw a cherry bomb in the officer's swimming pool in Hawaii?" I did, but decided not to pursue the subject.

We ceremoniously planted the Roman candle in place and considered the trajectory. Dad had a degree in astronomy, had been the navigation officer on a submarine in the war. I left it to him. We aimed for the open field across from The Old Smithy, and I lit the fuse.

Both our faces lit up when the fireworks soared into the inky sky and exploded with a brilliant shower of colored and spinning light. We hugged each other in glee, two children at heart. And then the phone rang.

“What the hell are you bloody playing at?” Ellis shouted. You’ve spooked the horses--they’ve jumped the damn fence. Christ knows what it’ll do to the cows. And you damn near set our house on fire.” I made abject apologies, promised to repay any damage, swore it would never happen again. So much for astronomy and navigation. Dad and I beat a hasty retreat to bed.

Mom and Dad left the next day, but only after personally apologizing to Ellis. He seemed mollified after we all went over and asked forgiveness, explained about fireworks on the Fourth of July in America. “My son once nearly got me kicked out of the Navy for the same damn thing,” Dad expounded as he surreptitiously slipped Ellis some money. Ellis pocketed the cash and gave me a wink. “Well, at least he’s not a bloody Saisnig,” he said.

Chapter 15: YANKEE TAKES THE MICKEY

My first meeting with Prince Charles was a social disaster. Of course, I'd seen him before, on the occasion of his investiture as The Prince of Wales at Caernarfon Castle. But that was ten years earlier and on TV.

The only advantage of being an American living in Wales was that the Welsh accepted me because I wasn't "bloody English." And the English living in Wales accepted me because at least I wasn't "bloody Welsh." My Welsh wife received similar left-handed compliments, because, although born in Wales, her mother was English and her father was Irish.

Prince Charles also had similar problems. As English royalty, the "tame" Welsh and the English inhabitants of Wales adored him. But, as "The Prince of Wales," a title affirming English dominance over Wales, he was hated by the Welsh Nationalists. You can't help being born what you are.

I learned to walk this nationalistic tightrope at an early stage. The first sentence I was taught in Welsh translated, "The English are assholes." The first English joke I ever heard about the Welsh was, "The Welsh like to prey a lot, especially on each other." A lot of this was friendly rivalry, but the Welsh nationalists threaten to blow up Caernarfon castle to this day.

Val and I had abandoned candle making for leatherwork when we exhibited at our first trade show, the Welsh Craft Show, held annually in Llandrindod Wells in Mid Wales. The three day event has always been a showcase for Welsh craftsmanship, averaged over a thousand exhibitors in those days, and had, as its most prominent patron, The Prince of Wales.

Val and I had no competition with our unorthodox style of leatherwork and were swamped with buyers and orders during the first two days of the show. Prince Charles made an unexpected appearance on the last day. We thought nothing of it, until we were officially notified that our booth had been selected as one of three which Charles would personally visit.

Val was delighted. She has English blood, loves to hobnob with the rich and famous, likes a bit of limelight. I was appalled. I wasn't about to bow to anyone. Besides, I'm shy and get tongue-tied when put under a spotlight. I pointed out that we would lose at least two hours of selling time. Val pointed out that it would be great publicity. I bit my tongue.

It was worse than I could have imagined. A resonant hum of ohs and ahs followed in the wake of Charles and his entourage, like smoke from a train, as they came up our aisle. A phalanx of body guards and BBC cameramen kept the crowd at bay. One of them even lifted a photographer friend of mine bodily off a nearby chair so that an official BBC cameraman could take his place.



Val positioned herself in front of our ten by ten foot booth, next to a bentwood hat stand bristling with samples of our handbags. Spotlights and flashbulbs were everywhere. Val and Charles were introduced. She curtsied. I hid in the back of the booth, but it didn't work. Charles had cameras trained on him, knew how to act his part, came inside. I can't remember if I bowed or even shook hands, but nobody let me forget the rest.

He eyed me, eyed our display inside the booth, then homed in on our three legged saddle stools. "Do you mind?" he asked, doing a regal squat on one of the stools. Flash bulbs flashed. I prayed that the stool legs wouldn't collapse. Then he stood up and said, "Spanish leather?"

I had no idea what he was talking about, wondered if he was kidding. He couldn't possibly be referring to Bob Dylan's "Boots of Spanish Leather," could he? Hell, he wasn't even really looking at me. The spotlights were blinding.

An uncontrollable part of what I am took control. "No, we import 'em from Japan," I heard myself say in a distant but thick American accent. The royal jaw dropped, the world stood still, and I had a flashback of the dungeons in Caernarfon castle.

He finally realized that I was joking, broke into an unrehearsed smile, made real eye contact for the first time. "You're not Welsh," he observed. I tried to explain about my Welsh wife, remember babbling on about making everything by hand, using only top quality British hide. I became aware of titters of laughter around me, remember the Secretary of State for Wales introducing himself, beaming, shaking my hand. The royal retinue disappeared, only to be replaced by the press. Someone handed me a hip flask. Val gave me a kiss.

I found out later that “Spanish leather” is an historical term for the ornate style of leather decoration which the Spanish inherited from the Moors and which the Crusaders brought back to Britain in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Maybe that’s what Charlie meant. How was I to know?



Saddle stool with glue-resist decoration. Charlie preferred a conventional, tooled, geometric design

The whole incident was at least good for business. Our work was shown on TV, my photographer friend managed to get a good PR shot of Charles and Val and the handbags, and one local newspaper wrote the whole thing up with the caption, “Yankee takes the Mickey out of Charlie!”

You can’t help being born what you are. Local Welsh nationalists later came up and shook my hand, bought me drinks in the pub, toasted the Yank. But an English friend was appalled at my lack of manners and called me “the MacEnroe of the crafts world.” The good news is that I sold the saddle stool that Prince Charles sat on at least four times (not really, but it makes a good ending to the story...).

Chapter 16: THE ADDER AD ER ANKERCHIEF

Bronwen was on top of the workbench, and she was screaming. As I entered the workshop, the second thing I took in was how white her legs were. To be honest, I'd never seen her legs before, but, then, I'd also never seen her dancing and shouting on top of a table with both hands clutching her long skirts.

Bronwen is Welsh for "white breast," but translations are unfair. Besides, I was looking up at her, and she was pointing down and shrieking something incomprehensible in Welsh at me. I'd always considered Bronwen a placid sort of employee, but a re-evaluation was definitely in order. White breasts and white legs and all that screaming were definitely disruptive.

The cause of all the fuss was a snake that was curled up on the slate workshop floor about six feet from Bronwen's perch. It was about two feet long, had cobwebs on its nose, and was as catatonic as Bronwen was frantic. I grabbed a hand brush, swept the serpent into a dustpan, and deposited it in a cardboard packing box. Once the lid was secure, I coaxed Bronwen off the workbench and ordered her to go into our house and make tea and/or lie down while I took care of the problem.

But nothing is easy. I had the box in my arms and was headed for the garden where I planned to release the snake when Val caught up with me. "What the hell do you think you're doing?" my darling wife demanded. I tried to tell her about how small the snake was, how snakes were good for the ecological balance, and got cut off in mid-sentence. "You idiot, that's an adder, and it could kill one of our cats!"

I considered her priorities, but challenged her premise. "It's probably a garter snake, but, even if it's an adder, it's too small to hurt anything bigger than a mouse. Besides," I added, "it had cobwebs on its nose when I caught him." My logic escaped Val, who demanded that we phone "the authorities" to determine just what sort of snake I was in charge of. I rolled my eyes, made exasperated husband noises, but did as I was told.



After numerous telephone calls, I ended up speaking with an herpetologist from the University of Manchester. She asked me to describe the snake's markings, coloration, and size. I told her that it was brown, had black zigzag markings on its back, and was only about two feet long. She informed me that the reptile in question was a fully-grown common adder, *Vipera berus*, whose bite could be deadly to humans. When I asked what I should do with it, she advised me to release it "into the wild."

Val overheard the conversation and pointed out that, while we lived in the country, our garden didn't qualify as a halfway house for vipers. "Take it up to the moors, anywhere but around here." I thought I got the message, so put the box in the car and was about to drive off when Val got excited all over again. "What if it gets out? What if it bites you?" I ignored her and headed for the moors, but stopped after less than a mile.

Nantglyn is a rural village, and the countryside is as wild as it gets in Britain. How else could the adder have ended up in our workshop? I watched it slither into the cover of brambles, wondered if he'd someday be responsible for the death of an innocent

berry picker, hoped it wouldn't be anyone I knew. The last thought was ridiculous; I'd lived here six years and had never heard of anyone in Britain being bitten by an adder, never mind dying as a result. Still...

Since Val expected me to go to the moors, I did just that and ended up at The Sportsman's Arms, "the highest pub in Wales." I ordered a pint of "real ale," nursed it at the bar counter, and ended up telling Yogi, the publican, about my dilemma. Yogi immediately informed all the other customers what the "Yank" had done, and I found myself under attack once again.

The local customers were unanimous in the opinion that adders were deadly to man and livestock alike, that they should be killed on sight, and that I was a fool, if not a criminal, to have let one go. I tried to argue that they did more good than harm, but was silenced when one of the locals called me "a white Paki." Paki is a term for a Pakistani emigrant to Britain, and, like "Yank," is derogatory more in context than in literal form. This time it was definitely derogatory, so I took the hint and left.

But I could still remember the cobwebs on the nose of that pathetic snake. And, as I wound my way down from the moors, I remembered the first joke I was ever told in Britain. Laura was about six years old, the daughter of an American friend and ex-patriot living in Birmingham. "Vy couldn't the viper vipe her nose?" she demanded. When I surrendered, she shrieked, "Cause the adder ad er ankerchief." All of us foreigners thought it was funny.

Chapter 17: THE WREXHAM RODEO

He was wearing a black cowboy outfit and looked a bit like Alan Ladd in the movie “Shane,” but older and without makeup. “Your costume ain’t much,” he drawled in a heavily accented Welsh voice, but you’ve sure got the lingo down pat.”



Being an American who’d lived in Wales for over ten years, I wasn’t sure how to take this dubious compliment. As a Navy brat who’d been forced to move every two or three years in his formative years, I’d become fairly good at blending in, learning to adopt the speech and manners of wherever I lived. North Wales presented the same old problem, but on a much bigger scale.

Val's parents lived in Wrexham, the largest city in North Wales, about a forty-five minute drive from our house. We'd been invited by the Wrexham Round Table to exhibit our craft work at the "Wrexham Rodeo," and we'd accepted on a whim and because it was an excuse to visit the in-laws. As if Val needed an excuse to visit her parents.

We certainly didn't expect to make much money from such a venue. Wrexham in general had never been a good place to sell our craft work, though we did supply our leatherwork to one craft shop in the city. Britain was in the middle of a recession, and the spate of bombings by the Irish Republican Army and Middle East terrorists had frightened off a significant chunk of the American tourist trade. We wrote the rodeo off as a business trip.

The Round Table is the equivalent of a Masonic Lodge in the USA, a sort of "old boy's" business network. Our bank manager in Denbigh was a "rounder" and recommended us to the organizers of the rodeo. After all, our business was suffering from the recession, and the bank had given us overdraft facilities that were becoming both embarrassing and threatening to all concerned.

Wales is a country where sheep outnumber the inhabitants at least ten to one. Sheep dog trials are televised nationally. Welsh Spring lamb is renowned and praised by gourmets worldwide. But rodeos are pretty rare.

Val pointed out that the mystique of the American Wild West was as exciting to a "Brit" as royalty and castles were to "Yanks." "Just be yourself, cowboy," she teased, patting my bottom. I packed the car with our stand, "cowboy" stock, and overnight essentials. Off to my first ever rodeo.

"The Wrexham Rodeo and Wild West Festival" seemed pretty tame to my jaded eyes. But I'd never been to a rodeo in America, so what did I know? Most of the horses had English side saddles, but there were a few Western saddles sprinkled in. The main "show" consisted of Welshmen pretending to be cowboys or mountain men, all fighting off imaginary posses or Indians with toy guns.

The event was staged in what Val and her parents used to call "the Eagle's Meadow." This was a patch of ground that had been listed in the Doomsday Book of 1086. Almost nine hundred years later it became an open air market. Today, it's a parking lot. The dead compete with the living in Britain.

As usual, Val left me in charge of the booth while she went exploring and shopping. An American accent in Wales is nearly as effective as a British accent in America, Val observed, so I was the designated sales person. I wore blue jeans, leather sandals, and a Pendleton shirt. Our booth was stocked with everything from belts and bags to holsters and cowboy hats.

The Wrexham shoppers loved my accent, asked about surfing and Ronald Reagan, sometimes even bought something. Our Denbigh bank manager showed up and bought me a pint of Guinness which improved my mood considerably. And then the cowboy in black appeared.

According to him, he was the star of the entire show. I asked why he didn't wear a white hat, and he solemnly explained that bad guys are much more interesting than good guys. I pondered this and refrained from delving further. Then I noticed that he had a press photographer in tow.

Dai “Cowboy” Jones turned out to be a bit part actor in British western movies. He lived his role, had all the right cowboy gear, and tried to make his accent “western.” But we both knew that the accent was hopeless. “I was kidding about your accent,” he said: “You’ve got a bit of Welsh twang, but there’s no disguising a Yank.” I remember Val telling me about a conversation she’d overheard after I’d lived in Wales for over three years. “You know the Yank from Nantglyn? He’s getting better; I can almost understand him now.”

Dai Cowboy figured that I could help him in other ways than his accent. He was a fanatic on authentic cowboy gear to go with his black cowboy outfit, and he figured that my leatherwork was as authentic as it gets. What had really caught his fancy was my selection of holsters. I’ve never been into guns, and firearms were banned in Britain, but I kept being asked for holsters by wannabee cowboys with imitation guns - so I made them on occasion.

I’d brought along four such holsters which I’d carved and hand stitched. Three had traditional “Western” carving of stylized acanthus leaves and flowers, and I’d substituted Welsh daffodils for American wild roses on two of them. The forth one was just for fun. A female nude from the back, full buttocks and a side view of exaggerated breasts, acanthus leaves leaving a lot to be imagined. Val referred to it as “cowboy pornography,” but I knew it would sell.

Dai Cowboy went crazy over the nude and bought it on the spot. But when the press photographer demanded a shot, Dai shoved the nude back in my hand and held out a Welsh daffodil for the camera. He ended up buying both of them.

I told Val the story when she finally returned, after I’d packed up the booth. She gave me a wink and said, “You could sell ice to Eskimos. Did you know that penguin is a Welsh word? It means “white head.” I decided not to query her stream of consciousness. Val patted my butt as we walked to the car and whispered “You’ve got a nice ass for a cowboy.” Some accents are unmistakable.

The End

CHAPTER 18: THE LADIES' CLUB

The Ladies Club began with the women in the village, at least the ones over twenty and under forty. There were about twelve in this category, and they were all convinced that they needed to be in better physical shape. Their husbands, including myself, had the wisdom not to argue and the diplomacy to at least agree “in principal.”

Not that any of us had any say about it. My own wife, Val, kicked things off by teaching a free aerobics class. She used Jane Fonda exercise tapes, the same ones she still works out with every morning of her life. Over the last thirty-five plus years, I’ve learned to hate the sound of Jane Fonda saying, “Don’t forget to breathe.”

The aerobics classes were not only popular, but they led to the formation of a “ladies club” which seemed to involve doing arcane exercises and then having a “ladies only” night out at the local pub. All the husbands were amused at first, a few were faintly alarmed when they were banned from such gatherings, and several were upset when told to feed themselves and their children on such nights. But those like me, who didn’t have children, simply used it as an excuse to go out together to a different pub and to speculate.

We all agreed that our wives deserved their own space, needed time to themselves. We weren’t male chauvinists, at least from our point of view. But we did wonder what the ladies talked about.



One thing they talked about was the formation of a local women’s soccer team. Well, the men had their own, so why not the women? Several members of the ladies club even knew how to play the game, and the rest could at least handle a Jane Fonda workout session. A few husbands pointed out that, while many local villages did have women’s soccer teams, they also had both a bigger and younger population to rely on. That wasn’t a wise thing to mention.

The immediate result was the formation of “NAIN,” a seven-a-side ladies soccer team that had all of two reservists. The team’s name was a play on the Welsh word for “grandmother” and the fact that the team only had a total of nine players. They all showed up for a group photo before their first game wearing garters and outrageous stockings, and their bravado was far in excess of their skills. And they got slaughtered by a team whose collective age was at least one third less than their own.

“The little bastards cheated,” Val muttered as I walked her home from the field. “One of them even kicked me deliberately. Of course I kicked her back, and the referee had no right to give me a penalty.” I kept quiet. NAIN never played again, but the ladies club was far from over.

Shortly after, Val announced her forthcoming fortieth birthday to me in very solemn tones. “I don’t want any jokes or surprises. You may not consider it a big deal, but I do and I’m going to arrange my own party.” I was stunned, but I kept my mouth shut. It turned out that Dorothy, another member of the club, was also about to hit forty at almost the same time. It was to be a joint celebration, and the ladies had made serious plans.

For starters, they rented the main dining hall and conference lounge of the local pub for the occasion. They pre-arranged a custom menu, ordered several cases of champagne, and insisted on doing their own decorating. Then they sent out the formal invitations.

The front page read: “You are invited to a ‘Cocktail Party’ in aid of the elderly!” The back page was much more interesting: “Dinner and drinks will be provided free of charge for those who show up in theme costume, and there will be a special prize for the best entry.” It was signed by “The Old Ladies of Nantglyn,” and at least fifty invitations were put in the local mail. Val gave me an unamused glance when I suggested pinning a lemon peel in my long hair and going as “a lemon twist,” and I got totally ignored when I brandished a screwdriver. This was getting serious.

The party was a huge success. Not only was the pub filled to capacity, but guests went out of their way to dress up in the “cocktail” theme. Many were predictable, such as the Bloody Mary’s, Pink Ladies, Old Fashions, and, of course, Screwdrivers. But some of the costumes were so elaborate that they had the recipe printed on them to prove their authenticity. Have you ever heard of a cocktail called “Angel Face” or “Gypsy?” How about a “Side Car” or a “Blue Moon,” one of the rudest entries?

Despite Val’s attempts to put her foot and my hands down, I went as a “Bosom Caresser,” if only because a friend in California who worked for a silicone breast implant firm had sent me some free samples. Val opted for being a “Blue Hawaiian,” and donned a skin-tight, blue leotard underneath a hula skirt. Dorothy, the co-sponsor of the party, also raised eyebrows with her minimalist rendition of a “Mae West.”

A group of friends who were all members of the local amateur theater ended up stealing the show. The “Mule’s Hind Leg” was clever, and the “Green Goddess” and whatever it was that was yellow with a cherry on top were outrageous in their use of makeup. But top honors went to the “Washington Square.” Rita wore an enormous and elaborately painted cardboard box with cutouts for her eyes and arms only. The relation of the box to the cocktail’s name was obscure, so she’d printed the recipe on the outside. When anyone got close enough to read it, Rita hit them with a red boxing glove hidden inside her box. “The hidden punch,” she explained.

The party was in full swing when I found myself next to Ellis Roberts, our next door neighbor. He was formally dressed in coat and tie, had a scowl on his face and a pint of beer in his hand, and was trying to ignore me. I couldn't resist putting my arm around his stiff shoulders and whispering in his ear, "You're the best Whiskey Sour I've seen all night." Ellis was not amused.

There were a lot of hangovers after the Cocktail Party. The most serious were among the husbands, and, according to what Val later told me, many were more emotional than physical. The worst case was Dorothy. She wasn't speaking to her husband at the moment, because he'd called her a "slut" on the way home from the party--something to do with him overhearing her asking someone to "come up and see me some time, big boy."

"A lot of the ladies had similar experiences," Val murmured, snuggling up to me. "And most of them enjoyed the results." "Which side was she on?" I wondered.

Chapter 19: IRISH COFFEE

It was an international gathering which included a famous Irish opera singer, an infamous Welsh dairyman, an English Shakespearean actor, a Welsh craftsman, and an American who was married to the latter. We were all sitting around the fireplace, savoring the warmth of a coal fire on a winter's night. Music and Irish coffee make strange bedfellows.



This was a dramatic scene, so some of the characters need introductions. My wife and I were the hosts. My Welsh wife, Val, was the designer in our craft business, and I was the Yank who dealt with production and paper work. Ellis was our neighbor, a dairyman and owner of a small holding whose fields surrounded our property. Suzanne Murphy was the “diva” of the Welsh National Opera, a rising star in the rarefied atmosphere of international opera singers. Her friend was Mike Newman, who’d made a name for himself as Puck in a recent BBC production of *Twelfth Night* and also sang with the WNO.

The setting was our eighteenth century cottage, “The Old Smithy,” in a tiny village in North Wales. It was February, and the stone house was both old and cold. We had a roaring fire in the grate and all sat close, the heat searing our feet and shins, and the cold chilling our backs.

My wife is an opera fanatic. The main reason she put up with life in a rural Welsh village with me for so long was because it was only a twenty minute drive to the newest performing arts center in North Wales. As a newlywed and an outsider to both Wales and opera, I felt it my duty to encourage such things. Theater Clwyd in Mold wasn’t bad from my point of view. After all, it had a good bar and a great bookstore. I even enjoyed the classic movie theater and the sexy modern dance performances.

But Val was obsessed by the opera, and I hated opera. As an ex-English major, I would flunk every operatic plot, with the possible exception of Wagner’s, and then only because of his use of mythology. Val heard only the music and didn’t even like Wagner. After I’d fallen asleep and snored through a couple of her favorite operas, she wisely suggested that I was not only tone deaf, but should wait for her in the bar after future performances.

I don’t remember when or where Val met Suzanne, but I knew that Suzanne had received rave reviews by opera buffs. Val compared her to Maria Callas; the press compared her to other divas. I couldn’t tell the difference.

But there she was at our front door. I invited her and her friend in, parked them close to the fire, and shouted for Val. We opened several bottles of elderflower wine, all talked at once, relaxed. God knows how Ellis got wind of it.

We all got mellow on elderflower wine. I made my boring speech about why I didn't like opera, despite Val's attempts to shut me up. Suzanne sang an Irish folk song for us, just to remind me of the origins of her musical career, also perhaps to shut me up. Mike sang an aria from Figaro in a Donald Duck voice that made us all howl with laughter. They were here to relax, not to talk shop.

And then we heard the knocking on the back door. It was Ellis. "Would we like some fresh cream?" This was a remarkable question. Ellis hadn't been talking to us for several days, because of some imagined slight regarding a birthday party we'd held for friends who weren't friends of Ellis. Feuds between neighbors in rural villages can be serious. But he was sweetness, light, and cream now. Opera lovers have a code of conduct incomprehensible to mere mortals. Val ushered him in.

Ellis was our next door neighbor. He put Val in the pale when it came to being obsessive about opera. Ellis collected old 78s of bygone operas and played them on an antique gramophone. He even played taped opera music to his cows while milking. And he'd been known to go as far as London to hear opera—the only one in our village to ever do so. The Welsh produce more opera singers per capita than any nation on earth, but going to London is considered a bit extreme from a rural Welsh point of view.

Ellis made a beeline for Suzanne. In coat and tie, he was no longer the farmer but an ardent admirer. He raved about Suzanne's recent performances, he criticized the Welsh National Opera's repertoire, and he made it abundantly clear that he was both an aficionado and an expert on the subject. He also pointedly ignored Mike.

"I walked out of the performance of *The Coronation of Poppea* because the woman was so ugly that it destroyed the music. But I'd watch you anytime," he simpered. Ellis had the reputation of being a wannabe lady's man. I remember an occasion when he was having his cows artificially inseminated by the local veterinarian, and a particularly winsome village maiden happened to pass by. I don't know what he said to her, because it was in Welsh, but I could guess. The lady in question turned beet red and slapped Ellis so hard that he rocked on his feet. But the smile never left his face.

Val raised her eyebrows at me, recognizing Suzanne's discomfiture. I took the hint and tried to diffuse the situation. "Irish coffee's in order," I announced. "Ellis has provided the cream, and Suzanne is definitely Irish. Let's put them together." Not the most diplomatic statement of my life, judging from the way Ellis and Suzanne both reacted.

Mike followed me to the kitchen and hissed, "Who the hell is that?" It was too long a story and there wasn't enough time. "Just give him a double and don't worry," I said. We whipped up unorthodox Irish coffee, using Scotch. Mike put a triple shot in Ellis' glass.

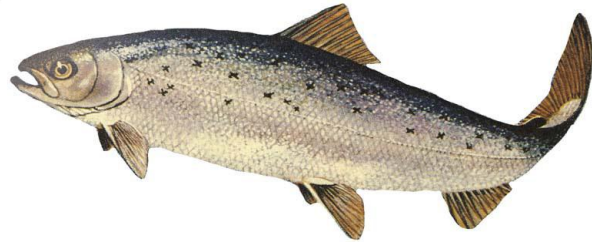
Everyone sipped, except for Ellis, who drained his glass with a show of bravado. Maybe he'd seen it done in operas. Mike disappeared to the kitchen, returned with another stick of dynamite that he put in Ellis' hand. After four healthy drams, Ellis winked at the room at large and announced that it was time for milking. His suggestion that Suzanne should be part of the process was met with silence. Ellis finally left, weaving perceptibly.

I stoked the fire, Val made straight coffee, and Suzanne and Mike murmured about needing to move on. We were all silent, the angel passing over our graves. "At least he loves opera," Suzanne ventured. "And Irish coffee," Mike added.

Chapter 20: POACHED SALMON

“Hey, Yank, want some poached salmon?” He was a local in the Welsh pub my wife and I had begun to frequent. I didn’t really know him, but I’ll eat salmon any way it comes, steamed, baked, smoked, even sushi. “Sure, how much?” “Two quid a pound. Fresh out the water this morning.” He winked, motioned for me to follow him outside to his car, opened the boot.

Four fresh salmon gleamed silver in the light of his flashlight. When he’d said “poached,” he hadn’t meant cooked. But two pounds a pound? Scottish Dee salmon went for four times that amount. Greed overcame my scruples, and I bought the smallest one. Looking back, I still feel guilty.



To be honest, the first time I ever fished in North Wales was also dishonest. My Welsh wife and I had lived in the tiny village of Nantglyn near Denbigh for just over a year when Val suggested that I go fishing. She jogged every morning and knew the surrounding valley and moors well by that time. I hated jogging and puttered in the garden instead. “Come on, you love fishing,” she cajoled. “Besides, it’ll get you out into some of this beautiful countryside we happen to live in.”

Tommy Howatson, who owned a small holding just outside the village proper, gave me my first opportunity. I suspected that Val had put him up to it, but fishing is fishing. “Let’s take a ramble on the moors, tickle a few trout” Tommy said, “Do you good to see the moors proper before they bury them underwater.” He was referring to plans to build a huge reservoir on the Brenig Moors where he grazed his sheep on common land. The Brenig Reservoir was also destined to become a first class fishery, fly fishing only.



Llyn Brenig

I told Tommy that I didn’t have a fishing license, didn’t want to get caught poaching, being an alien resident and all. Tommy laughed. “Boyo, I’ve been poaching the moors since before you were born, and I’ve yet to see a water bailiff.”

We walked a good ten miles on the moors that day. Tommy was my senior by at least thirty years, but it was all I could do to keep up with him. I

kept reminding myself that he was a shepherd; I did craft work at a bench all day. I kept pace with him, tried not to puff too noticeably.

Villagers from Nantglyn had peat digging rights on the Brenig moors. They were promised half-price fishing when the reservoir was completed. Nobody complained,

because nobody dug peat any more, never mind burned it in their fireplace. I'd tried it once and enjoyed the experience, loved the pungent smell and the unusual colors of the flames. But peat isn't as efficient as coal or even wood and produces an outrageous amount of ash.

Tommy kept up a steady, unhurried pace, occasionally pausing to lean on his walking stick and admire the view. His walking stick was beautifully carved. So were the moors. It was mid-summer and the heather was in bloom. Yellow gorse provided startling accents in a sea of purple. Drifting clouds created shadows that added depth and movement to the scene.

We came across a burn, a tiny creek only about two feet across, but about three feet deep. The water was stained brown from the peat and tasted earthy. "This is it, boyo," Tommy announced triumphantly. "Let's tickle a few Brenig trout before the fly fishing brigade takes over."

Tickling trout requires nerves of steel and a very limited imagination. What you do is lie down along a river bank and put your hand as deep down and as far under the bank as you can. Then you ever so slowly move your hand until you touch something that's alive. This is where it gets tricky.

When you touch a fish underwater, it not only feels slippery and slimy, but it moves. This is why people who have any imagination are lousy at tickling. Christ, it could be an eel, a water rat, god knows what. The first time I touched a fish while tickling as a kid, I whipped my hand back out of the water as if I'd been burned and nearly wet my pants.

My Uncle Ernest in Missouri had assured me that a fish wouldn't spook if you were slow and gentle enough. He said that you could even slide your hand over the body of the fish and then either grab it or slip your finger into its gills and haul it out, if you were slow and gentle enough. He even claimed that my Mom was able to pin fish down with her feet that way when she was young.

I lay down by the creek bank, remembering my Uncle's instructions. I steeled my nerves, put my arm in up to my armpit and slowly groped around. Then I touched something that moved, and I whipped my arm back out of the water as if I'd been burned. Tommy guffawed.

We ended up with fourteen trout between us. They were all native browns, only about eight inches on average. But I was thrilled with my first attempt at poaching. Tommy and I made our way back to his farm, and he gave me a lift back to The Old Smithy. Val pretended to be greatly impressed by the great white hunters and stroked my tender ego. I noticed that she also gave Tommy a bottle of our best apple wine as he left.

The Brenig reservoir was completed about a year later, and I was determined to get something in exchange for my defunct peat digging rights. The only snag with being allowed to fish at half price was that it was fly only and I didn't know how to fly fish. So I bought a fishing license and learned fly fishing the hard way.

I was blanked on my first ten outings on the Brenig. Val didn't laugh at her hunter, but kept encouraging him to try again. Dick Williams accompanied me on my eleventh try. He was the president of the Ruthin Angling Association, an expert, and Val was a friend of his wife. I wasn't keen on exhibiting my lack of skill, but, after about three hours of being skunked, I asked Dick for advice. He handed me a tiny Black Pennel dry fly he'd tied himself--black hackles, silver ribbing. "Do I get a guarantee as well?" I

asked. “Definitely,” he said. I caught my first ever fish on that fly about three casts later. Dick was obviously descended from Merlin.

Dick Williams was Tommy Howatson’s opposite. They were both Welsh, but Dick was a royalist, while Tommy was a Welsh nationalist. Like my wife, Dick had grown up with a generation which was taught to aspire to all things English, was discouraged from speaking, never mind learning, Welsh. Val’s Mom remembered class mates caught speaking Welsh being punished by being forced to wear a sign around their neck which said “Welsh Not.” Dick and my wife had done well in school and had both gone on to English universities.



Tommy came from a long line of Howatsons who had originally come from Scotland in the early nineteenth century to work on the railroads. Tommy’s first language was Welsh, and he spoke English haltingly, translating as he went. Needless to say, Tommy, like Val’s Mom, had not done well in school and had not gone on to university.

They were both farmers, but Dick had inherited an estate and was a “gentleman farmer,” while Tommy had inherited a hill farm and scratched out a living by raising mountain sheep the hard way. And they both loved fishing, but, here, again, their backgrounds reflected the dual nature of the Welsh. Dick obeyed the laws pertaining to fishing to the letter, was a fly fishing fanatic, would never dream of fishing with a worm, never mind tickling. Tommy despised “English” feudal law, considered the game and fish on Welsh land to be fair game to anyone who could catch them, and treated poaching as both an art and a justifiable flaunting of English legalities.

But fishing is fishing, and Dick and I became fishing buddies. He introduced me to fly tying, taught me to appreciate the subtle differences between cane and fiberglass fly rods, and took me on my first night fishing trip for “sewen,” or sea trout. Sea trout are migratory brown trout that come back to fresh water to spawn. They’re easily spooked during the day and usually only feed at night.

Night fishing for sea trout rivals tickling when it comes to needing nerves of steel and a suppressed imagination. We were fishing opposite banks of the River Clwyd on a moonless night, could hear each other stumbling through undergrowth and occasionally cursing when we hooked a tree while trying to cast in the dark. The periodic loud splash of rising sea trout made my pulse race, and having a nesting wild duck explode beneath my feet nearly gave me a heart attack. Then I caught a small sea trout, only three quarters of a pound, and got so excited that I nearly fell in the river while trying to land it—not being able to see where the bank ended and the water began.

And then I hooked a big one. Sea trout easily run over twenty pounds. The tug on my line was ferocious, and I was terrified of being broken off. I shouted to Dick for help. “Sorry mate, I’ve got a big one on as well,” came the reply. It took about five minutes before we realized that we’d hooked each other’s lines.

Dick and I went to the pub and were still laughing about playing each other when Dick shouted for a friend to join us. Howell Evans turned out to be the water bailiff for Dick's stretch of the Clwyd and knew a lot of good fishing tales. I bought another round.

Like many game wardens and bailiffs, Howell had once been a poacher himself and knew most of the tricks. He told us about a blacksmith who used to poach fish with his hammer. The blacksmith would wade out in the river to a rock which stuck out of the water, strike the rock with his hammer, and then collect the fish which came floating to the surface, stunned by the concussion. He told us the story of Hugh Evans, the mayor of Denbigh, who was caught poaching salmon and had tried to avoid arrest by climbing into bed with a fish stuffed down one of his waders. He said that a favorite poaching trick used by farmers was to suspend a dead sheep over the water in the summer and let the blow flies do their work. Thousands of maggots would drop into the water below and attract fish. All you had to do then was put a maggot on a hook. I wondered if Tommy knew that trick. Probably.

Dick took me on my one and only trip to Scotland in the fourteen years I lived in Wales. We were after salmon and spent a week fishing the River Nith in Thornhill, a small town near Dumfries. The water was high, and the owner of the fishing lodge recommended using worms (he pronounced them "worrirms") as the only possible way to take "a fish" in such conditions. Salmon are always referred to as "fish" in Scotland, anything else is a trout or grayling or whatever. I followed Dick's lead and stuck to fly fishing for five days without success on the part of either of us. On the morning of the sixth day, I rebelled, dug worms in the hotel garden, and, to Dick's disgust, caught my first salmon that afternoon. It was an eight pound, fresh run, Atlantic grayback cock. I was shaking so badly that I almost broke my hand holding the fish when I attempted to dispatch it with my "priest," a small weighted club which the British use to usher in the last rites on such occasions.

That was the only fish either of us caught. On the long drive back to North Wales, Dick and I tried to determine how much that salmon had cost me. We added up the cost of petrol for the round trip and the hotel bill for seven days, wisely decided not to include the bar tab or the cost of the fishing license, and divided the total in two. It worked out over fifty quid a pound. I decided not to mention this to Val, and god knows what Dick told his wife. And I still have mixed feelings about poached salmon.

Chapter 21: DUCKING



Thomas Telford is one of the most famous engineers in British history, but the Pentrevoelas ducks weren't impressed. Every afternoon they waddled across his handiwork in North Wales, oblivious to both the feat of engineering which had created the highway and the traffic jams which attested to its popularity with motorists. Cars would occasionally skid to a halt and sometimes even crash into the stone walls lining the two lane highway in an effort to avoid hitting the ducks. Less sensitive drivers put their hands on their horns and kept going. The ducks suffered some minor casualties, but they maintained their right of way.

Val and I sided with the ducks. For one thing, we had a retail crafts shop in Pentrevoelas alongside the A5. We wanted traffic to stop--as did the pub and the cafe on our side of the road. We were interested in selling our leather goods to people who wanted to stop and shop. The pub and cafe just wanted them to stop, full stop. After all, there was nowhere else to eat or drink without going another twenty miles or turning back.

The ducks, like the A5, split the village in two. Pentrevoelas had only two claims to fame. The first was The Voelas Arms, a large hostelry that had once been a major posting inn and coach house for wayfarers en route to or from Holyhead, the closest port for the ferry to Ireland from North Wales. The second claim to fame was the recent creation of public toilets and a major "rest stop" in Pentrevoelas, the only one available for many miles to travelers from Ireland who had drunk too much Guinness on the way over and had not bothered to stop earlier. Unfortunately, these two amenities were on opposite sides of the road. Even more unfortunately, Pentrevoelas got nicknamed "Toilet Town."

Nobody was sure of the ducks' origins, and they were so large that most people assumed they were geese. The drake was blackish brown with a flash of white on his

throat, and the hens were smaller and mottled brown. Rumor had it that they were “imported,” so I felt a definite affinity with them.

The ducks had a regular routine. They spent their days on the pub side of town, puttering in the old millpond and cadging handouts from the locals. But, come late afternoon, they headed to the other side of Telford’s road that separated the millstream from the river it fed into.

Val and I, unlike the ducks, originally saw the A5 as a blessing. We had rented and converted the original Voelas Arms coach house into a craft shop. The Voelas Arms parking lot separated us from the hotel and allowed ample parking. The only hitch was the fact that there was no traffic light or slow zone through the village. Cars roared through at seventy miles an hour. Cars that pulled into the Voelas Arms risked being rear-ended. People that pulled into the rest stop across the road often didn’t have the nerve to cross the A5 to our shop or the pub or cafe. During the three years we operated “The Coach House,” two local people died trying to cross our section of the A5 and two cars smashed into the front of our shop. But only one duck got clipped, and it survived.

In retrospect, I suspect that there’s a moral in those statistics. I was a fellow duck, also crossing dangerous territory in pursuit of a higher goal. Wales may have been my macrocosm, but crossing the A5 to the tiny stream known as the “Nug” was the fatal attraction for all of us. No, I never got clipped--but I sure got hooked.

The Nug, pronounced “neeg,” was a stream that fed into the Conway, a river famed for its runs of salmon and sea trout. It cost up to and over a hundred dollars to fish the best parts of the Conway for a day, but the fee for the Nug was less than eight dollars a day, and, as an honorary local, even that fee was waved in my case. The dictum that you get what you pay for was not entirely true. I spent a couple of hundred dollars for the privilege of fishing the Conway twice and came home with one seven pound sea trout and one three pound salmon--expensive fish. I spent a total of just under eight dollars fishing the Nug the rest of the year and came home with nearly a hundred wild brown trout. And I had released at least three for everyone I kept. The bottom line was pleasure, not meat.

Just over a year into The Coach House and my discovery of the Nug’s hidden treasure, I met the “lord of the manor.” Evidently, the entire village, including fishing rights on the Nug and all hunting/shooting rights on the land both sides of the A5 in Pentrevoelas, was under the domain of the Wynn Finch family. I was caught off guard when the well-dressed man came into our shop and commented on my fly rod that stood behind the counter.

“Nice cane rod. Hardy Perfect by any chance?” He obviously knew his stuff, so I showed off my stuff. I even told him about the Nug, about the wild brown trout and the fantastic fly fishing. He was interested, so I told him more, told him about how the locals poached with worms in high water and caught some really big ones, about the flies I’d found most effective, about the time I’d hooked and landed twenty-two trout in less than three hours and only kept seven.

“You only kept seven?” I remembered the photos I’d taken, decided to find them and show him. I scabbled around under the counter, finally found the photo envelope. I laid the pictures out on the counter, one at a time. Pictures of The Coach House; pictures of Val and I; pictures of the horse in the field behind our shop, his neck through the back door while eating my apple and most of my lunch.

And, then, triumphantly, I laid the picture of my best catch ever on the Nig on the counter. Seven wild brown trout, all over ten inches, taken on a fly, and carefully aligned alongside my reel to give a true indication of size. “Beautiful,” he murmured. “I never believed that little stream could still produce such fish. Of course, it’s illegal.”



I stared at him, asked what he meant by illegal. “Well, it’s a fly only stream, and my father and I decided on an eight inch minimum and a five fish take. You seem to have exceeded the limit. I’ll overlook it this time, but don’t do it again.” He gave me a supercilious smile and said “tight lines” as he left. Me and my big mouth.

I looked down at my photos and began to put them away. Impulse made me look at the rest, in case there was any more incriminating evidence. The last three were of the ducks, crossing the A5. I remembered the time, remembered thinking that I should be helping instead of merely recording. The ducks were crossing the A5 en route to the Nug. Cars moving sixty miles per hour slammed on brakes and jammed on horns. The ducks kept waddling, and the drake actually stopped momentarily and honked back at the cars.

I thought about the lord of the manor, the drake, the A5. Sure, I’d just been clipped. But I was definitely on the side of the ducks. Nothing was going to stop me from crossing that road when I felt like it.

Chapter 22: AND WHO ARE YOU?

My wife and I had just moved into our house in North Wales. I was sweeping about two hundred years of soot off the walls of the forge, the Old Smithy's workshop, when I heard the voices. I'd left the top of the stable door open for ventilation and could hear two women, giggling like schoolgirls, at the adjoining front door to our cottage.

"I'll knock, if you'll talk," one of them said. A decidedly masculine voice chimed in, "They're probably blotto on drugs." Someone began to knock on our front door.

Intrigued and irritated, I came out of the forge to confront them. They had their collective ears pressed to our front door and nearly fainted when, from behind, I asked if I could be of assistance. One of the women let out a muffled scream, and the male member of the trio turned a color that is usually associated with heart attacks.

I was covered in soot. Smothered is more like it. God knows what they thought, but I wanted an explanation for their impudence. "Did you want to see anyone in particular, or were you just knocking and talking in general?" I asked, feeling a bit belligerent.

The two well-dressed women gripped hands, shrank away from me. The elderly man stiffened his shoulders like an old soldier and stood his ground. "Where are you from?" he demanded, rather than asked, as if that had anything to do with anything.

The question reminded me of the caterpillar in *Alice and Wonderland* asking Alice, "And who are you." I got defensive. I've never known who I am.

The four of us stood outside my front door in the cold. I told the old man that I was an American. He peered at me intently, either having trouble focusing or applying some sort of visual field test, the way bird watchers do. "Well, that's OK, just so long as you're not a Communist," he barked. And he took his ladies in tow and marched off, leaving me bemused.

The ladies turned out to be from the local manor house, known as "Plas Nantglyn," and they even invited my wife and me for "drinkies" about a year later. It was a sorry occasion, because they knew as well as us that the Plas was up for sale, and that they no longer needed to put on a show for the "locals." Val and I were considered different, because we certainly weren't local. But it was a dismal affair. The ex-ladies of the manor chattered brightly about the old days, smiled at each other's in-jokes, drank far too much gin and tonic, and forgot they had company who were not of their world.

Val and I had moved into The Old Smithy in 1972. At that time the Plas was occupied by one of three surviving daughters of the Wynn-Edwards family, a notable Welsh dynasty. Val and I were able to buy our house freehold only because the Wynn-Edwards estate had been broken up and sold piecemeal. The Wynn-Edwards family once owned nearly half of the parish of Nantglyn and had continuously occupied the Plas from 1573 until the last squire of the manor died in 1967.

The ladies of Plas Nantglyn finally disappeared, and the Plas was put up for sale. It proved to be a long process, because the manor house was both old and isolated. The age implied major renovations and modernization; the isolation limited the prospective client list. A wealthy English businessman finally bought it, to the consternation of the local Welsh. Maybe the Wynn-Edwards hadn't been so bad, after all.

With the sale of the Plas came a sale of the contents which Sotheby's and Christi's had already picked through and discarded. The auctioneer's catalogue included

over six hundred items, the Plas was opened to prospective buyers two days before the auction, and the turnout on the final day was overwhelming.

Perhaps it has something to do with the British class system, but almost every local wanted to and did buy something from the sale of Plas Nantglyn bric-a-brac--a bit of the "lord of the manor's" castoffs. Val and I had toured the Plas the day before the sale but hadn't found anything we couldn't live without. And we felt no compulsion to own something that once belonged to others' masters.

But I must admit that one item caught my eye. It was a Meerschaum opium pipe, circa 1860, and beautifully carved. I was a pipe smoker at the time and, being a Yankee who would buy anything, had accumulated an impressive collection of antique and unusual pipes. Val told me to "pipe down," particularly insofar as the Meerschaum was bound to be out of my price range. "Besides, what would the neighbors think?"

One of our neighbors was in the same sort of boat. Neil was English and also new to the village. He had a daughter who'd recently enrolled in ballet classes, and he'd noticed a pair of pink Victorian ballet slippers in their original box among the many sale items. Neil wanted to buy them as a present for his daughter, but was shy about bidding on them--also afraid of what the neighbors might think.

Neil lied to me unabashedly. "I can't attend the auction, because I've got to work." Lie number one. "I know you're going and wouldn't mind bidding on them." Lie number two. "I'll pay anything for them if it isn't too much." Lie number three, though he had a good qualifier.

I went to the auction on my own. The first hundred plus lots on the block consisted of assorted silver which were snapped up by English dealers. Then came the antique furniture, fixtures, and paintings that the London auctioneers had declined, followed by "collectibles." The latter included everything from Victorian garden urns and brass chestnut roasters to eighteenth century "Toby Jugs" and, my heart stood still, a small collection of Meerschaum pipes.

"Val was probably right," I told myself, but I couldn't stop my hand going up when the auctioneer started the bidding on the opium pipe at \$75. About a hundred pairs of eyes swiveled in my direction, and I shrank in my chair. No, I didn't get my pipe, because the final bid was over \$400, well out of my price range. But yes, I'd probably confirmed the opinion of most of the village about the Yankee hippie.

I wanted to slink back home, but remembered my promise to Neil. So I twiddled my thumbs while garden implements, kitchen appliances, and, finally, linens and clothing were on the block. The auctioneer was having a field day. People were paying more for an old coverlet from the Plas than they would pay for a new one in Harrods.

And then the pink ballet slippers were held up. "What am I offered, ladies and gentlemen, for a vintage pair of ballet shoes?" Silence from the audience, including me. "Now, now," the auctioneer cajoled, "these slippers are in their original box. They probably once graced the feet of landed gentry."

The latter remark was a mistake. Locals might pay good money in order to enjoy using the lady of the manor's bed sheets for a table cloth or kitchen rag, but they didn't like having the social scale rubbed in their noses. Besides, who needs ballet slippers? No one offered a bid.

The auctioneer sensed the mood, decided to move on. Time is money. “Will anyone give me ten pounds for this lot?” he demanded. I put my hand up, the gavel went down, and about a hundred pairs of eyes swiveled in my direction.

Well, as a Yankee in a tiny Welsh village, there wasn’t a lot I could do to control local opinion. The neighbors knew that I was from California, knew that I made candles and leatherwork for a living, and, of course also suspected that I was a hippie drug dealer. But at least I had a Welsh wife, at least I wasn’t English. I collected my ballet slippers as unobtrusively as possible. Some of the locals said hello, but not one commented on my purchase.



Neil summed it up after I’d described my ordeal. “Behind your back they talk a lot, you know. Why would anyone from California live here? And why would anyone bid on such things?” I gave him an irritated look. “They probably have visions of you wearing ballet slippers and smoking a hookah,” he added with glee. I flashed back to the caterpillar in Walt Disney’s *Alice in Wonderland*, with his oriental slippers and hookah. “And who are you?” I remembered Alice’s answer: “Why, I really don’t know who I am.”

Chapter 23: SNOWDON

We knew we were off course when we spotted the airplane seat. It sat upright, in perfect condition from our foggy perspective, as if awaiting a passenger to sit and await some ghostly takeoff. We all stared at the apparition, fatigue and cold momentarily forgotten. The Army guide swore. “Keep moving if you don’t want to end up like the poor bugger who once sat in that chair.” We braced ourselves against the sleet and continued our climb.

If I was asked to sum up Wales in one word, I’d like to say “green,” but am tempted to say “mud.” Like the fields of six National Eisteddfods we attended as craftspeople during August. Like the stuff which ended up on our shop floor every spring for four years when a tributary of the local stream got blocked up. Like our garden and most of the country when we had a “wet spell.”

Wales is renowned for wet spells. If it doesn’t rain for three days, farmers murmur about drought. But they also love to point out that if you can see the mountains, it’s going to rain; and if you can’t see the mountains, it’s raining. Water and earth are one in Wales, a union so consummate that sheep outnumber people in the country. Land inhospitable to human habitation still produces grass, thanks to the rain, and Welsh mountain sheep fertilize the scant soil and maintain the cycle even in the highlands.

But most of the soil has washed off the wildest part of Wales, the high mountains of Snowdonia, leaving ancient stone and treacherous shale naked and forsaken by even the sheep. I laughed when told that Wales’ highest mountain, Snowdon, was just over three and a half thousand feet. In California such an elevation is a low foothill leading up to twelve and thirteen thousand foot peaks in the Sierra Nevadas, many of which I’d climbed. I shouldn’t have laughed.

The Welsh name for Snowdon (“Yr Wyddfa”) means “Eagles’ Nesting Place.” The eagles are long gone, but the view from the top is considered one of the glories of Britain, according to all the guide books. If you get a view. And you don’t even have to be a mountaineer to climb Snowdon, because a Victorian rack-and-pinion railway can get you almost to the summit.

But my first climb up Snowdon wasn’t easy, partly because of my big mouth and partly because of David Jones, the landlord of The Kinmel Arms. David was a “walker,” as opposed to a “climber,” but he’d climbed the peaks of Snowdonia literally hundreds of times. He did it because he loved doing it, and he earned money in the process by walking for charity--over a million pounds sterling in aid of muscular dystrophy in a life of walking Welsh mountains. He’s known as “David Snowdon-Jones” with good reason.



It was late October, and I'd only lived in Wales for three years when I laughed about the height of Snowdon. It was also late at night at The Kimmel Arms when David gave Val and I free drinks and asked us to accompany him on the first stage of his next charity walk, a fifty mile jaunt from the top of Snowdon over all the other major peaks of Snowdonia and home again. "You don't have to walk at all," he explained, noticing our raised eyebrows. "An Army helicopter will take us and the news press to the top of Snowdon; you'll be dedicated admirers seeing me off, and you can find your own way back while yours truly plods on for fifty miles." It sounded like a classy way to see the view from the top of Snowdon, and we agreed to the date and timing of the event.

David phoned about five in the morning of the great day to tell us that there was a problem. I knew there was a problem even as he spoke, because the wind was driving sleet sideways outside our windows. "The helicopter can't make it, but I've got some friends who'll walk up with me and handle the public relations. Why don't you come along and get a taste of a real Welsh foothill?" Val snarled at me when I shook her awake, but we were ready when David collected us about an hour later.

The first men to climb Everest trained in Snowdonia, and several of their successors have been killed in the same "foothills" of Wales. But we learned that later. David's three friends turned out to be professional climbers, and they all expressed concern about my hiking gear. Val at least had boots and a water proof jacket and hood; I had tennis shoes, a knit cap, and a leaky leather jacket. But I laughed at their concern, challenged them to a race, and reduced them to uneasy silence.

We went up the "Pig Track," a trail more direct but less dangerous than the other main alternatives. The first hour was relatively easy, even if the track became a small stream and I gave up trying to keep my feet dry. The next hour was scary, because a dense fog joined the wind and rain and we were having trouble even finding the trail.

That's when we found the airplane seat, sitting in the middle of nowhere. David and his friends changed the direction of the hike, guided by unseen instruments or instinct, and we headed into driving rain which blinded us. Val was given gentle pushes from behind to keep her going, and I survived on sheer egotism. We were given one break before we reached the top—five minutes to eat some chocolate and get moving again, in case we cramped up.

When we staggered into the official circle of stones marking the top of Snowdon, David posed for pictures with Val and me, told his friends to look after us, and, after an official confirmation of the time, took off on his solo fifty mile walk. The mountaineers allowed us about a ten minute rest before forcing us to go back down the mountain, warning us about hypothermia. We were both shaking with cold and fatigue and didn't argue, but we did wonder about David.

About half way back down the Pig Track, we met a couple of walkers who were on their way up but had developed second thoughts. "How far did you get?" they asked us, assuming that we'd also turned back. "All the way," Val replied with her usual impish grin. They grinned in return, not believing us, but enjoying the joke. We saluted them and stumbled on down, hurried along by our escorts.

The mountaineers abandoned us at the first fast food stand at the base of the mountain and raced off to report the wreckage of the plane and to verify David's starting time. I ordered hot chocolate and had difficulty extracting my wallet from my hip pocket, still shaking uncontrollably from the cold, still thinking about the airplane seat.

David made his walk in near record time, a blister incurred by wet shoes on his ascent of Snowdon being the only handicap he ever admitted to us. Lots of money was raised for charity. The airplane seat turned out to be part of a private plane which had crashed in Snowdonia a month earlier, killing three people. Two professional climbers and two amateur hikers also died in Snowdonia that year. I climbed Snowdon twice more, never got a view from the top, never got in trouble. But I kept my eyes out for the eagles— and I never called Snowdon a “foothill” again.

Chapter 24: THE TAJ MAHAL

“A hen is only an egg’s way of making another egg,” David remarked, quoting Samuel Butler, though I didn’t know it at the time. We were “walking the bounds” of his estate on a late summer’s eve, the sun still casting long shadows as we finally arrived at a small wooded area just out of eyeshot of the manor house.

The copse of trees was unremarkable except for the ancient chicken hutch in its center. As we approached, about a dozen chickens appeared from nowhere, exploding around our feet with a frenzy of feathers and manic clucking. David, the pied piper, led them into the hutch, cooing to them as he went. Grain, left over kitchen scraps, and a bottle of water materialized out of the poacher’s pockets of his Berber coat. Four or five brown eggs, spotted with chicken droppings and down, went back in.

David closed the hen house door, slid the wooden latch in place, and then examined the hutch, peering intently at the sagging structure, looking around. I heard the muffled sound of chickens sighing contentedly. David pointed out a sprinkling of feathers under a nearby tree. “The fox got another one. This has got to go,” David muttered. “Eli makes me keep it out here because it looks so decrepit, but it makes it too easy for the fox.



We walked back to Segrwyd Hall together in meditative silence. I knew that David had a soft spot for the “Segrwyd fox,” as he called any fox on the estate. The ancient weather vane above the hall was in the shape of a fox; and David had once almost fired a gardener who’d volunteered to shoot a fox for him, after it killed the Christmas goose that David was fattening up in the walled garden.

David and I liked each other, despite, or perhaps because of, the fact that we were so different. He was Welsh, I was American. He was a respectable lawyer, I did craft work and was considered a hippie by the locals. He kept bees and chickens, I was into making country wine. But we both shared a love for good books, tall tales, and good company.

Eirlys, the real “lord of the manor,” dished up what she considered a simple meal for the four of us. My wife, Val, winked at me as the tureen of salmon en crouete was passed around and David poured a Grand Cru Chablis. It would have been fried egg sandwiches and homemade elderberry wine at our house, often was.

“Eli, it’s time we got a new hen house,” David announced, seeking approval, pouring more wine. I reminded myself that this was the head of the most prominent law firm in North Wales, the diocesan registrar of Saint Asaph Cathedral. “The old one is falling apart, the foxes are picking the hens off, and they aren’t laying well.” Not exactly a coherent legal argument, but this wasn’t a court of law.

Actually, it was in a way. Eirlys had asthma and hated chickens. She ignored her husband. David got the message, changed the subject, and invited (well, sort of ordered) us to dine at Segrwyd Hall the following weekend. Of course we accepted--egg butties get boring. Besides, I wanted to know how the senior partner of Swayne, Johnson, and Wight would deal with a new chicken house.

David had been great when it came to the purchase of our own humble abode. The Old Smithy was an integral part of an old North Wales estate that had been broken up and sold piecemeal. David researched the eighteenth century deeds, verified right of ways, and informed us that everything was in order. Except we could only take rabbits and vermin on our freehold property. What a deal!

The hitch was that the feudal rights to deer hunting and fox chasing were the exclusive property of the original Wynn-Finch Estate, and they had sold those rights to the local hunt. “In other words, you can legally set a mousetrap in your house or put a rabbit snare in your garden,” David pontificated, “but the Denbighshire Hunt still retains the legal right to pursue deer and foxes in your back yard.” I had visions of silly people on horseback shouting “tally ho” as they trampled my runner beans. But our back yard was about the size of his living room. He grinned at us and poured himself more of our homemade wine (Chateau Smithy Parsnip this time).

David didn’t like the hunt and was fond of quoting Oscar Wilde about the pursuit of the inedible by the unspeakable. David sided with the fox every time, even when it cost him his dinner. Ironically, Segrwyd was originally an Elizabethan game park, the name being a corruption of “Exchequer Wood.”

Val and I arrived at Segrwyd at the appointed hour the following week. Eirlys immediately commandeered Val for a heart to heart on interior decorating decisions on the second floor, and David hustled me out to see his new hen house. Normally, we would have all had a drink together first, caught up on village gossip, and swapped anecdotes relating to our respective lives and living. Something was amiss.

I don’t know how Val and I missed it when we drove in, but we did. The new hen house was smack dab in the middle of the formal garden. It was painted white and looked like a gazebo from a distance.

“It’s a replica of Saint Asaph Cathedral,” David announced proudly. And so it was, when I peered closely and ignored the congregation of hens. It was exquisitely detailed, with crosses, spires, stained glass windows, and an elaborately carved wooden front door. The whole thing was mounted on a four wheel platform so it could be moved, it had ingenious sliding partitions for food and water, and a large mesh wire cage in front provided a secure run for the chickens during the day.

“Got it for a few bob from a cabinet maker we once helped out,” David chuckled. “The only reason he parted with this one is because he’s just built himself a new chicken house in the shape of the Taj Mahal. Eli would love that one.” I doubted it.

David gave me a call the next day. Could I come over and help move the chicken house? We towed it out of sight of the house, back by the old underground mushroom house, then went back and hauled the wire mesh cage out of sight as well. “Eli was worried that the hens would ruin the lawn,” David explained lamely. We walked back to the hall together in meditative silence.

Chapter 25: ALREADY STUFFED

We were all admiring the distant view and ignoring the state of the lawn outside the window when the explosion occurred. Our hosts exchanged wide eyed glances and then raced for the kitchen, my wife and I close behind. The oven door was off its hinges, pieces of meat dripped from the walls in Rorschach patterns, and the kitchen reeked of alcohol. “Oh god,” Jill shrieked, “I should have checked the stuffing!”

Jill Leggate was our first employee. She didn’t need to work for money, because her husband was upper management level in the Middle East oil industry. But with two children in school, a beautiful but isolated home, and an absent husband, she was bored. Val and I hadn’t told anyone that we were interested in hiring help, didn’t even think we needed it. But when Jill knocked on our door one day, introduced herself, and was excruciatingly honest about her background and motives, well, we hired her on the spot.

Jill was English, but she was also well educated and versatile. She could have found lots of jobs, but she was more interested in whom she worked for and what she did than how much she got paid. Jill became our Girl Friday. She cleaned up, she helped with packaging, she made the coffee, and she ran errands. More importantly, she became a close friend. We were outsiders, she was an outsider. Val loved opera, Jill loved opera. We were into arts and crafts, Jill had an Uncle in California who owned a major art gallery. We liked “exotic” food and travel; Jill had lived all over the world and was a great cook.

And we all liked rural life, sort of. Val and Jill loved living in a rural setting where the scenery was spectacular and the crime rate was negligible, where housing was affordable and most of the food you bought was produced locally. But Val and Jill also craved big city entertainment, craved escaping to the “real world,” like girl scouts on a camping trip sneaking into town for a hamburger and milkshake.

Val and Jill would ask if it was all right to take a couple of days off to see the latest show in London, and I’d not only acquiesce, but I’d drive them to the train station. To be honest, I loved being left on my own, loved to putter in the garden and to sneak off at dusk to try a bit of fly fishing without feeling guilty. Jill’s husband, David, didn’t have to play these games, because he was often away for three months at a time. But when he was home, he wanted his rural dream of Britain to be perfect. Why else would anyone work in the Middle East?

David had bought a relatively new and large house on the outskirts of The Vale of Clwyd, the major agricultural region of North Wales. The house was isolated, the view over the Vale was magnificent, and the grounds were extensive. Unfortunately, most of the grounds were downhill, but he did at least have an enormous lawn area.

The British are famous for their lawns, and, when asked for the secret of their success, are fond of telling foreigners to “roll it well for about two hundred years.” David, like any nouveau British lawn owner, wanted to speed the process up. He rotivated, fertilized, imported top soil, and had new sod laid and rolled--at a considerable price. But he could afford it and enjoyed doing it in the little time he had before returning to the Middle East.

And then the moles found it. Unlike gophers, moles eat worms instead of roots and shoots. But, like gophers, moles can create chaos in a cultivated area. David’s newly enriched and cultivated soil became mole heaven, and the lawn was transformed into a



series of furrows and molehills which resembled a NASA photo of the moon by the time David got back home.

David tried everything. The vicious mechanical mole traps which are set like underground mousetraps caught a few, but hardly made a dent in the mole population. Patent sonic noise machines, guaranteed to scare moles off, failed totally. Purpose made gas canisters placed in mole runs and exuding poisonous fumes succeeded in moving the moles a few feet away, at

best.

"It happened yesterday," David murmured, gesturing at what had once been a lawn. "I was thinking of the contrast between Saudi and Wales, the desert and the Vale. And then I got to thinking about how oil well fires are contained." Jill gave him a sharp look, and he added, "And, well, I guess I shouldn't have drunk so much."

We were back in the front room, wondering what could have caused such devastation both inside and outside, munching the sandwiches Jill had improvised. The disaster in the kitchen could wait until tomorrow, Jill insisted. "Thanksgiving is about friends, not turkeys," she declared. Val and I quickly agreed, noticing the look she gave David and suspecting that she was playing word games.

David's lawn looked like a battlefield. It was pitted with large craters and crisscrossed with blackened furrows. "The moles really pissed me off," David explained. "So I poured a few gallons of petrol down each run, lit a match, and ran like hell." He grinned lopsidedly. "I know, no more lawn. But at least the moles are gone."



"It scared me to death," Jill added, giving David a challenging look. "But at least I didn't blow up the kitchen on purpose." David avoided her eyes, though I noticed the hint of a grin.

The turkey had been shipped to her from an uncle in Canada, she explained. He had a big farm, had done it before. This time, the note simply said "already stuffed." How was she supposed to know he'd smuggled her a bottle of Canadian whiskey, stuffed inside a turkey? Jill's tone was defiant. The rest of us remained silent. Some explosions are more predictable than others.

Chapter 26: TURKEY PLUCKER

Five in the morning, New Year's Day, North Wales. Bladder bursting, stumbling around an unfamiliar house in the dark, cracking shins against unexpected furniture. The loo eased some of my pain, and my desperate thirst became the next priority. I groped towards the kitchen, drawn by the light and the smell of coffee.

I was in no mood to talk to anyone, but the deep voice simply said, "You look like hell, boyo. Have some coffee." I had no idea of who he was, but the sing-song lilt was definitely Welsh. He didn't look all that well either, when I was able to focus. Swarthy complexion, dark hair, broad shoulders, big callused hands, easy grin. A bit of the gypsy in him. I figured he was a farmer, like at least fifty percent of the local population.

"Hear you're artsy-craftsy, Yank," he said, the derision registering in my dull brain. "Mick says he buys a lot of your stuff for his shops--candles and handbags and such like." I wasn't in the mood to discuss being a Yank, or the finer points of the arts and crafts business, or any other subject, come to that. Besides, he probably knew more about me than I did, if my experience of living in rural Wales was anything to go on. "So what do you do?" I retorted.

"I'm a turkey plucker," he said, without hesitation. Only I don't really think he said "plucker," though I was in no condition to be positive. I pretended to ignore the bait, if that's what it was supposed to be. I poured my coffee and reflected on last night's party.

Our host, Mick, had put on a very big and very extravagant affair, with an amazing social mix and enough booze to make it all work. Too much booze. I slumped into a chair, sipped from the hot mug, and tried to take in the surroundings.

The kitchen was modern. Large, double-glazed windows. All built-in appliances and cleverly constructed oak counters and cupboards. Central heating. The massive farmhouse table and surrounding ladder back chairs in the middle of the huge room were the centerpiece--very old and very Welsh. Mick had an affinity for both high tech gadgets and rustic antiques. He joked about being "shabby chic."

My early morning companion continued his monologue. "Used to do a bit of hill farming near Betws-y-Coed with my Da. Mostly sheep and such like, you know. But there wasn't any money in it. Anyway, a mate of mine, Dai Jones from Denbigh, he got me a job on the big turkey farm outside Llangollen. Like battery chickens, except it's all turkeys, maybe four or five thousand." He lapsed into silence, poured more coffee.

I was torn between curiosity and hangover. "Problem is," he started up again, "the toms are too big for the hens. They breed them special, for the meat and all." He seemed to expect a reply. I got the feeling that he'd told this story many times before. I wondered how on earth he got invited to Mick's party.

My wife and I liked Mick, and not just because he was the brains behind our best customer. Craft Centre Cymru consisted of a chain of over twenty craft shops throughout Wales, and they would have taken our entire annual production, if we were ever silly enough to agree to it. We liked Mick because he gave us advice on costing, even when it meant that we charged his company more (though I'm sure they never lost any money as a result). And I particularly liked Mick because he was a foreigner, like me. His real name was no more Mick than mine was Yank.

My companion was still waiting for a reply. The first verse of a scurrilous British ditty swam into my mind: *"I'm not a pheasant plucker, I'm a pheasant plucker's son,"* or something like that. It was still black outside the windows, black inside the rest of the house. I peered into my coffee mug and gave in. "So what exactly do you do on this turkey farm?" I asked.

And he told me, rather gleefully.



I learned a lot about artificial insemination that morning, the first day of the New Year. Learned that all the hen turkeys are "done" by A.I., because the prize toms are too big. Learned that the sperm from the toms has to be extracted by hand, learned that somebody has to do the job. He went on and on.

I lost track and mused about the social mix of the party. Lots of "artsy-craftsy" suppliers like my wife and myself. *The butcher, the baker, the candlestick maker* (and how does that pheasant plucker song go?). And there was the middle management bunch who all lived in new housing estates in the towns. *Little boxes, on the hillsides*. And there were the nobs, including Mick and the owner of the entire craft chain. No boxes for them, if Mick's house was

anything to go by. *What do you do, when you've got to go to the loo, in an English country garden?*

Mick had gone all out, even invited a Welsh harpist, an Irish rock band, and a famous soprano who sang with the Welsh National Opera. The food was catered, the kegs were real ale, and the champagne was vintage. We all kissed, held hands, sang *Auld Lang Syne*, drank to the New Year.

I had a painful flashback of myself declaiming "Up the long ladder and down the short rope. To hell with King Billy and God bless the Pope. If that doesn't do it, we'll tear him in two, and send him to hell with his red, white, and blue." My wife, Val, shushed me, but Mick grinned at me and rolled his eyes, whatever that meant. The party went on far too long. I wondered how many of us had spent the night here.

Weak light and wan people filtered into the kitchen as the sun began to touch the top of the mountain rim in the distance. Gallons of tea and coffee were made, hair of the dog that bit us was produced, and a prodigious brunch was presented to the survivors. The hardest, led by Mick and his girlfriend, went for a ramble part way up the mountain. Val gave me an impish wave as she joined them.

The turkey plucker handed me a pint of bitter, saying "Cheer up, boyo, at least you aren't English." A dubious compliment from a Welshman. He'd evidently learned that my wife was Welsh, so there was hope for the Yank, after all. I thanked him for the beer in Welsh, and he grinned.

After two pints, we decided that our work was pretty much the same. "The trouble with craft work," I proclaimed, "is that the initial design stage is really exciting, but the production process gets downright boring." Elwyn (we were on first name terms now) agreed. "Bloody hell, that's the truth and all. Breeding those big toms, designing ways to

hold and milk ‘em, that’s the exciting part. But the rest’s a bloody wanker’s dream.” I wasn’t sure what the expression meant, but had a rough idea and laughed.

By the time the mountaineers returned, Elwyn and I were on our third pints and were definitely mates, as they say in the UK. We had agreed that a couple of dressed turkeys which “fell off the truck” would be a fair exchange for a custom-made leather butcher’s apron. I was tempted by his offer of salmon, until he told me how he got them. As a member of the local fly fishing association, I had to draw the line somewhere.

I told Elwyn about turkeys and American Thanksgiving, told him that a tom turkey had almost been chosen as the American national symbol. He made a rude joke about “Yanks,” and we both howled with laughter. I said “at least we’re not English,” and we howled even louder. And Elwyn was definitely invited to our next genuine American Thanksgiving party.

Val drove us back home over the moors, and I told her all about Elwyn on the way. “Sounds like a wanker,” she said, severely. And then she gave me a sly Welsh wink.

Chapter 27: THANKSGIVING



Mrs. Jones rolled her eyes when I offered her one of the raw oysters that I'd just opened. She flapped her gnarled hands in mock refusal, all the time eyeing the youngsters who were wolfing them down without inhibition. I told her that they'd make her sexy in bed. She glanced at her husband, giggled, and swallowed two in succession. But she drew the line at washing them down with Guinness.

Every country has some form of harvest festival--a celebration of the earth's bounty, a sacrifice to ensure next year's crop. But Val and I wanted our festival to be more. We'd come to North Wales as outsiders and had been both helped and accepted. Indeed, we'd been invited to parties and dinners simply because we were outsiders. It was our turn to give thanks to people, so we decided to have a thanksgiving party on a grand scale.

The first problem was the guest list. We couldn't invite selected people in our tiny village without insulting the unselected, so we invited them all. And we couldn't invite friends outside of the village if we didn't include their loved ones, friends, and whomever they chose to bring along. So we ended up having an "American Thanksgiving."

The basic idea of Thanksgiving, American style, is that everyone contributes to the festivity. Bring food, bring drink, bring entertainment or whatever, just as long as you contribute. With nearly a hundred expected guests, we strongly encouraged people to "think American." We parceled out American recipes for dishes served at the White House in Colonial days, we asked the younger generation to set up their own disco, and we advised the rest to bring something to drink.

Not that we were being stingy. Val and I ordered 12 dozen raw oysters from an Irish importer, bought 6 cases of champagne and a keg of real ale, and arranged for the delivery of cooked turkey and harvest bread loaves from a local friend and baker. But the real problem was finding room for everything and everyone.

It took Val and me and four paid staff three days to convert the workshop, showroom, and house into a "party mode." Bales of hay provided seats, workbenches became buffet counters, and the smithy showroom became the main serving center. The new workshop became the disco/oyster bar, and the house proper was reserved for the elders, the cooks, and the overflow. We put our faith in the belief that cramped quarters and surplus fare would ensure success.

And it did. Nearly two hundred people showed up for the event, all friends and friends of friends. And most of them brought offerings of food or drink. People who'd been given American recipes for such exotic items as "Parson's Pleasure" and "Oaxacan Peanuts" worried about getting the recipe right but doubled the quantity to be safe. Those too shy or British to experiment with American concoctions brought classic UK offerings.



The butcher (Dai Thomas, left), the baker (Alwyn Thomas, right), and the candlestick maker (Val, center). See the addenda for details of our “bill of faire” (behind Dai Thomas, the butcher).

And there are always a few high rollers at a big party. Alwyn the baker stunned us with a presentation of four enormous “harvest wreaths” made in pastry—they weren’t for eating, but made a spectacular display. Yogi, our closest publican, donated a free and large keg of real ale on the understanding that we plug both the beer and the pub. Derek and Wendy Summers chipped in two cases of their best homemade wine on the understanding that we kept it all out of sight of drinkers who had no discrimination. And Anne Owen from the local delicatessen embarrassed us with a huge and delectable assortment of hors d’oeuvres.



But the most spectacular donation was the boar’s head. Maggie and Nigel Botting were cordon bleu chefs and knew how to impress a crowd. Their masterpiece weighed about ten pounds and was presented on a silver platter. It was fully cooked, ornately decorated with multi-colored cake icing, sported a big green apple in its mouth, and had a tiny American flag flying from its snout.

Val and I had once been given half a pig, including half the

head, in exchange for some leatherwork. We were both a bit horrified to discover the head on the top of the box of home butchered meat, but my mother-in-law assured us that you can eat every part of a pig except the “whistle,” and that “brawn” not only made good eating but that she would cook it for us.

It took all day for her to prepare, cook, and extract every ounce of brain, tongue, eyeball, and meat from the cheeks and snout—and it took another full day to press the mess into a mould and get it to set in the refrigerator. I pretended to enjoy eating it while mentally crossing it off my list of favorite foods. And I never had the nerve to ask my mother in law what the “whistle” was.

But I did ask Nigel if he had similar plans for the boar’s head after the party, and he laughed. “I wouldn’t cook brawn if you paid me, and I wouldn’t eat it if you bribed me. But our two Great Danes will be in doggy heaven for about fifteen minutes with that little beauty.” I figured that the dogs would eat everything except the apple.

The party took on a life of its own. Some people arrived in the middle of the day, went home for a nap and came back. Some came late and stayed most of the night. I took two hours off at one point and escaped to a pub in the nearest town without even being missed. The disco was a huge success, the food and drink lasted into the wee hours, and many of the good-byes entailed an animated discussion of recipes.

Val and I collapsed about 4 AM, slept until 9, and then faced the morning after. Our first impression was that some mad architect had tiled the entire house with paper plates and cups, adding bits of colored napkins, assorted plastic utensils, and bizarre food items for highlights. We held hands as we surveyed the battlefield, smiled wanly at each other over cups of fresh coffee, and murmured about having thrown a hell of a good party.

Our workers arrived before noon and helped us clean up and restore workshops to their proper function in short order. And the phone calls began. Most were thank yous, some were recipe hunters, several were apologies for behavior or not bringing an appropriate donation, and one was from the police department.

“There’s a bloody pig’s head mounted on the High Street traffic lights, and we have reason to believe it’s your doing,” an angry desk sergeant’s voice informed me. “If it’s not removed immediately, we’ll press charges,” etcetera, he bellowed. I drove the five miles to town, but saw no sign of the boar’s head except for the wooden one over the pub by the same name.

I phoned Nigel and reported the loss of the boar’s head. Nigel wasn’t bothered. “The sergeant must have been the only person not invited to the party,” he quipped. “Besides, the dogs prefer sirloin.” I silently sided with the dogs.

We never did learn who stole the boar’s head, but we did receive a lot of compliments for allegedly mounting it on the Denbigh traffic light. And someone anonymously delivered a cord of split oak firewood to us a couple of days after the party. It’s the contribution that makes an American Thanksgiving a success.

Addenda**BILL OF FAIRE: THANKSGIVING 1976**

(Most of the recipes for the dishes served were taken from The American Heritage Cookbook, 1964, Penguin Books, Ltd. Val did the artwork and calligraphy for the menu)

(DRINKS)

Sangaree
Old-fashioned eggnog
Wassail
Peach wine cup
Claret cup
Champagne
Guinness

(HORS D'OEUVRES)

Oysters on the half-shell
Smoked salmon
Caviar canapés
Guacamole
Pizza
California onion dip
Deville eggs
Oaxacan nuts
Cheeses

(ENTREES)

Roast turkey
Chestnut stuffing
Cranberry sauce
Baked Virginia ham
Frosted grapes

Barbecued spareribs

Gumbo z'herbes
Spinach timbales
Onions in cream
Baked celery with
 almonds
Rutabaga pudding
Boston baked beans
Corn sesame sauté
Janson's temptation
Corn pudding
Pennsylvania red
 cabbage
Scalloped potatoes
Candied sweet potatoes

(SALADS)

Bird's nest salad
Cucumber salad
Sunshine salad
Corn relish
Cranberry-orange relish
Waldorf salad
Coleslaw
Russian salad
Shaker potato salad

Mixed garden stuff
Monticello dressing

(BREADS)

Harvest loaves
Corn bread

(DESSERTS)

Pumpkin pie
Mincemeat pie
Sour cream raisin pie
Pecan pie
Shoo fly pie
Fudge
Lemon cheesecake
Apple crumble
Almond slices
Cranberry orange bread
Topsy squire and tipsy
 parson

(AND, OF COURSE)

Coffee
Tea
And a keg of real ale

Chapter 28: TREASURES OF BRITAIN

Nearly one hundred artisans were putting the final touches on their displays before opening time when the tiny yellow river appeared, slowly winding its way across the elegant marble floor. Boxes were hastily moved, noses sniffed, and all eyes eventually focused on the culprit. No one could believe that a fox terrier possessed such a big bladder. Tiny ignored the attention while she finished her business, even ignored the simultaneous applause that erupted as her owner, red faced, produced a roll of paper towels and profuse apologies as he frantically mopped up.

The Tatton Hall Arts and Crafts Fair was a major annual event in Cheshire, England. Artisans, if accepted at all, gladly paid two hundred pounds in the 1980s for the three-day event; the public, which arrived in droves, gladly paid five pounds per head and per day just to get in. Val and I were delighted to be in such a prestigious show, and we anticipated making a healthy profit with our leatherwork.



One major reason for the success of the Tatton Fair was the popularity of Tatton itself, an estate listed as “a treasure of Britain.” The eighteenth century hall is more pleasant than “grand,” but the fifty-four acres of formal and woodland gardens, lakes, and streams are one of the National Trust’s most visited properties. The Fair was held during an autumn “bank holiday” when the foliage was a blaze of color, the deer were rutting, and the overall effect was that of a nostalgic British film. Indeed, if you ever saw *Brideshead Revisited*, you had a glimpse of Tatton Park.

Tiny’s performance on the opening day of the show was moving in more ways than one. The specific venue for the arts and crafts show was the trophy room, and Tiny

was the only unstuffed animal in the entire place. The trophy room was a two thousand square foot, purpose built room that housed the hunting trophies of the Egerton family which had owned Tatton since the late sixteenth century.

It was an animal rights activist's nightmare. Hundreds of horned ungulate heads lined the walls, and dozens of large, rare, and even extinct species of the cat family, preserved in taxidermist poses, occupied glass cases. There were dazzling displays of dead butterflies and birds, a department store collection of dress dummies displaying aboriginal dress from around the world, even a showcase with two tuna, caught on a single, double hooked line, which weighed a total of over 1500 pounds.

Val and I were uneasy about the venue. After all, we were leatherworkers, and the British are notorious for caring more about animals than people, if charity donations are anything to go by. We had once even been accosted at a show by an angry animal rights lady who loudly denounced us for making craft items out of dead animals. When I explained that it was a lot easier than using live animals, she went berserk.

We were also exhausted. As usual, we'd stayed up all night finishing stock, creating a one-off display unit, and packing everything into a clapped out station wagon for the two hour drive the morning of the show. A lot of craftspeople suffer this syndrome, and we recognized them all as we wearily set our display up in the trophy room that first morning.

Bob and Pam Robinson were an obvious exception. They had arrived in a camper the day before, had set up their outdoor camping area as well as their indoor display units in advance, and looked decidedly refreshed and smug on the opening morning. At least until their dog, Tiny, unleashed her opinion.

Bob and Pam made fancy knitwear on a wholesale and retail basis and were both organized and efficient when it came to display and sales. They were also good friends. We had been invited to share their campground spot at Tatton and had no trouble locating it at the eleventh hour. The camper was the obvious clue, but the positive ID was the camp table set up with a linen tablecloth, real silverware, crystal glasses, and a magnificent arrangement of cut wildflowers. Bob and Pam liked to travel first class, at least from a craftspeople's point of view.

Opening day at the Tatton Show was a madhouse. Val and I were shattered from lack of sleep, but managed to cope with the last minute set up and the fact that we had one of the only sites in the trophy room which did not have antlers hanging over our heads. We had brought our own hat stand, but it hurt to see all those original display racks going to waste.

Josie, another knitwear maker and friend, arrived in even worse shape than us. She stumbled in at the last minute, threw an oversize tablecloth over her table, stacked her knitwear on top, and disappeared underneath the table. We could hear her snores through the din of the first wave of customers. We even heard her say "Shut up, I'm trying to sleep" at one point, a statement which later earned her immortality in a British publication about salesmanship.

Artisans aren't necessarily salespeople. For one thing, they are the makers of their own products and have a lot of ego wrapped up in their own creations. For another thing, they are often opinionated, biased, defiant, and unconventional. Why else would they be artisans?

The opening day of the Tatton show turned out to be a grand success. The weather was delightful, the buyers were abundant and eager to spend, and even Josie woke up by midafternoon. Sales were brisk, sellers and buyers were happy, and the sound of wine corks being popped by artisans was unabashedly loud an hour before closing time. Cork pulling is part of the professional jargon of British craftspeople. If the show is bad, you rarely hear a cork being popped--not because bottles aren't being opened, but because nobody wants to share the costly contents.

A lot of sharing went on that first day, and all the craftspeople were in a decidedly good mood when the show closed at six. Most of us were camping in a designated area in the park, and the communal celebrations lasted well into the night. Val and I, along with several others, shared dinner and swapped tales of sales with Bob and Pam. Bob won the unofficial sales award of the day by virtue of having literally sold a sweater off his wife's back. Josie was highly commended for refusing to let crass commercialism deter her from a higher calling (namely, sleeping). And Tiny was declared the living treasure of the Tatton trophy room.

Day two of the show was even better, particularly insofar as most of the participants had caught up on their sleep and didn't have to deal with setting up a booth. Thanks to record sales the first day, Val and I were already running low on our traditional stock of belts, bags, and accessories. So we brought out our "secret weapon," a brand new and original line of leather bowls which we had cut, molded, and dyed to resemble flowers, leaves, fruits, and vegetables.

We displayed the new line in wooden fruit crates and baskets lined with straw. In order to add to the "market" image, we chalked our prices up on a slate blackboard and filled one crate with real fruits and veggies. For the heck of it, I put a sign saying "reduced to clear" in the box of real produce and even put a "sold" sticker on one of the real bananas.

It's fascinating to be on the selling side of the counter at an arts and crafts show. Sure, some customers have a real appreciation for creativity in any form and will often pay for it. But the rest are divided up into what crafts people call nose pickers, tire kickers, and be-backers. The nose pickers are mostly bored husbands who have been forced to attend such a show by their wives, and the collective name speaks for itself. Tire kickers are the ones who spend a long time pawing through your display, only to announce before leaving without buying that "it's a pity you don't have one in purple." And be-backers positively rave about your goods and promise to be back, but rarely do so.

To our delight, our new collection sold like hotcakes. But one customer fascinated us. She slowly and carefully examined every piece of the new line, and we initially wrote



her off as a tire kicker. But she didn't ask for one in purple. Instead, she proceeded to slowly and carefully examine every piece in the box of real produce as well. We tried to make eye contact, to explain, but she ignored our efforts and walked off. Not exactly a be-backer, but there are other categories of customers we don't bother to label.

Our mystery customer returned three times that day. She never spoke, avoided eye contact, and seemed particularly fascinated by the real banana with the sold sticker, even going to the point of sniffing and squeezing it while Val and I did our best to keep a straight face. A whole new category of customer was materializing in front of our eyes.

We discussed the incident with Bob and Pam that night, after cocktails and a four course meal in the park. Bob's opinion was that, if our mystery customer returned on the final day, we should simply give her the entire box of real produce, banana and all, with a smile and no explanation, "sort of in keeping," he thought. Pam was worried that the mystery lady might feel patronized at best, might even be humiliated. We slept on it.

Our mystery lady did return on the final day. We had nearly sold out when she arrived, and we were already beginning to prepare for packing up. The lady was still evasive regarding communication, but she certainly didn't hesitate about buying something this time around. She very deliberately picked out three of our leather "fruit" bowls and handed them to me, along with the exact payment that she had obviously prepared in advance.

I wrapped her goods, and, as I handed them over, casually indicated our box of real produce. "Could you use any of this? We only used it for display and don't really have room in the car to haul it back home." "Don't be silly" she snapped, snatching her goods and marching off.

Val and I, of course, won the unofficial sales award for the day.

Chapter 29: HEDGEHOGS

I saw my first hedgehog in a glass cage in Harrods. “I don’t care what the hell it costs, just so it doesn’t have fleas,” the fat American lady shouted at the slim English salesman. Everyone and everything was bristling. I edged away, embarrassed to be a fellow American.



Hedgehogs are miniature porcupines from an American point of view. They have long snouts, short legs, and a coat of stiff, pointed spines on their backs. They roll up into a ball of bristles when threatened, their main diet consists of insects, and they are in that dubiously fortunate class of animals which humans consider cute and cuddly. Well, maybe “cuddly” is the wrong word.

Classic English children’s books had given me a vague idea of what hedgehogs looked like before I moved to Wales. But I didn’t know about the fleas, had no idea that dairy farmers distrusted hedgehogs, and had never considered eating “hedgehog au daub.” But I’d heard the joke: “how do hedgehogs make love? Very carefully.”

During my first ever drive from London to North Wales, I noticed that hedgehogs were the predominant “road kill,” and I counted over twenty during the 300 mile odd drive. The count had no statistical meaning, insofar as my wife and I weren’t always on country roads and were driving during daylight hours. But, well, it’s hard not to notice a squashed hedgehog on any road.

Val told me that her parents’ dog used to catch hedgehogs and drag them into his doghouse. He never hurt them, but the flea problem became serious. Val’s parents blamed the hedgehogs, but Val wasn’t so sure. After all, even dogs have fleas. But hedgehogs definitely have parasites, and grooming isn’t something hedgehogs do easily. So a symbiotic relationship works well—the fleas/lice get fed and the hedgehogs don’t itch. At least that’s the official theory

Unlike the fat American lady in Harrods or Val’s parents, I didn’t care about the fleas. I liked hedgehogs because they were, well, cute and cuddly. Val was bemused when I took to carrying a box in the back of the car in order to collect stray hedgehogs I found curled up on the road at night and then release them in our garden. She laughed when I put saucers of milk outside our back door to feed them, pointing out that every cat in the county would share the bounty. And she took demonic delight in pointing out that our farm neighbor, Ellis, probably believed that hedgehogs suckled his cows at night and would not approve of my humanitarian efforts.

I laughed at rural superstition, but had to admit that cats were a lot faster than hedgehogs, had to admit that I hadn’t seen many, if any, hedgehogs in our garden despite my efforts on their behalf. And then I met the gypsy.

She was peddling socks and clothespins and tea towels, and I was about to close the door in her face when Val whispered behind me: “buy some clothespins.” So I did—six of them. The old lady informed me that they were hand made by gypsies and would bring me luck. I informed her that it was an honor and a pleasure to do business with such a slick salesperson, and she gave me a grin and a mock “thank you, my lord” before leaving.

When I asked my darling wife why she’d made me buy clothespins, she shrugged and said that it was bad luck not to humor a gypsy peddler. It turns out that gypsies have a reputation for giving “the evil eye” to people they dislike. Superstitious folks are aware of this and go out of their way to humor gypsies. Gypsies, of course, go out of their way to capitalize on this weakness.

And when I asked Val how she knew the old lady was a gypsy, she said, “well, they always look sort of scruffy, they always have cheap stuff to sell, and, well, they’re always so cheeky.” So much for my Hollywood image of gypsies—though I had to agree that the old woman was a bit “cheeky.”

And so she was, because she came back a week later and asked me to buy more clothespins. It was that or socks, which I didn’t want. Val wasn’t home, and I wasn’t really superstitious, but I added another six handmade clothespins to our collection. And I tried to get some mileage out of my transaction with the persistent gypsy.

“What do you know about hedgehogs?” I asked her. She looked at me the way I’d looked at her the first time she tried to sell me clothespins. And maybe she thought I had the evil eye this time, because she promptly gave me the “scoop” on hedgehogs, at least from her point of view.

Yes, they suckle cows at night, she assured me. And, as for collecting them off the road, by all means. “It’s a pity to see them squashed by motor vehicles. Such a waste.” I was about to agree wholeheartedly, when she gave me the recipe.

“They’re lovely baked. Just cover them with mud and cook them slow in the coals until the skin and prickles peel off.” I don’t remember if she said they tasted like chicken, and I never had the heart to find out. But I do confess to once playing a flashlight over Ellis’s herd of cows one night and not seeing a single hedgehog. Not that I’m superstitious.



Chapter 30: LOCALS

David Jones had a remarkable memory, which is probably why he was so successful as the publican of The Kimmel Arms, a pub in North Wales. The second time we met, he remembered the first time, which is more than I could say. “Oh, the Yank from California. Whiskey and water, if I remember correctly.” Correct on all counts, a year after our first and only meeting to date.

Val and I had recently moved into a “dry” village. Nantglyn had three chapels, one church, but no pub. The nearest public house was a five mile drive to either the Sportsman’s Arms on the top of the moors or one of at least a dozen which the nearest town boasted. We preferred the Sportsman’s to the town pubs, but our “local” ended up being The Kimmel Arms which was another five miles down the road. At least the host there remembered our names and pronounced the word “Yank” in a way not calculated as an insult.

We got on with David Jones from the start. He played classical music in the background, featured the best collection of liqueurs and malt whiskeys in the entire area, and decorated his establishment with an impressive array of antique bottles and agricultural implements. We were delighted with the decor and loved the ambiance. The “pub grub” and wine list impressed us still further, and, before we knew it, we had become friendly with the “locals” and became “locals” ourselves.

Becoming a local confers certain privileges such as being allowed to run a bar tab, being allowed the occasional drink after hours, and being privy to the gossip about every other local. Of course, every other local also enjoys the latter privilege, although the dissemination of such information is carefully orchestrated by the publican. David gave us the low down on the “old time” locals early on, “just to set you straight about some of them, so you don’t take offense or make fools of yourselves.”

“Eddie Wynn is bloody obnoxious and as tight fisted as they come, but he raises pigs next door and I have to put up with him. Hugh Davies? He’s a survivor of the Battle of Arnhem and has stuttered ever since, shell shock, you know. He isn’t much of a conversationalist, and, for god’s sake, don’t mention the war to him. Ken MacDonald is the head engineer at the local hospital, but, if you want to make friends with him, just talk about gardening. As for Little Emlyn, well, he was a jockey before the war, but now he reckons he can’t sleep unless he drinks at least ten pints of Guinness a night. Naw, don’t pay any attention to the way Mrs. McShea talks. She sounds like an old madam, but she’s a lovely lady. The old gentleman with the walrus mustache? Oh, that’s Dudley Ward. He and his wife have a rundown manor house just outside the village.” The catechism went on and on.

We got to know and even like them all, but Dudley and his wife Alison became special. I was standing at the bar placing an order, when the silver haired person next to me announced that he reckoned that the Yanks had saved Britain in the war and insisted on paying for my drink. Dudley had twinkling blue eyes, wore a double breasted tweed suit, and sported a fantastic waxed mustache which was curled at the ends and commanded most of my attention as I automatically introduced myself, said polite thanks, and added water to my neat malt whiskey.

Before I could lift my drink in a salute, my benefactor snatched my glass out of my hand and dumped the contents into the sink behind the bar counter. “You bloody

Yanks might have saved us in the war, but I'm damned if I'll let you ruin good whiskey. Might as well put ice cubes in sherry." The fantastic mustache was quivering as I tried to protest and was ignored. "Try a real scotch," he thundered, ordering a double malt whiskey I'd never heard of and moving the water pitcher out of my reach. And then he put on a monocle and an impish smile and watched me intently as I sipped.



The combination of waxed mustache, monocle, and double malt whiskey was fatal. Dudley Ward, from my young American viewpoint, was obviously a full-fledged British eccentric, and I was enchanted. We introduced our wives, we

ordered more drinks, and we knew at once that we were all destined to be more than friendly locals.

Dudley and Alison became close friends, despite and because of the thirty year age advantage they had over Val and me. Like us, they were "outsiders" in Wales, Dudley being English and Alison being a Scot, born and bred in Edinburgh. Though it was rarely discussed, they were as poor as we were, but just as determined as us to make their own way on their own terms. And, as for being individualists, who else, outside of Victorian literature sported a waxed mustache and monocle? Besides, they had a way with words, made us laugh, and delighted us with their Old World manners and charm.

We discovered a mutual interest in everything from agricultural antiques and country wine to gardening and the unauthorized version of British history. We met their children and they met our parents. Drinks at the Kimmel evolved into sharing family secrets, Christmas dinners, and, ultimately, personal tragedy.

As a child, Dudley had been treated with arsenic for a glandular problem, the only known cure at the time. The cure eventually proved to be as bad as the disease, and a heart ailment complicated his condition. He laughed off his occasional bouts in hospital, joked about being well preserved in malt whiskey, and kept his mustache curled and his monocle polished. We were concerned, but Alison protected him, didn't let us to know how serious things really were, and certainly didn't want the other locals to know anything.

Dudley was very stiff upper lip about it all, kept up appearances until the end, and refused to let even us see him in his last days. Alison broke the final news and our hearts: "He wanted you to remember him as he was, dears." We do.

Chapter 31: DON'T LET YOUR ROD BEND TOO MUCH

The letter that had been slipped under our shop door was brief and blunt. "To the plagiarist," it began. It was accompanied with the resume of an artist we'd never heard of, complete with a color photo of one of his major works which was more than familiar. "You have obviously copied my art work for your own gain in violation of copyright and human decency. I intend to take this matter to court unless I receive full restitution."

Val and I were shocked as much by the accusation as by the resemblance of his enclosed photo to our latest work of art. We'd been commissioned to create an honorary plaque for the county's angling confederation and had gone to great lengths to create a molded leather plate for the occasion. The lip of the plate bore the inscription of a Welsh anecdote relating to fishing, and the center of the plate featured a hand carved rendition of a salmon rising up to take a fly. We were proud of it.

To be honest, Val wasn't that proud of it, partly because she disliked doing representational work and mostly because she disliked fishing, or, at least, my obsession with it. I talked her into accepting the commission by promising to provide accurate color pictures of salmon and assuring her that I would handle the border inscription. And I needed Val's cooperation not just as a partner, but because she was a genius with design and dyeing. Val remained unmoved until I produced a design which she actually approved of.

I found the design in the fishing catalogue of one of Britain's most esteemed fly fishing suppliers. The magazine abounded in graphics, some advertising, most ornamental. The design in question was about an inch in diameter, black and white, and served to break two paragraphs of text. Like many other graphics used in the catalogue, it had no copyright mark or other sign of authorship, so Val and I assumed it was in the public domain, probably taken from a Victorian woodcut or print.

Val grudgingly approved the design because it had movement and drama. It was an underwater view of a fish propelling itself from the bottom of its watery world towards a tiny window on the surface, the attractant being a fishing fly on the top of the water. And the lure was linked by a line which joined the action below to the sliver of air and land above. Val drew her own version of the design, tailoring it to fit the nine inch diameter of the bottom of our leather plate. I traced and carved it, Val dyed it, and the Clwyd Angling Association loved it.

John Jones, the incensed artist, had seen our leather fish plate featured in local and regional newspapers, and he was shocked because he recognized it as his own design, one he'd even used as his logo on his business card. He was not polite when I phoned him and tried to explain.

"Imitation may be a form of flattery, but copying is downright theft," he shouted over the phone. He went on to denounce us as frauds, likened us to art Mafioso trying to muscle in on the action for the money. I couldn't get a word in, actually didn't try too hard, because a part of me agreed with him. We had copied, after all.

It hit a nerve. Val and I wanted to be more than artisans, we wanted to break new ground. We'd been proud of our leather plates, thought they were original, at least in terms of construction, until we learned that molded and hardened leather had been used for everything from plates and beer mugs to cannon barrels and armor in the Middle

kidding, knew that he was peeved that I was out-fishing him, but I owed him an explanation.

The inscription we used was “Paid a gadael i dy enwair blygu gormod,” a very old Welsh saying which roughly translates, “Don’t let your rod bend too much.” Having gone to all the trouble of copying and modifying John’s design for the center of the plate, we wanted an appropriate Welsh inscription to fill the blank rim, and a water bailiff employed by the Brenig Reservoir finally solved the problem. We were in The Sportsman’s Arms at the time, and none of the locals could come up with a suitable Welsh homily relating to fish and fishing until “Dai Brenig” offered his solution. There was lots of laughter on the part of the old timers at Dai’s suggestion, and Val and I gathered that the saying had more than one meaning. All the better from my point of view, even if Val rolled her eyes.

We never used John’s design again, and we began to distance ourselves from any obvious source of design. Why copy at all? The object itself should stand alone without borrowed ornamentation. We became fanatical about creating leather “objets” which were original and not obviously functional. We called them “weed pots,” “vessel forms,” and “pippens,” and the applause from the Arts Council increased along with our overdraft at the bank.



I never entirely understood why “don’t let your rod bend too much” caused so much laughter in the pub that day. Sure, there’s a phallic allusion, but most Welsh speakers I consulted could only point out that it was a very old saying which couldn’t be translated literally into modern Welsh, never mind English. But the fish plate incident was a turning point for Val and me. We sold our business at a loss shortly after and moved to California where we now survive by making our own original designs and creations in leather. I’m sure there’s a basic connection somewhere, but I don’t know how to translate it.

POSTSCRIPT: CANDLES IN THE RAIN

“Candles in the Rain” is the name of a song that a lady named Melanie sang at the opening of the first Woodstock Festival in the 60’s. It begins with a lot of soulful and warbling sound effects, moves into folk rap, and then, finally, explodes into an ecstasy of hippie-rock. I can now mock Melanie, but I still like her first big hit. If that doesn’t make any sense to you, you are either too old or too young. And I’m not being critical, because I wasn’t at the original Woodstock either.

”Raise the candles high...to stay dry against the rain...Some came to sing, some came to pray, some came to keep the dark away...” No matter what you think of the sound, Melanie vocalized a message which summed up an era. It was “us” against “them,” light against dark, idealistic youth against the tyranny of the establishment. We were the new generation, we had a chance! “Candles in the Rain” was a song about idealism, faith, and, revolution, about creating a flicker of moral light in the darkness of universal decadence.

Before I met my wife, I shared a student apartment near a California campus with a guy who turned out to be an acid freak and was into mysticism. He introduced me to Melanie’s song. What he particularly liked about it was a reference in the song to Meyer Baba. Meyer Baba was an Indian mystic who promised to reveal the “truth” on his deathbed, but refused to speak in the meantime (literally--he never spoke, not even on his deathbed). I never figured out how Meyer Baba got his message out so successfully, but he had a serious following at the time. Melanie’s song was also about things that had no hope of realization, unless people believed in them enough. Like peace, like Meyer Baba finally speaking, like candles surviving in the rain.

We arrived on the doorstep of Val’s parents in North Wales with no money, no realistic job prospects, and no real worries. After all, we were on our honeymoon, young, in love, and had both been to college. But, when a dozen academic job applications on my part went unanswered, Val took matters into her own fair hands and made a few sand candles in her parents’ tiny back yard.

We took our candles to a local tourist trap, timidly showed them to the buyer of the first shop we came to, and were stunned when we not only sold all we had but were also given our first ever order for more! Who could resist such a lure? Getting paid for



having fun, getting orders for unforeseen fun, and not having to worry about a salaried job was a prospect that few people our age were ever offered. We took the bait, gladly.

We made our first commercial candles in an outdoor sandbox in North Wales. And it rains a lot in Wales. And Melanie's song still rang in our heads. We chose "Candles in the Rain" as a business name, because it linked our past with our present, it combined literal meaning with allusion, and it summed up our aspirations.

Val and I made candles in North Wales for five years. We were the first sand candle makers in all of the UK in the early 70s, and we made a lot of money. And we gave it all up without regret.

The rot began when we first approached the big wax suppliers and candle makers for both materials and advice. One senior salesman seriously advised us to buy premises that we didn't really want and then to have a "convenient fire"--the insurance would cover it and allow us to go wherever we wanted. After all, that's what his company had done. And what candle making operation has not had a fire? We were horrified. Not only could we not conceive of committing fraud or arson, particularly in or on premises that we dearly loved, but Val was terrified of fire.

"Candles in the Rain" specialized in candles that were carved, layered, and unusually shaped--all things that mass producers had little time for. Our specialty was sand candles that the big boys wouldn't touch. We made two tier "owl" candles, we carved Celtic designs, we hand-dipped mushroom shapes, we made our own molds, and we became clever at recycling waste into high ticket, one-off creations. The backyard business grew into a serious production unit with thermostatically controlled wax tanks, two ton deliveries of wax each month, industrial propane tanks, and up to 6 employees. Hey! We were making money!



But we both became unhappy. Between the employees and the volume of orders, we found ourselves working one hundred hour weeks, overloaded with paperwork which had more to do with the workers than our actual hands-on business, and increasing worries about what that scumbag salesman had originally hinted at--fire.

And we were getting bored! We were bored by both the "ease" with which we were making money and the applause that we received from our rural neighbors. And we felt guilty on both counts. After all, the concept wasn't original, the fad couldn't last forever, and we felt like shysters.

Anyone can make candles. We wanted a challenge. We wanted to be "artists."

So, with the perverse logic that only an artist/craftsperson can defend, we phased out candle making in favor

of leatherwork. After all, Val had been a tailoress and was good at design, Bill was fairly good at tooling and carving leather, and leatherwork was a lot more challenging than candle making. We began with a range of belts and handbags that were cut, decorated, dyed, finished, and assembled entirely by hand. Our first primitive efforts were so incredibly successful on a commercial level that we dropped candle making entirely.

But the horses we changed in midstream were not all that different. Making belts by hand is no more exciting than making candles by hand, and aniline dyes and leather finishes pose a long term health risk which certainly rivals the immediate risks inherent in candle making. Of course, it took us a long time to discover all this, never mind acknowledge it. The real difference was the material itself--and the challenge it presented.

We were woefully ignorant about our chosen material when we took up leatherwork. We liked it because of its age-old tradition, because it was about as "natural" as you could get (after clay and wood), and because it was durable. And the challenge of learning about tanning, currying, dyeing, finishing, and working leather was an added incentive, from our innocent perspective.

The first major change which we, as neophyte leatherworkers, noticed was that the cost of our raw materials was a lot higher than those involved in candle making. Worse still, the raw materials varied greatly in quality, price, and consistency of supply. The second major shock was the discovery that mass production techniques offered a serious alternative to our meticulously hand made efforts.

But we believed that the public would appreciate, and pay for, the difference between machine embossing and hand carving, between machine sewing and saddle stitching. We believed that until, like John Henry, we nearly died with our tools in our hands. By the mid 80's, Val and I were at our wits end trying to survive off leatherwork, trying to defy recession. We had experimented with almost every traditional leather work technique and had even come up with some new ones. We represented British leatherwork at an international conference in Australia, we were featured twice in a leading fashion magazine, we exhibited



Fashion Extras Magazine (UK). August 1984. The "Futures" editor: "But the last word has to go to CANDLES IN THE RAIN. You first spotted them in FASHION EXTRAS this time last year. Now Val and Bill Norrington have done it again, bringing leather and jewellery together in one product--water formed bangles and neckware. No two pieces are alike and quite frankly I've never seen anything as original as this. The designs look as if they could come from the neck of your neighbourly cannibal with the leather taking on a bonelike quality. But underneath the gloss it's all leather. A great gift!"

our work in Holland and Germany, and our work was included in a major Welsh Arts Council exhibition. But you can't live on applause.

In 1985, Val put her foot down and announced that she would rather be poor and warm than poor and cold. We moved back to California the following year. It was, after all, Val's turn to live in an exotic, foreign country.

Once again, I submitted academic job applications with no success. Perhaps my lack of references as a self-employed person was the problem, perhaps I shouldn't have mentioned fourteen years of being a craftsman in North Wales. I decided to opt for local expertise and sent my resume to a professional for rewriting and tailoring.

When my polished resume came back with "Wales" spelt as "Whales," I put my foot down alongside of Val's, and "Candles in the Rain" went back into business on its own out of sheer defiance. What irritated us was the fact that most Americans had heard of Wales, but didn't know where it was, never mind how to spell it. But we knew and could never forget. Candles in the rain.

We began to sell our sculptural leatherwork through galleries only and to get most of our orders by exhibiting at the largest wholesale show for handmade American arts and crafts in the USA. Needless to say, we are often asked about our business name, sometimes even criticized for our marketing strategy. "Your product identification is ambiguous and misleading," one craft industry guru once told us. But we're not about to change. Besides, we owe a debt to Wales--the one without an "H."

"Raise the candles high...to stay dry against the rain...Some came to sing, some came to pray, some came to keep the dark away..."

Not The End



The Covent Garden Collection

Val and Bill, AKA “Candles in the Rain,” now make a range of leather goods called “The Covent Garden Collection,” named after London’s famous market garden. The collection includes leather garlands and bowls in the form of vegetables, fruits, flowers, and leaves, all of which are entirely hand-made from vegetable tanned, top grain cowhide. Each piece is individually formed using specially developed molding techniques, and each piece is individually colored using both aniline and acrylic dyes. These original creations are permanently hardened with heat and treated with four coats of clear acrylic finish which enhances the glowing colors and gives the product a water- and dirt-resistant surface which can be easily cleaned with a damp cloth.

