

One

The Roots



I come from an extremely unusual family. My paternal grandfather, Rufus Clarke, was a sportsman, a gambler and a publican (bar owner). He was rotund with red hair and a huge beard. He was known all over our valley as a kind man but he didn't suffer fools lightly. He was wealthy and sent all three of his children to private schools. He owned horses and raced them for big money.

In his obituary, of June 1934, it said "Death has robbed the Eastern Valley of one of its best known licensees and sportsmen Mr. Rufus Clarke, age 56, has been the licensee of The Bridge End Inn, Pontrewynydd for around thirty years, and his father held the same establishment before him. Most people will remember that his trotting horse Queen Hummer won the most prestigious Cardiff Handicap race against all comers in 1911, and was the only horse to beat the highly regarded Honest Tom. So great was this horse's appeal that a record bid of five hundred English pounds could not persuade Mr. Clarke to sell. Two weeks later tragedy overcame the mare. She was put out to grass when a local hunt pursued across the same field. The mare took up the chase,

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riderless, and was impaled on a large hedge stick and died. Mr. Clarke is survived by his wife, two sons and a daughter. One of his sons, Lyn Clarke (my father) is another well known sportsman who has played rugby for Brynmawr, Newport United and Pontypool Harlequins."

This is an amazing obituary, both for my grandfather and Queen Hummer, both are spoken of to this day and if that's not fame, I don't know what fame is. Another story told to me by my Aunt Rene is that our family name is in fact, Clark. The "e" was added on after the Bridge End Inn was externally re-painted. On replacing the licensee's name over the door, as is the law, the painter misspelled it and instead of having this corrected my grandfather decided that the family name would change to suit the door. When I inquired why this error was not corrected my aunt told me that no-one would dare brooch the subject as grandfather was known as a stern disciplinarian. This incident sums up the kind of man he was and when he named my father Lyndhurst, after the town where he and his bride had honeymooned, once again no-one ever considered questioning it.

My paternal grandmother, Sarah, nee Morgan, was a different kettle of fish altogether. She was tall and slim and a very somber and serious woman. She appeared to be quite a bit younger than her husband. She was Welsh speaking and came from a farming family somewhere in the Southwest Wales, They seemed an unlikely couple and looked more like the partners of an arranged marriage. Although she, and her two sons Lyn and Goff, ran the Bridge End after grandfather had passed away she remained very much in the background. She would quite often retire to the upstairs living quarters and let the boys run the business.

My father, Lyn, was tragically killed in World War II when I was just three and so I did not see a great deal of Grandma Clarke. Occasionally, on a Sunday, when the pub was closed, we would pay her a visit but even then she hardly

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spoke. She seemed to have come from a strict family upbringing because she would only speak when spoken to, as if this had been drummed into her head as a child. Because of this it was most difficult to hold a conversation with her, however, sometimes from out of nowhere she would speak and on those few occasions her words spoke volumes.

I remember on one such Sunday visit she spent the whole time listening to a Welsh speaking radio station. To break the monotony I asked her what was being said. At this she began to translate word for word what was being said never once taking her eyes off the radio to look in my direction. It was like she lived in her own little world and could withdraw into it whenever she felt the need. Years later she moved from the pub and bought a house on Sunnybank Road, Griffithstown and with her son Goff, became even more reclusive. Poor Goff never married and his mother quashed the only chance he ever had because she thought that the girl was below the standard that she felt was necessary to marry into the Clarke family. Ma Clarke, as we all called her, tried the same thing when Lyn married my mother, but unlike Goff my dad was made of sterner stuff and would not tolerate her interference. When she died the Clarke money went to Goff. When he died on it went to his sister Rene. When she passed on some money came to me, but my mother never received one penny. She was "persona-non-gratta" for life.

My mother's parents could not have been more different. My maternal grandfather, Herbert Herbert, joined the Army almost right out of school. He enlisted with the Royal Hussars as he, like Rufus Clarke, was a horseman. A hussar was responsible for maneuvering the cannons around on the battlefield, this being done by a team of four or six horses. He would ride the lead horse and pick out a path that the team could easily move the cannons into a more advantageous location. For this you had to be a superb horseman. During World War I my grandfather fought at the two battles of the

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Somme and had two horses shot out from under him. He had what was known back then as shell shock which I guess today would be called battle fatigue. He was sent home to recuperate and since he was still able bodied he was sent to Devon to work on the construction of new ships. When the war finished in 1918 he was demobilized and he returned back to his wife and family in Pontypool. His demob money soon ran out and so he took a job at one of our local steel mills. One day, at the mill, he walked around the corner of a building and was hit in the head by a heavy metal bucket which had been thrown into the air by two younger boys who were clowning around. He never went to the hospital but from then on experienced severe head-aches which became worse as time progressed. In the end he could stand the pain no longer. He went down to the shed that he had built at the bottom of the garden, at 6 Edwards Street, and hung himself.

Once again another grandfather was gone before I was born and so I didn't have the chance to know either of them. I do have a wonderful photograph of him wearing full regalia and mounted on his favorite horse. My brother, Chris, still has his riding crop to this day on the head of which is listed some of the most famous battles that his regiment, the XV Royal Hussars, had fought in during their illustrious history. My grandmother, and mother, rarely spoke of him as if, by taking his own life, he had been blacklisted from the family. When he died my mother had to quit her nurses training at Nuneaton, Warwickshire and return home to help her mother. If it wasn't for that she would not have met my father and, of course, I would not have been conceived. It's an ill wind that doesn't blow good fortune for someone.

My maternal grandmother, Elizabeth nee Duke, or Lizzie as she was referred to, was a wonderful, kind and loving person. Out of my four grandparents I knew her the most. She never said a bad word about anyone. Her's was the first door to be knocked if anyone in the neighborhood needed

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help. She was a dainty little woman with piercing brown eyes which always seemed to be warm and accepting. Her one leg was around six inches shorter than the other and so she had to wear one heavy raised boot so that she could walk at all. Actually she only wore boots, the Victorian style which buttoned up past her ankles, for support, which she laced up with the aid of a small bone handled button hook. When she walked she would step with her good leg and then drag her other heavily laden leg along behind. This made walking quite difficult and the steep hills up from Pontypool town, almost impossible. In spite of this handicap she walked down to town and, carrying her shopping bags, climbed those awful hills once a week for most of her life. Only during the last few years of the life did she find this impossible but because of her kindness others were only too willing to do this for her.

Now my grandmother, Na Na Herbert, had two children. My mother, Elizabeth, called Betty and a little child named Barbara, who was crushed by a coal lorry at the age of four. At the bottom of the gardens at Edwards Street was an alleyway which was put there primarily for coal to be delivered. All those old houses had coal sheds down there and it was designed that way to make it easier for all concerned. Barbara had gotten out of the yard and the lorry driver didn't see her as he backed-up and crushed her little body against the wall. My grandmother was sitting in a chair rocking Barbara's dead body when Mrs. Hopkins came into the house and laid her to rest. All these tragedies seemed part of daily life back then. By the time I was three I had lost two grandfathers, and aunt and my father. Neither of my grandmothers ever remarried but chose to be widows, wearing black for the rest of their lives.

Lizzie Herbert lived until she was eighty six years old. My sister Ann (Bunny) was feeding her some soup while she lay in bed, down in her living room. Her last words were "lovely, lovely, lovely". Bunny went to the kitchen to set

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down the tray and when she came back, Nana had gone. Even with her last breath she could speak no ill. I drove down from Liverpool and after going to my mother's house, I went up to Edwards Street and sat alone with my dead grandmother. I talked to her for about an hour and the only other sound to be heard in that room was the ticking of the grandfather clock which she loved so much. How appropriate.