

# One

## Early Memories



Growing up as a child in Pontypool, after World War II , was both rigorous and oddly fascinating. There was a lack of food and so all of us kids were as skinny as rakes and roamed the streets like a pack of ravenous animals. Looking for anyway to supplement our food supply became the daily ritual . We would steal apples from local orchards, mostly the green cooking apples which, after eating , would give us the stomach gripes. We would search the mountains for wind berry bushes and eat the fruit right from their branches. We would wander the country lanes and pick blackberries trying not to be scratched by the brambles which they grew amongst. In some instances we even experimented by eating some different tree leaves but this did not prove very successful. The one leaf that we found edible was that of the hawthorn tree which we naively called "bread and cheese" but I would not advise anyone to try this unless they are desperately hungry. At home our main meals consisted of tinned Spam, tinned corned beef, tinned sardines or tinned pilchards. These were served with one form of vegetable to prevent the rickets and a piece of fruit to prevent the scurvy. Every night we were given a cod liver oil capsule to prevent God knows what, which we dutifully swallowed down like

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Spartans. At school we were each given a daily bottle of milk to boost our intake of vitamin C and from home we brought our own lunches or paid two pennies to buy a hot meal. My lunch often consisted of sugar sprinkled on dry bread or dripping (meat fat) spread on dry bread with a dash of salt. In between meals, for a penny, we could buy an Oxo cube to lick on or a piece of licorice root to gnaw on to stem the pangs of hunger. We would also go into the fish and chip shop and ask the owner if he would give us the bits of fried batter which fell from the deep fried fish. We called these "scratchings" and they were usually thrown away but we considered them to be delicious. Out of this adversity grew hard and determined young people, not expecting to be given much and yet enjoying every morsel they were given.

Up at the top of King Street and up School Lane there were, what was called, "allotments". These were areas of open land split into ten yard square sections where families could cultivate and harvest anything that would survive our damp climate. Potatoes, beans, peas, cabbage, lettuce, carrots or leeks were available for those lucky families who were given this opportunity. Our family was not that lucky because my father did not return from the War and so we had no man to work the land. We managed to survive by bartering some goods or services, which mainly comprised of my mother doing washing and ironing for others, in return for their leftovers. We ate real meat once a week but usually it was the cheapest cut of meat, which was left over at the butcher's by the end of the day. We also tried to eat fresh fish once a week but generally we got by with an inadequate diet for growing children. Most of my friends and associates were under developed and under nourished for their ages.

One year, in the middle of summer, I was walking up School Lane when I stopped dead in my tracks. There was a vast column of caterpillars, about thirty yards wide, crawling across the lane from the allotments, on the right of me, to the Recreation Field to the left. They had decimated every grow-

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ing thing above ground and had left a trail of destruction in their path. Every plant was chewed down to its stalk or stem with not a single green leaf to be seen. Where they had come from, or what caused this freak of nature, I do not know but the whole unique episode left a lot of families without a valuable food source for the rest of that year. On occasions if it wasn't for bad luck, we would have no luck at all. Never the less, life went on and somehow we all managed to prevail in those less than hospitable times.

The same could be said about our clothes, which were few and far between. I only had two pair of shoes which lasted me for way too many years and so, to this very day, both of my big toes are curled inwards. If my feet would have grown in a normal manner they would have been at least two sizes longer. My two pair of shoes consisted of Wellington boots, which I wore any time it was raining which was all too often and the other pair were sneakers, or what we called "Dapps", which I obviously wore when the weather was dry. Later in life I did own a super duper pair of leather shoes but these were only to be worn on special occasions like weddings, funerals or Sunday school. When ever we had holes in the soles of our shoes we would cut out foot shaped pieces of cardboard. These we would insert, inside the shoe along the inner sole, so that we could continue to wear them. We almost always had non matching patches sewn onto the seat of our pants, to extend the life of the garment, because new ones were out of the question. This was also beneficial to the neighbors who were spared the sight of our red flushed arses which poked out through the offending holes.

We also applied patches to our jackets but in this instance they were sewn on to the elbows of the sleeves. When the collars of our shirts became too frayed we would turn the whole shirt inside out so that they would not show. However, this did cause somewhat of a problem when trying to buttoning up the front of the shirt which became a perpetual nightmare. Most people wore there socks on their feet but,

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in cold weather, we also wore them on our hands to prevent any frost bitten fingers. Back then darning socks was an every day occurrence and , by the age of eight, I could darn my own. At winter we also wore a strange head gear called a Balaclava which , I believe, was discovered during World War I in an area of Russia known as the Crimea. It was a woolen knitted cap that went completely over your head and down to your shoulders. It only had one hole , in the front , so you could look out of with the rest of your face being completely covered for maximum warmth. So with patches on our shoes , arses and jackets, shirts turned inside out , socks on our hands and a complete Ninja styled head dress, we looked weird enough to send the neighborhood dogs barking mad and the cats harum scarum.

Every once in a while we would receive a care package from America which we opened with bated breath. The action of the sender was, of course, wonderfully kind but you could always tell the recipients of such welfare. The extremely odd shapes, designs and patterns of the garments now draped on their bony frames were hilarious. Some of us looked like the Bowery Boys and took a horrendous ragging from the other kids. "Got any gum chum ?", would be their derisive cry or "Too high, too low, too late. Meet the boys" was another classic gem of mirth. In spite of all these strange quirks of life we still came up smiling. Whether it was total ignorance or complete bliss I do not know but we were never down trodden but, on the contrary, developed a built in mechanism which protected us from the slings and arrows of our discontent. We developed an elephant like thick skin which could not be penetrated by the barbs and criticisms of our detractors. I learned never to be swayed by the views of less determined people and for this I am blessed. To help warm our homes, during the Arctic winters, a trip down to the local train tracks would usually produce some well needed pieces of coal or coke. These would have fallen from a passing mine wagon and would be gathered to bolster the family fireside heat.

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At night we would take out the fire bricks from the fire side oven and wrap them in flannel clothe and insert them in the bed between the sheets to give a lovely warm sensation. The only disadvantage to this was when, in the middle of the night and on rolling over, you would receive a sharp painful jab as the now cold fire stone jarred your body. Somehow we always found a way to manage and overcome problems. To save water we used put a house brick, sometimes two, in the toilet water tank to cut down on the amount of water needed to refill the tank after flushing. Such simplistic but genuinely brilliant remedies were employed where ever and when ever they were deemed necessary. Rarely did we complain because no-one wanted to listen to a complaint when we were all in the same boat. It was a "Don't tell me your troubles and I wont tell you mine", kind of scenario. In other words it was a no nonsense sort of upbringing where we all learned to solve our own problems and , if possible, help a fellow man along the way if we could. Never were we crest fallen and complainers were severely rebuked.

Back then no-one could afford a family car and so we all traveled by public transport, which in the main meant buses or trains. The only other option was to walk or, in my case, run everywhere. The scarcity of food and the running regimen built me into a tough, scrappy little bugger and in years to come this would mold me into a good athlete and aided me immensely in my sporting endeavors. Candy was almost non existent until the end of the War but then it only became available through the use of ration book coupons which allowed each person a limited amount. The same applied to certain foods, petrol, cigarettes and other non essential goods. This system inadvertently allowed, say, non smokers to trade their cigarette coupons to smokers so that other goods, which they had need for, could be obtained. This practice is probably why I have never smoked in my entire life, a fact which has escaped my recognition until this very moment of enlightenment. I did not see a banana, a cocoanut, a date or a pome-

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granate until the age of nine or ten. My mother once gave me a banana and not knowing I asked her what it was. It looked like a boomerang and so I hurled it away and was saddened by its refusal to return.

The only way my mother could buy things for my sister and I, was through a catalogue which she paid for on the "never never", otherwise known as the weekly installment plan. When relating such stories to the modern generation it is beyond their comprehension to visualize a society without televisions, cell phones, computers and many other modern day inconveniences but it happened. I only hope that if ever times get tough again and we are denied these currently accepted privileges, which we now take for granted, that this modern generation will be as intuitive and have the improvisational skills that we had back in those days of doubt and uncertainty. Their very survival might just depend on it in the final analysis.

To say that our neighborhood had colorful characters would be a gross understatement. The types, colors and variations of them were as numerous as the creatures of the Amazon forest. Different nationalities, religions and personalities abounded and would have put the United Nations to shame. Yet everyone was accepted as a normal part of our community. Never once did we question why anyone was the way they were or chastised them for being different. One family had two daughters, one white and one obviously not. The second one sported an Afro hair style long before they became fashionable and was the love child of a G.I. who had returned to the United States. Another family had two Italian girls named Nina and Lala and were the product of a liaison between their daughter and an Italian P.O.W. who remained in Wales after the war had ended. They very much kept to themselves and did not play with the rest of us urchins. Yet another family had a young girl, obviously born out of wedlock but no-one ever mentioned it. She just grew up with the rest of the gang with no recriminations. Yet another family had taken in

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a young relative whose mother had gone to America with the child's father, another G.I., and to the best of my knowledge lived in the Pittsburgh area and never returned to Pontypool. Oh, did I mention that there was an American army camp just outside of our town?. As the saying went back then "They are overpaid, oversexed and over here." Having nylon stockings to barter with, they ruled the roost much to the chagrin of the local male population.

On another level our neighborhood had its fair share of physically and mentally handicapped people. One family had two adult sons who were badly crippled the one being wheel chaired and the other, although not quite as bad , had badly bent legs and walked in a very labored fashion. He would literally drag himself around without any form of support and we all helped him when he seemed unable to cope. We also had other men who had returned from the War with what we then called "shell shock", which today would be called "battle fatigue". These people would walk about talking loudly to themselves and even arguing , at great length, about some far off incident which only they were privy to and which had angered them. Today they would be in a military hospital but back then they were disgracefully left on their own to be cared for by the community.

However, I do remember two extremely uniting events when the whole neighborhood came together. The first was the wedding of our, now, Queen Elizabeth II to Prince Phillip in 1947 when every family brought their tables out and put them end to end down the length of the street This provided for one long banquet of food the likes of which we had never seen before and we feasted until we almost exploded. This unforgettable occasion provided such joy the likes of which we had never experienced and a schmorgas board of edibles that we had never before tasted. The second event occurred the following year when an arctic winter brought such cold that our streets had around a foot deep of frozen ice on them. Every able bodied man jack, from each house, came out and

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being miners and steel worker, with picks and shovels, they worked together to clear the streets. This was a monumental effort and all ill will was put aside while the job was done and this was celebrated by everyone. This enabled the coal trucks to once again deliver their much needed fuels to warm the families and their houses which had been cold for far too long.

Through thick and thin our neighborhood pulled together and somehow survived with a do or die attitude. The determination of these people rubbed off on me and I learned that it was not the size of the dog in the fight that mattered but the size of the fight in the dog. This proved invaluable in later times of hardship and indecision. Added to all this was an array of various vendors who passed through our neighborhood on a weekly basis. The fruit and vegetable delivery man had a horse drawn cart and on the odd occasion the horse would take a dump in the street. The minute the shite hit the road, four or five of the local women would rush out with buckets and squabble over who's turn it was to take possession of the steamy hot straw filled pile of manure. Apparently the application of this volatile concoction worked wonders for the growth of their rhubarb. Knife sharpeners, rag and bone men, rat catchers, cockle sellers, pie men, milk men, coal men, ash men to remove the coal residue, all vied for our attention. However, the stars of the show were the Shunny Onion man who, it was said, rode their push bikes all the way from France. This, as a child, always amazed me because France, in my mind, was a million Brazilian miles away. Never the less, there they were on our street wearing their black berets and selling their onions right off their push bikes and this was long before the European Common Market was even thought of. Their bikes were ridden over hundreds of miles of broken road, which speaks volumes for the dedication of those intrepid travelers. How amazing was that?

The pop man also came by on his battery propelled float and amongst all of the pop flavors, which he sold, the

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one that amazed me was the Dandelion and Burdock To the best of my knowledge both of these plants are considered to be weeds and so how on earth anyone came up with the idea to blend them together, into a brew that would be acceptable for human consumption, has always been a complete mystery to me. It must have been an acquired taste because to my pallet it was harsh and bitter tasting quite similar to annis. The coal miners of our street seemed to be the group that bought this obnoxious drink and so perhaps it was good for clearing the taste of coal dusts from their mouths. All that I can say is that it would strip the taste buds from the pallete of any normal human being. I was also told that, when attempting any home redecorating, this noxious liquid would have the same amazing affect on house paint. I guess that there is just no accounting for taste.