

The Welsh Drovers

By Teri Brewer

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One day last spring, over steamy mugs of tea and griddle- baked welshcakes, Billy and Margaret Evans shared their memories of some of the last Welsh cattle droves with us . Now in his eighties, Billy can recall driving cattle and sheep to market from his farm, Craig yr Hufen near Senghenydd above the great castle of Caerphilly in south Wales.

Billy tells a story about leading a bull by his nose ring, and how the beast got the better of him by sitting down and refusing to budge. He remembers many of the stars in the generations of Welsh border collies which he has bred and trained to work the herds of sheep his family keeps, he remembers the animals of character, the adventurous old ram which escaped his father's farm, and how he wound up chasing after it from farm to farm, cornering the ram at last in the castle ruins many miles away, how exhausted he was, and how he brought the ram home by train.

Billy shared songs, his poems and many stories with us, as we began to learn about working with cattle and sheep on the Welsh hill farms. Margaret Evans is a farmer's daughter herself, and often helped her own parents drive cattle along once quiet lanes between their farm near Cardiff and the old cattle market near Tredegar over 30 miles away.

The old droving tradition in Wales and elsewhere in the British Isles, captures the imagination on both sides of the Atlantic. The migration of people from these islands to America, and the important role that droving and the songs, poetry and yarns we associate with droving, played in shaping life in the western United States might be interest enough for anyone. But sharing a little of the life on some Welsh farms, and talking over family history, changing land use and talking cattle and sheep made us realize how much we have in common despite the very different land and conditions, different breeds, different histories.

Billy and Margaret's memories are a link in a very ancient chain, connecting today's Welsh hill farmers to their remote ancestors who farmed these same wild mountains back 6,000 years or more. The landscape of Wales is green and lush to the casual eye, but weather and geology conspire to create tough farming conditions with little good quality pasture land in most of the country except Pembrokeshire in the west and the Vale of Glamorgan in the south. This never stopped the Welsh from keeping cattle, along with sheep and pigs, and working with the hardy wild ponies of their rugged mountains. Hard rearing meant that the small Welsh Black Cattle produced in these hills coped well with long droves and there is some evidence that

driving the cattle to markets distant from Wales may have become common practice as much as 2,000 years ago. They would be fattened up in a gratifying way on rich English pasture before being sold in the markets of larger English towns.

The men who undertook caring for cattle and sheep on the long walk into England played an important role in bridging the gap between the different cultures and languages of Britain in changing times. They probably brought together the interests of the Celtic language speaking Welsh with Roman and later Norman (French) settlers and the various groups, Celtic, Saxon and Norse in origin which inhabited England. But the truth is that we don't know very much about droving in those days. Ancient drove roads and field names bear silent testimony to the passage of men and animals but sometimes tell us little more than that they passed.

One of the most dramatic sights seen in any age in Wales must have been these great droves where hundreds, even thousands of animals were moved from pastures to market over great distances. It is no wonder that the adventures and misadventures of drovers has often formed the subject of songs and stories. The drovers of the dark ages we may know little of, but the stories they told, are still preserved in the great tales of the Celtic peoples- like the Welsh local legend "The Lady of Llyn y Fan Fach", the "Mabinogion", a cycle of ancient mythic stories in Welsh, or the "Tain Bo Cualinge", the Irish epic about a great cattle raid. Perhaps it is to this period that we also owe some memorable musical innovations like the "pibkorn", an ancestor of the hornpipe described by the fiddler Iolo Jones as "two horns with the cow removed".

By 1650 the Welsh economy had become dependent on the trade of cattle to England; "for they are the Spanish fleet of Wales which brings in what little gold and silver we have." (According to a letter of the time written by the Bishop of Bangor to Prince Rupert). Drovers were not only responsible to make a success of this vital trade, but also were routinely making other financial arrangements and carried mail, payments and parcels on behalf of many of farmers, businessmen and wayside hosts, but it was a seasonal service, slow as the pace of the cattle, and usually only available outside the winter months.

The drovers of the 17th and 18th century, perhaps like their forbears, provided a safe escort for travellers, and a budget of news, ballads, poems and stories very welcome in the remote uplands they travelled. Sometimes we know they brought trouble to a family that had made them welcome:

**To our house came he again for a bed,
His words were honey, but his thoughts I read,
With a handy hammer I tapped his head-
That was the end of the drover grey.**

Welsh drovers themselves sometimes wrote poetry and sang (most often in Welsh), and some even turned a hand to hymn writing- reflecting their roles as shepherds

and guardians to flocks. Droving was becoming a proud profession, one which offered the freedoms of the road, but which could carry significant responsibility, and some temptations:

**Farewell to Bartholomew's fair
And all its wasteful songs,
From the hag with the dangerous spiteful laugh
To the man with a salt box on a hook
In it may be all sorts of wonderful things,
Wild beasts and cats and gear.
Horribly harmful their goods,
The wandering minstrels never had such harsh voices.**

(From the Welsh, trans. By G.W. Jones)

The visit of a drove brought stories of the world beyond to an inn or farmhouse, but tales of the drovers also play an important part in Welsh local legends.

“Most of these that walk about be Welchmen”

During the Tudor era, when a Welsh family held the English throne, laws were passed which modified earlier vagrancy acts which had sometimes been used against Welsh drovers in England. The new rules said that a drover must be a married householder over 30 years of age, and had to apply local courts for a license. If the license was granted the drover displayed it in the form of a badge. There were restrictions on the selling of cattle, which could from then only change hands in public fairs or marketplaces. This discouraged cattle rustling as well as private sales or the depletion of drove herds before arriving at market and kept a check on the identity and whereabouts of drovers. Small drovers still bought their cattle from farmers on credit, paying the debt on return from the English fairs.

Advice to Drovers (translated from Welsh)
by Vicar Pritchard (1549-1644)

If you are a drover, deal honestly
Pay a fair price for what you have
Keep your word, do not break promises
Better than gold is a code of ethics

Do not attempt to take advantage of the poor,
do not greed for over profit,
do not deal with notorious thieves.
Nothing of theirs is of value.

Beware of buying too much on credit

Do not take people at their word
Buying on credit will cause a drover
To leave the country and flee to Ireland.

Beware of cheating your bargainer,
God will judge you for deceiving.
Even if you flee beyond Ireland,
God will avenge a dealer's cheating.

Do not shield the ones who cheat,
All they collect say the scriptures,
Will not benefit them
But will vanish as through a sieve.

Beware of drinking while you're droving,
Wine will reduce the drover to a beggar,
If the drover is a drunkard,
All his stock will buy his beer.

Deal honestly, save your soul,
Do not steal the cattle of the simple
Even if you disappear to the "Low Countries"
God is sworn to avenge you in the end.

One of the best known drove routes ran from Haverfordwest, a prosperous market town in west Wales through the hills and valleys of south Wales and on to Smithfield Market in London. Most droves on this route involved 400- 1000 cattle, tended by a drover and his assistant accompanied by two unlicensed helpers for 400 cattle, or more as animals increased. The drovers might be on horseback or on donkeys but helpers would walk. Droving sometimes ran in a family, and at least three generations of the Johnathan family certainly knew this route well. The trip proceeded, sometimes picking up additional herds along the way as well as a following of travellers wanting company and safety in numbers on the long trip to London. Drove routes are typically 15 - 30 feet wide, and often enclosed by hawthorne hedges which may date back to pre-Roman times in some places.

The Haverfordwest cattle market would be held on a Thursday, when local farmers would walk their herds in for the market. The drovers would buy the cattle, but would sometimes act as agents for farmers instead. All cattle had to be shod for the long trek, and this was done overnight if possible, but sometimes took longer. Keeping the cattle shod on the journey was a constant problem, and encouraged the development of small wayside shoeing stations by inns at intervals of 25-30 miles along the drove routes. Cattle and sheep could be left in adjacent fields for a small sum and the name "ha'penny field" or "penny field" today is a remnant of the old system.

The trip proceeded at a modest rate of about two miles per hour maximum, twenty miles a day might be possible from spring through to early fall. This meant the return trip from London would take a minimum of three weeks from Haverfordwest.

Before arriving in London drovers sometimes stopped at Barnet to trade in horses and a few cattle, but the great London destination was Smithfield Market. In 1625 as many as 60,000 cattle a year left Wales for London, by 1851 277,000 Welsh cattle made the trip as well as a million sheep. Smithfield Market was held on a Monday. Cattle were delivered, paid for and slaughtered all on the day. In the nineteenth century some would be sent to the east end of London where they would supplement the kosher dairy herds kept in the middle of the city.

It was the coming of the railways starting in 1838 which foretold the end of the great Welsh droves, but this actually happened gradually and did not affect all parts of Wales equally, so the droves continued in some form for more than a century after ways of moving cattle began to change. The majority of cattle and sheep moving to London in 1870 still got there by foot. By the end of the nineteenth century, droving had become primarily a means of getting herds to a railhead, but there were many of these in Wales at the time, and the length of droves was sharply shortened. Railway strikes prolonged the droves until after the First World War, and the outbreak of the Second World War, saw some revival on a smaller scale. But the frequency of Welsh fairs for the sale of animals has actually increased as the demand for meat in the growing English cities grew, because farmers did not have to pay an auctioneer's commission if they sold at a fair in the way they would if cattle were auctioned in the weekly markets.

During the last two centuries, the life of Welsh farmers has been gradually affected by the rapid development of cities and industry, more and more men left farms to work in the Welsh mines and quarries, in the budding iron industry of south Wales. Farmers benefited from the increased demand for meat and poultry by city dwellers, the need for hardy ponies to work in the mines but farms were sometimes lost to mining and quarrying, city expansion and the construction of reservoirs to serve growing populations. In south Wales farm families often supplemented income by increasing participation in new occupations. Chores which had once been done with the help of neighbors- such as shearing of sheep, and harvesting of silage crops now sometimes suffered from a shortage of hands to help. The verses, stories and songs of the drover and farmer sometimes were re-set to reflect new circumstances. Billy Evans sang us this song about a mining man's misadventures on a local market day:

A Pontypridd Collier in Search of His Wife

In Pontypridd I dwell, It's the Truth I have to tell,
It was Wednesday. As you know it's Market Day.
I with my old Jam Tart to the Market made a start,
But by Jove, she seemed to have bolted clean away.

In the New Inn I did pop, Just to have a little drop,
As I happened to be feeling rather dry.
But when I looked around, she was nowhere to be found,
It looks like my Old Dutch has done a Guy.

I've hunted everywhere, In the Rhondda I declare,
Treherbert, Tonypandy, Ystrad, Porth,
Dinas, Hafod, Llwnypia, Maerdy, Ferndale, Ynishir,
But I've had to look along up further North.

I set out O'er hill and dale, I got to Merthyr Vale,
Aberfan, Mount Pleasant, and Troedyrhiw.
Through Cilfynydd and Coedpenmaen though my heart was filled with
pain
I was mad I hardly knew what I should do.
I made a sudden dash across the hill to Mountain Ash,
Abercynon, Penrhiwceiber, Ynsybwll.
To Nelson I did pop, at Quaker's Yard I made a stop,
Through Treharris and Bedlinog I did pull.

I've looked round everywhere, Merthyr, Dowlais, Aberdare,
Rhymney, Pontlottyn, Tredegar, Old and New,
Brynmaur and Ebbw Vale, to Beaufort I did sail,
Til I landed safely down in Rhiwddyblew.

I thought I might succeed, If I went to Aberbeeg,
Past Waenlwyd and the Cwm I had to go.
All round Llanhilleth hills, I swallowed bitter pills,
and the youngsters started ringing poor old Joe.
I doubled on my tracks, went by Abertillery back,
Nantyglo and Blaina I did search.
Up the Garn I had a run, it was anything but fun
but now I know that I'm left in the Lurch.

All the Western Valley's down, to Abercarn and Risca Town,
Blackwood, Cowbridge, Crumlin too as well.
Walked five miles to Pontypool, hunted Cwmbran like a fool,
How I managed to reach Newport, I can't tell.

Next to Cardiff I did steer, for I thought I'd persevere,
To Swansea, down to Barry, Cowbridge Road.
Called at Aberavon and Neath, told them there of all my grief,
Then I started back to find my own abode,
Cwmmer, Caerau and Maesteg, on the 'Garw made a raid,
Tondy, Ogmore, Gilfach Goch, Bridgend.
In Llantrisant's ancient town, I parted with my last Crown,
But Butty there turned out to be a friend.

He gave me a piece of chalk so that I didn't have to walk,
Back to Pontypridd, that town of many charms,
But judge of my surprise, It dazzled both my eyes,
I found her boozing in the "Butcher's Arms".

Even though the droving of cattle and sheep is mostly finished now, and even ponies are moved to market or fair by trucks these days, the custom of the weekly markets and fairs in season is still kept, and these still provide one of the most important times for Welsh farmers to get together, exchange news and gossip, compare practices and check prices, pick out new rams, supplement a herd, or find a promising young dog to work their sheep. Some of the local fairs also include great demonstrations of the ancient skills of shepherding and droving and working with dogs. The Welsh farmers still move cattle and sheep up and down the hills in an ancient seasonal rotation, making use of the upland "common land" in the milder summer, keeping animals in lower pastures enclosed by the sheltering drystone walls which are such a common sight in the Welsh hills.

And the ancient tracks and drover's roads? Well farmers still use short stretches to drive sheep and cattle between pastures. Many are protected by the national parks of Wales, and are used by hikers and "ponytrekkers" (organised trail riders). While some have become busy modern roads, many remain unpaved, and with their broad grassy edges, ancient shoeing stations, inns, wayside pastures and resting places they still offer a sudden glimpse of Welsh history to both visitors and residents. The stories and songs of the drovers roads live on with us- in both Wales and the American West.

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