MY MEMOIRS
by
TOM SHAW
(SYDNEY JOHN THOMAS SHAW)

As a consequence, of the interest, shown by my family, in my cultural and ancestral uphringing, I submit hereby the story of my life and fortunes, not in the monetary sense, but one that was, basically of sincerity and understanding of others in this life of perplexity, poverty, poorness and passion.

I was born on the 19th February 1915 in Coleford, Gloucestershire, England. My mother's maiden name was Winifred Brown, begot to John Brown and Louisa Brown. My father was John William Shaw, a coal-miner, but no other details of him are available- except that he had been an orphan, along with a brother called Victor, and had been a sailor in the royal navy since a boy.

My parents named me Sydney John Thomas Shaw, commonly known as "Tom Shaw". My place of birth was 21 Newland Street, Coleford-my grandmother and grandfathers' home and which place I have many happy memories of wandering around their spacious garden and helping Grandma to feed a half dozen or so pigs, that Grandad had reared for food and curing bacon, to feed the family. Fowls roaming their property were also there for the additional supply of eggs and meat.

My grandparents were blessed with 10 children - five boys and five girls. My mother being the third daughter. To feed and clothe a family of this size needed a lot of patience, thought and loving, plus hard-work.

Before they were married, Grandmother aged about 15, drove a pit pony. She was one of 14 children. Her maiden name being "Ireland". The eldest daughter of Mr. and Mrs. G. Ireland of Clearwell, near Coleford. Grandad, John Brown, was the son of Mr. and Mrs. G. Brown of Bream, who had six children. John started work aged eleven years in "Sydney Mine Park", later on to "Cannop Pit" and in all, worked underground digging coal for a pittance for over sixty-three years. Monday to Saturday inclusive. In all that time he was off work sick for one week and drank only half the bottle of medicine. There was no transport in those "good-old-days" and miner walked to work (commonly known as shank's pony), in all weathers, rain, snow, gales, sleet and mud. Leaving home in the dark and back in the dark. No lighting of streets except gas light in Coleford town.

My Dad was one of these miners, working in "Cannop Mine" from about 1912 and I well remember him coming home, blackened face and body. The coal dust ingrained into sweat. No hot or cold showers in those days but every house had a tin bath, boiling water in the kettles and pots hanging over the open fireplace, in waiting for the miners arrival. The hot water made the temperature bearable. I remember Dad getting into the bath, knees up, because the tin bath was small and Mum would wash his back with a flannel. Clean and dried, we would then have our cooked dinner and soon off to bed. Up early again, the next day, same as the day before. Mum had made up sandwiches, mainly bread, margarine or dripping with cheese and onion or home-made jam, being the stable diet for hard working men.

My big treat was going to visit my grandparents on Sunday afternoon to get a sandwich with real butter on it. If it was summer time, we all went for a walk, as did most people and progress was slow because everyone stopped to talk. Most people still retained their "Forest of Dean" speech, such as "How bist thee George?" and "I bist alright, how bist thee?" Their speech was an identity of it's own. People referred to the "Varest" rather than the "Forest".

On these specific walks we would go to the "woods" in Spring. A fantastic sight of bluebells and daffodils, which made a big impression on me from the age of about four to nine years. Adjacent fields were a mass of plants people called "cowslips", a beautiful picture of yellow plus primroses by the millions.

The "Great War" began before my birth and my uncles, Sid Brown and Frank Perkins, volunteered and joined. However, Frank was invalided home to Coleford about 1917 suffering the ill effects of "Mustard Gas" which was inflicted on the British soldiers by the Germans. Towards 1922-23 he was bed-ridden, his lungs burnt out. Mum frequently took me to visit him, he being my hero. Our coming emigration to New Zealand in 1924 prompted Frank to say to me, in his Forest of Dean jargon, "Thick there nose of thine will sink the ship" in his jocular way of making conversation, as he slowly drifted out of this world.

I well recollect the soldiers returning from France to Coleford in 1919, and we, my mother, aunties and Grandma waiting with hundreds of others on the Coleford Market Square (coblestones) for the troops. Then we heard the local band, leading the troops as people waving Union Jack flags cheered. Grandma said "There is our Sid!". He later joined us for a happy reunion but which was limited because he had to go and get a bath and be de-loused. After all the years in mud, filth, wet snow and stench of death, all soldiers were lousy and suffering from malnutrition.

Uncle Sid and Aunt Nell emigrated to NewZealand in 1923 (as did us, the Shaws in 1924). In 1920, aged five, I started school as we then lived in Staunton Road, it was about a half mile walk up John Street. I settled in pretty quickly with other children. During the winter months, the under privileged children, which included myself, were taken to the "Tavern" for lunch, which was a slice of dry bread and hot soup. Most children wore wooden clogs in the snow going to school. Dad made us children a toboggan which I had much pleasure using.

At the bottom of John Street was a confectionery shop and once a week Mum gave us a penny each to buy something. My choice being a bag of sherbet with a liquorice straw to suck it up.

ON the way to our grandparents in Lord's Hill we went via a lane where a man made paper windmills, which we could obtain for a jam jar. Mum and Dad had a family of four chidren, myself, Joan, Victor and Pearl. An epidemic of diptheria struck Coleford about 1922 and Joan died with it. The rest of us had a mild attack only.

Poverty was pretty rife in Gloucester after the war. Into the 1920's the miners, struggling on a pittance to provide food and clothing for their families, the plea for better conditions and more money fell on deaf ears. The mines of course were owned

by the gentry and wealthy from Gloucestershire into Wales. One of the owners being Stanley Baldwin, Prime Minister. The Prince of Wales (later King Edward V11) was on a conducted tour of Wales and he requested that he be taken off the beaten track to see the Welsh miners homes and he was disgusted when he saw their living conditions. He was very outspoken to the ire of Baldwin and his cohorts. As a result, of the "Royal Family" members in residence in Gloucestershire, the area is now named the "Royal Forest of Dean".

The New Zealand Government offered cheap fares to New Zealand for miners and their families to emigrate to work in New Zealand. The conditions were that they be nominated by a responsible person. Uncle Bill Brown who was living and working in the Huntly mining area was happy to do this, just as he had so done for Uncle Sid in 1923. We obtained a booking for New Zealand in March 1924 on the "SS Ruapehu", I was then nine years old and amid tears and more tears from my grandparents and relations we departed Coleford by train to Liverpool, staying one night in a hotel. The next morning we travelled by a horse and buggy to the docks. Luggage booked in and full of excitement, up the gangway to our cabin.

Tom Shaw passed away aged 91 on the 27th January 2006 at Waipu, Northland, New Zealand

The above is an excerpt of Tom Shaw's memoirs written by him in 1998 at the age of 82 and was sent us by Tom's daughter Valerie Compton (Shaw)