**Interview with Ellis Jones by Hywel Roberts**

**November 1, 2021**

**Hywel:** Today we’re interviewing Ellis Jones from St. Peter, in the western part of Minnesota. Ellis, thank you so much for doing this with us because we’re really interested in your reflections of growing up in south central Minnesota and your affiliations with Wales during your years. The first question is where in Wales did your family immigrate from and do you know why?

**Ellis Jones:** My father's side came from Blaenau Ffestiniog and I think my mother’s side came from the island, from Anglesey, but I don’t know that for sure, yeah; and why they came, I don't know, because my great-great-grandfather’s mother was a chambermaid and became pregnant but never got married. So, her name was Mary Frances and her son was John Jones. Then he got married and had several children, and three of them immigrated to Philadelphia, but I don't know why, sometime in the late 1800s.

**Hywel:** The next question is where did they immigrate to initially?

**EJ:** Initially my understanding is that they immigrated to Philadelphia and then later moved to Wisconsin and later to Cambria, Minnesota.

**Hywel:** Howfar back can you go as far as written evidence of where they came to?

**EJ:** The records that I have been able to be in touch with went back to somewhere in the middle 1800s to Blaenau Ffestiniog, but I don't know on my mother's side.

**Hywel**: I think that answers very well. That is a slate mining town and I'm sure they were affiliated with that in some way or other.

**EJ**: yeah, yeah.

**Hywel:** What places in Wales are special to you, Ellis?

**EJ**: Well, in 1974 my family and I were there, and Aberystwyth was a place that I was really wanting to go to and perhaps visit the National Library Wales. But we didn't have enough time, and if I were to go back, I would go back to Aberystwyth and to the National Library because it holds a lot of interest for me, and I've never seen it and I would just love to see it.

**Hywel:** Can we go back to you beginning when you first went to school – when and what did you do when you went to the first school around St. Peter?

**EJ:** I was born in New Ulm, Minnesota – in the hospital – and then I grew up in the village, or the Township of Cambria, which is just west of Mankato where I attended grade school through seventh year. 7th grade and 8th grade were together, so I went to New Ulm High School. I started when I was twelve and I graduated when I was 16 and about four feet six –

kind of a tiny person! Then I went to Gustavus Adolphus college for my bachelor’s degree, and when I graduated, I was drafted into the army, and the Korean War for two years, and then I went to the University of Minnesota for a year to get my master’s degree, and then I taught at Plainview High School as THE business teacher for three years, and then was hired to teach at Gustavus Adolphus. I taught there for 40 years through 1998 and then I retired. I've been retired now for over 20 years. Is that enough of a summary?

**Hywel:** One of the things I'd like to ask you is about the Welsh language and who's speaking it? Was anybody speaking it while you were growing up?

**EJ**: This is so interesting because both my dad and my mother only spoke Welsh in their childhood and in their family, until they went to school and then they learned English. When they were married, they both understood and spoke Welsh, but never to each other at the house. So, my brother and I never learned any Welsh words other than quick expressions and so on. But I discovered a few years ago that we did develop a Welsh accent from being around all of the people in the Lake Crystal area from North Wales. So, as I was growing up, we spoke with the same accents and so on as everybody else in the community – which was almost 100% Welsh. In 1974, I had an incident when we were traveling in Europe, and in Wales my wife decided to go to a shop with our hostess in North Wales, and I went along just to see what was going on. And as we were wandering, I listened to the murmur of people and discovered that they had an accent like in Crystal. Well, it really was that Lake Crystal people had the accent of North Wales; and that's where I discovered… . One of the interesting things is once in a while my mother would see somebody and she would poke me in the side and say, “He's a Hwntw!” I had no idea what that was until later I found out that that's a derogatory term for people from South Wales by my North Walian people—ha ha – which I thought was kind of interesting!

*[Ed note:* *It is also said that '****hwntw****' comes from "tu hwnt", which translates from Welsh to English as "beyond" or "over there". ... He said: "Hwntw is a term used for people from south Wales usually by people from north Wales. "It's the counterpart to 'gog' for people from north Wales, deriving from 'gogledd' meaning 'north'*.]

Anyway, at one point I went to the Gymanfa Ganu in Ottawa, ON Canada, and there were a number of Welsh people there, and I was chatting with one older gentleman, and in the conversation, he paused and said, “Where in North Wales are you from?” and I laughed and I said, “I'm from southern Minnesota!” But I had slipped into my Lake Crystal accent which was North Walian so… . And then I've taken a couple Welsh courses, but they didn’t stick to the point where I could converse very much in Welsh. So that's a brief summary.

**Hywel: Now when you were growing up, did people have nicknames for people?**

EJ: Yes, indeed. My nickname was junior because my dad's name was Ellis Pritchard Jones and I was Ellis John Jones, and so I, instead of “Ellis J,” I was “Junior.” Other people had different nicknames you know. There was Tom Jones Colorado – because somewhere in his past he had made a trip to Colorado and then come back to Lake Crystal. Then there was Johnny Jump Up and I have no idea where the “jump up” came up, but I know it wasn't from Wales! Many people had the first name and their middle initial, like Tommy C Jones, and in my case it’s Ellis J – this is what I'm known by now and stuff. It’s kind of a unique thing; I don't know of any other ethnic group that uses the middle initial like we do.

**Hywel**: But you do have a new name today though – Jones the Knitter, is it?

**EJ:** That's on the outside of the door of my apartment because when I was about eight years old my mother taught me to knit. I thought that was kind of cool, since I couldn't play heavy sports because I was too tiny, and so I knitted. As I got toward high school I decided to do a glove, but I had the wrong size needle and the wrong size yarn and it ended up being from the tip of my finger to the elbow--it was a bit too big so I didn't make a second one. But now since I retired I've gone back to my knitting and I now kind of specialize in lap robes and each one contains about 35,000 stitches and I'm now on number 132 and they're in different colors and of course there's a Welsh influence because… in fact, I can go and get one and show it to you if it'll show on the TV. This has the American flag – red white and blue, and then it may also have the pattern of the Canadian flag, which is red, white, and red, and then the Welsh flag is red, white, and green and then the music is represented by the black and white stitches. So I entered it at the National Gymanfa Ganu this year in Utica and I got third place—out of three, heh – and then I got a modest cash award, so… .

**Janice**: Ellis, you donated this one to a silent auction [showing it on the Zoom screen] and we won it, Don and I.

**EJ:** Oh, did you --I see you're still using it!

**Hywel:** Tell us about the gatherings that used to happen when you were younger… as far as getting together, not particularly in church but maybe they got together and did a noson lawen or… .

**EJ:** Well, we had a tradition in the Cambria community where I grew up at what we called the June Meeting, which was like an Eisteddfod, and there were recitations and singing and poetry or essay writing, and I always used to participate in those and that's where my sensitivity to being Welsh was sort of sharpened. When I was 16 my voice had not changed, and so I participated in the soprano solo competition. There was only one other candidate, and she used a book to sing three verses of *Jesus Lover of My Soul*, while I had memorized it. The judicator was to judge between the two of us who was to get first place, and I will never forget: she stood up and didn't say a word when it came time to announce the results. She kinda looked around and she made some comment about how difficult it was, and she said she decided to award first place to the person who had it memorized, which was me—and, heh heh, my competition was the leading soprano of the Lake Crystal High School! And I don't think she ever forgave me, you know. But that was the last time I competed because that was in June and in August my voice changed and I couldn't carry a tune in a bucket for several weeks, you know. But that established in my mind the vocabulary of the Welsh customs, and that kind of carried over. One of the things I did when I taught at Gustavus – on March 1st there's a daily chapel service at 10 o'clock to 10:20 – and on March 1st of that one year the organist played two Welsh hymns; and afterwards I was effusive in telling the Chaplain what a good choice of hymns that was for the Chapel that day. And he said, “Well Ellis, next year why don't you give the sermon?” I said, Oh no, and he said, “Well, let's have a Gymanfa Ganu” – and he pronounced it correctly because I had been a nuisance in telling people how to pronounce it correctly. So then we had it – the first Gymanfa Ganu on Saint David's Day. And it was awful, because they didn't know anything about sitting in parts and singing Welsh hymns and all this sort of thing. But over time we gradually improved it to the point where we had a 200-voice college combined choir in the front, and we’d have 4 or 5 hundred people coming from Lake Crystal and Mankato and the Twin Cities and Saint Cloud and Winona and all over the place, and I think it became the largest Gymanfa Ganu around St David’s Day in the country, because no other one had that many. Even today when I meet former students, one of the things they remember is the excitement of singing on Saint David's Day, and they looked forward to them. And I had some faculty members comment to me that they never went to Chapel except on St David’s Day because nobody else could hear them because it was so loud! And it was, it was really lots of fun. One time I was buying a ticket at the ticket counter and there was a seating area behind me and as I bought my ticket, I heard this voice behind me say (Hollalluog, Hollalluog) –which is from *Guide Me oh Thou Great Jehovah*. And I turned around and here it was a former student who had remembered that because I taught the whole congregation how to pronounce the Welsh words for the first verse, and then the choir sang it as a first verse and then we all sang the three verses in English and then we had three repeats, you know. And the kids just really went into this as college kids do, you know. And we had a brass octet that accompanied it so that the place shook because it was such glorious music! That's one of the things I remember a lot.

**Hywel:** That's wonderful! So, what's important for you at least as far as being from a Welsh heritage? What does it mean to you?

**EJ:** Well, in 2004 I was presented the heritage medallion which is given – and I think Mary Mergenthal has one, too – and in my response to it I emphasized the importance of maintaining our heritage, and not only us but other people who are associated with the Welsh, you know. The point was that we need to maintain these traditions, otherwise it becomes a part of the dustbin of history. I gave this talk in 2004 and just within the last year it was reprinted in *The Ninnau* and so it's still around. And that's an important thing, I think, to maintain these traditions we have – to not only our own people but also others, so that by association people will honor our traditions, because they're good. Then a few years ago I told the board of the Minnesota Gymanfa Ganu that in my view the traditions of the Welsh in this non-Welsh city will continue on the basis of the music – not the language here – because nobody speaks Welsh in this area. But they do sing, you know, and so that's why I've said that we should try to continue the tradition. I have met many people and when they find out I'm Welsh, they'll often mention music is one of the things that they know about the traditions.

**Hywel:** Great! Have you taken any roles in the Society or in other Welsh organization's or received any honors other than what you just mentioned?

**EJ:** Well, I get to be kind of vocal one once in a while, and with the St. David’s Society, they invited me to be on the board. This is a number of years ago and I'll never forget that meeting because there was a lot of laments about the fact that the attendance at the St David's banquet had fallen so greatly. And then they were discussing the program for the next year and – finally I couldn't resist – I said, “Well, instead of inviting some non-Welsh people, why don't you just plan on Welsh music and to publicize it?” Oh, what a good idea! So, then it was done, and the attendance doubled in the next time as the Society got busy and publicized it, and returned the focus to be on Welsh, you know, and St David Society. So, when the Minnesota Gymanfa attendance had dropped to really low figures, and they were concerned about that, the minister in my church said, “Well why don't you have the Gymanfa come over and sing it at First Lutheran Church?” Well, I was president, I think, and so then I put out all kinds of publicity, and the attendance doubled. And of course, some of the conservative people were a little bit uneasy about singing in a Lutheran Church, you know, because that's not a part of the Welsh tradition. But they survived and there was nothing from on heaven that disturbed them or anything. So, we got through it, and we've gone on since then. But I feel really strongly that in this day and age one of the keys to success of organizations is publicity. We are bombarded with everything, and we just need to get the word out and tell people and *constantly* tell them – remind them you know. I think working with the ministers of churches and choirs – if there's a church choir you know, because one of our strengths in the United States is the music! So many people have commented to me, where they've gone for the first time they say, “That was really wonderful; I just love that.” The other day I talked to a lady who's a recent widow, and she commented that she and her husband were from Saint Peter and had always made sure they made it the last Sunday in September to the Minnesota Gymanfa Ganu because they enjoyed it so much. Neither one of them are singers, you know, but they just loved it.

**Hywel**: I want to go back to something you said earlier, Ellis, that you’ve never made it to the National Library of Wales in Aberystwyth, which is one of my favorite buildings in the whole of Wales, and I hope you get there soon. But what other things are you researching or reading about Wales or what makes you excited about Wales and what further studies are you doing these days?

**EJ:** Well, I like to purchase books written by Welsh authors and read them carefully and enjoy that. In 1974 I must share with you an experience I had. We flew from the United States to Stockholm and then flew from Stockholm to Oslo because my wife is Swedish and Norwegian and then we were given a ride from Oslo up to Bergen and then from Bergen we would cross the North Sea and to Newcastle and rented a car and drove on the wrong side of the road, you know. As we were driving across from Newcastle toward Wales we came to the border, and – I've not shared this with too many people – but I saw this sign approaching: Welcome to Wales. I had a sensation of coming home, and I've never been there before; but it was sort of like I felt like a bird, you know, that there was something in me indicating this is where my home was, you know. I've never forgotten that. I felt so comfortable in talking with the people of Wales and being able to see eye to eye with all the guys, you know! Heh Heh! I had a sensation that I had to stoop down a little bit, because in the United States I'm always talking up to the guys because I'm only 5 foot six, you know!

**Hywel**: There's a book that just came out – that just arrived at our house last week actually – and it's about *The Welsh in Liverpool*, the Liverpool Welsh. It was in Welsh, it just got published in English, and it looks like an absolutely thrilling book. I was reading it last night a little bit and it was talking about if it wasn't for Liverpool, Patagonia probably would never have happened. Because that's where they all left from, and where all the presentations were given. But that's going to be a really good book for people to read. Yeah, any other books about Wales that you can tell us about maybe?

**EJ:** Well, John Dingly has written a couple books and I read one of his; and he's from our St. David Society. Then I have a stack of books on my dining room table which includes some of the Welsh books, and it would take me awhile to dig down through them, but I read them all. And *The Prince and the Pauper* I just finished recently. Then at the National Gymanfa Ganu there's often an authors table, and I enjoy stopping at the table and seeing what new books they’re having, and sometimes I've either purchased them or taken down the information and sent for it later, you know. And if it's got a Welsh connection, I like to see what it is, you know.

**Hywel**: As far as our Society is concerned – because you're a business guy, you know business – how do you think the Society should be proceeding as far as being successful, in making sure we stay above water.

**EJ:** Well, I'm glad you asked me the question. First of all, I would strongly suggest that everybody take a subscription to *Ninnau*, because in my view each issue of them is like a Welsh seminar. The topics are all over the place and it takes me a week or 10 days to read through it, because I read each article, and there's such a wide variety that over time you get a picture of Wales and what's going on with Welsh history and Welsh places and so on. I don't think it's publicized enough because it's such a resource for people that can't get to meetings, you know. In fact, I have plans to write a letter to the to the editor about the importance of that. The idea of it being a seminar hit me about a couple months ago and I thought that that describes just what it is, you know. Instead of going to a conference and going to all the different topics that are being presented, here in one issue you have topics that cover everything from sports to politics to local events that are going on, and there's a calendar showing where in the United States are events going on. Intra-organizational communication is a key to success in terms of the viability and continuation of an organization. I feel so strongly on that, because the organization that cuts down or cuts back in the intra organizational communication is headed for nowhere. And [in *Ninnau*] there's even a column that if somebody wants to study Welsh, well, there's a column in there that tells what that's like. When I talk to people about Welsh, one of the first things they say is, “Oh that's the language with no vowels!” Well, that's true, but there IS a vowel sound you know! And here you have a column every quarter about that; if you want to really study Welsh, you can start there, you know. Anyway, that's my soapbox.

**Hywel:** There’s even a crossword you can do in Welsh. Yes, it's a wonderful publication and Megan does so well with it. [Ed. Note: *Ninnau* also has a Facebook Page that is current and interactive.] So, you seem to be extremely fit and healthy in your mind and body, Ellis. Can you give us a clue, or what do you see contributing to longevity?

**EJ:** Well, I try to walk everyday –fifteen to 25 minutes every day – and at one point I had kept that up for 380 days and then, I didn’t feel well, so I broke the string at 382, I think it was. But I walk everyday—outside, inside, on holidays and birthdays, and so on. I figured, “Well, I can sit around for 20 minutes, but I could do that time walking, you know.” I'm trying to lose a little weight, because on the body mass index I was in the “overweight” and now I'm down into the middle of the “average weight,” so I'm feeling better. Otherwise, I guess it's just the genes. I'm feeling fine and I'm busy all the time. One of the things I do that keeps me busy every day is knitting, because I can sit down and do that easily, and watch TV. I can watch a baseball game and get in a few stitches and watch the pitcher pitch, and then if he swings and strikes, slide in a few more stitches, and then the next pitch if it's a ball, I do a few more stitches, and pretty soon I have a whole square done. It takes 48 squares to do one of the lap robes, and each is a five-inch square; there are twenty stitches in a row, and there are 37 rows, so there are 740 stitches in each square and then with 48, that puts it up to about 35,000 stitches for each completed lap robe, and as I mentioned before, I'm on #132 right now! And I enjoy getting the little thank you notes that I often get. So, I try to be positive and if I get upset about something there's nobody around to see me throw anything or anything. Heh heh! I used to play racquetball quite regularly but that's a young man's game now, so since I'm going on 90, I don't run and play stranger sports, you know.

**Hywel**: Oh, that’s fine. There’s one question I want to ask you before we leave: what do you eat for breakfast?

**EJ**: What do I eat for breakfast? Well, not a lot. You know, maybe I’ll have a fried egg and toast and a piece of sausage, or I'll have a small dish of cereal. They say the breakfast should be your big meal and I've learned that it's better for me if I keep a small breakfast and keep the three meals kind of balanced rather than a decreasing amount. I can tell when I lost a little bit [of weight] but I figured out it was in July of a year ago that I hit my peak, and I've been losing a little less than 3 ounces every day, so it counts up and I'm close to where I want to be. Heh heh!

**Hywel**: Well, wonderful. So, listen you're a very inspiring man, so thank you. And thank you for everything you've done for the society, and for all the teaching you've done in your life and that you keep on continuing doing because you're a beam of light to all of us.

**EJ**: Thank you so much, well thank you. Life is good.

**Janice:** Mind if I ask a question on behalf of Don, my husband? OK, he always loves to ask this question to people: what did you do for fun when you were a kid?

**EJ**: Well, I was in 4H and I wasn't real serious about it. But I liked to read. I know my mother would be complaining because I was always reading something, you know, and I found that a way to whet my curiosity, and I enjoyed that. But I was so small that I couldn't participate in a lot of sports until I discovered when I was teaching at the college that I did have some skill in playing racquetball because I was short and I had quick reflexes. One time I was playing a student and he finally quit. He said, “My back hurts from bending over.” Because I was always playing the ball low, you know, he had to bend over – he's a tall guy and stuff. One time I played a student and in the middle of the second game he said, “Oh, I've got an appointment to make.” I am not sure he had the appointment. But he’d lost the first game by about four points, and I was ahead in the second game, and for the students it was embarrassing because they didn't want to go back to the dorm and say they beat this old guy at racquetball – what's proud about that? – and worse to be beaten by this old guy, you know? So, I just enjoyed it because I couldn't lose and I had a lot of fun with it! Heh heh!