

The Old Man's Creek Welsh Community of Johnson County, Iowa

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According to historian Jon Gjerde, midwestern ethnic communities formed around kinship ties, common language, culture and religion. Affiliation in such communities was voluntary and membership was fluid as families arrived or left. Immigrants often sought the comfort of associating with people of similar backgrounds and beliefs. Being able to occasionally, or constantly, converse in one's native language served to ease the pangs of homesickness and to reaffirm the immigrant's cultural identity. The church often symbolized the community members' commitment to their own religion and language, both integral parts of the ethnic culture.¹

The Welsh community at Old Man's Creek fits Gjerde's definition of an ethnic community. While the Iowa Welsh did not settle in a geographically isolated enclave, as the Norwegians and Germans tended to do, the Old Man's Creek settlers managed to form a community based on their shared language, religion, customs, past association, and even kinship ties. Like all immigrants, the Welsh faced the daunting task of carving out new lives for themselves in a new place. They naturally sought out familiar faces, familiar patterns of social intercourse, and above all familiar religion. For all Welsh knew that God was best worshiped in the musical tones and the fervent expression possible only in the ancient tongue of their native *Cymru*.

To write a history of a Welsh community, then, it is also necessary to write a history of the local Welsh church. Just as religion was woven into the lives of the Welsh, so too is the Welsh Congregational Church woven into the history of the Welsh community at Old Man's Creek. The church obviously could not have existed without the community, but neither could the community have developed without the church.

The Welsh claim no unique chapter in the history of American immigration. The earliest Welsh immigrants left their homeland seeking religious freedom, which places them in good company with the better-known Puritans, Separatists and Quakers of early American history. Later Welsh immigrants sought financial opportunities, another time-honored reason for moving to the New World. As America's eastern seaboard attracted more and more people, the cities and towns spilled their excess population westward. Welsh settlers neither blazed the way nor lagged behind the swiftly moving frontier. Across America, new communities took root in virgin territories. Like the Germans, the Norwegians, or the

¹ Jon Gjerde, Minds of the West: Ethnocultural Evolution in the Rural Middle West, 1830 - 1917, (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 103-110.

Dutch, the Welsh often settled near their own. The settlers found comfort and strength in worshipping together and conversing in their native tongue. The Welsh settlement at Old Man's Creek in Iowa was a result of this common, but important, pattern of immigration, migration and settlement in America.

The first great wave of Welsh immigration occurred as a result of William Penn's efforts on behalf of his Quaker brethren. When Penn obtained the king's grant for Pennsylvania as a home for his English Quaker friends and for others suffering religious persecution, a group of Welsh Quakers quickly took advantage of the situation. Some of the more prosperous Welsh Quakers purchased from Penn forty thousand acres for their own use. In 1682 the first group of Welsh Quakers immigrated to Pennsylvania and settled on the fertile lands northwest of Philadelphia. This area became commonly known as the "Welsh Barony" or "Welsh Tract." Welsh Baptists followed in 1683, also settling north of Philadelphia. Welsh Anglicans also made their way across the sea, some as early as 1695. The Welsh were so enthusiastic about Penn's new colony that Welsh settlers outnumbered all other immigrants to Pennsylvania between 1682 and 1700. All told, an estimated two thousand Welsh settled in various parts of Pennsylvania by 1722. Most of the Welsh immigrants during this period were gentry or yeoman farmers, well able to afford the expensive journey to America and to set themselves up in successful enterprises. The Welsh Quakers of Philadelphia, with their successful business ventures and well-appointed dwellings, were noticeably more prosperous than the English Quakers.²

While Welsh settlement continued steadily throughout the eighteenth century, the second significant wave of Welsh immigration did not begin until 1795. The new immigrants, much more numerous than their predecessors, came for a multitude of reasons. Most prominent among the many influences, however, were the economic opportunities available in America.³

To the people of early nineteenth-century Wales, America represented economic hope. A number of factors combined to create unfavorable circumstances for much of the population in Wales, prompting those who were able to gather the necessary resources to emigrate. In his assessment of the reasons prompting emigration in 1793, Independent minister George Lewis of Caernarfon mentioned high rents, burdensome taxes, and heavy tithes to support the Anglican clergy. Landlords also began to change their management methods in this period. Rural Wales saw traditional tenures being replaced by expensive annual leases, grazing lands being enclosed as private property, and wartime inflation depressing the economy in general. In addition to these hardships, Wales suffered the additional burden of poor harvests every year from 1789 to 1802. Having enjoyed relative prosperity after the American Revolution due to improved roads and canals which increased trade in central Wales, the weavers of Llanbrynmair, Montgomeryshire, Wales were hit

² Elwyn T. Ashton, *The Welsh in the United States* (Sussex, Great Britain: Caldra House Limited, 1984), 42-3; Edward George Hartmann, *Americans From Wales* (New York: Octagon Books, 1978), 44, 48.

³ Hartmann, *Americans*, 61.

especially hard by the economic deprivations caused by Britain's wars with France between 1793 and 1807.⁴

Letters home from friends and family who had already immigrated to America also factored into many would-be emigrants' decisions to leave Wales. A letter from Welsh immigrant Lewis Howell, Jr. to the editor of a Welsh periodical expresses the hope extended to those back in the homeland by those who had already made the journey to America:

To a stranger just landed from Europe, the first objects which attract his attention are its people, all so neatly and comfortably clad -- the expression of happiness depicted upon every countenance. The stranger is involuntarily led to inquire where are the working classes, the tattered and half-fed miserable-looking starvelings whom his eye was wont to rest upon whilst crossing the streets of his native land. He enters their neat and cleanly dwellings and beholds their tables loaded not only with the necessities, but also a good deal of the luxuries of life. Here he concludes that America is infinitely superior to the Old Country and heartily wishes all the hard-pressed of his native country to come and take their abode in this land of Canaan.⁵

Other prospective immigrants received their information from prominent boosters, men who advocated immigration to the America. Morgan John Rhees, a prominent Welsh Baptist and political dissident, advocated immigration to America. He promised religious freedom and economic prosperity in the New World, and his opinions were widely heard and widely regarded throughout Wales in the early 1790s. Reverend Benjamin Chidlaw was the first minister of the Welsh settlement at Paddy's Run, Ohio. He returned to Wales in 1835 and 1839 to spread the good news about life in America.

One of the first swells in the new wave of immigrants left Llanbryn-mair in 1795. Ezekiel Hughes gathered about fifty like-minded neighbors and in July started out on foot towards the sea port Carmarthen. George Roberts was a member of the emigrant party and later wrote an account of the journey. In Carmarthen, they engaged William Hugh to take them aboard his small ship to Bristol, where the ship *Maria* awaited the emigrants. However, before the group could set sail a press gang came after the men to force them to work aboard sailing ships. A sympathetic townsman hid the men until the press gang left empty-handed. The Llanbryn-mair men then headed for Bristol by foot, leaving the women and baggage to William Hugh's care, planning to reunite in Bristol. But the wind would not cooperate and after being stuck in Llanstephan for three weeks, the women, too, set out afoot for Bristol. Fortunately, the wind changed so the women caught a ship at Swansea and made Bristol the next day. They arrived only to discover that their men had left aboard the *Maria* the previous day! The *Maria's* captain had assured the men that they would catch the women at sea aboard William Hugh's ship. The ships rendezvoused, but because the women

⁴ H. M. Davies, "'Very Different Springs of Uneasiness': Emigration From Wales to the United States of America During the 1790s," *Welsh History Review* 15 (June 1991): 377-8; Gwyn A. Williams, *The Search for Beulah Land: The Welsh and the Atlantic Revolution* (New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, Inc., 1980), 130-1.

⁵ Alan Conway, ed., *The Welsh in America: Letters from the Immigrants* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1961), 69.

were not aboard, both ships returned to Bristol, where all members of the original party from Llanbryn-mair finally reunited. At last on August 6, 1795 the already weary group left Bristol bound for America. After once again escaping impressment, this time on the high seas, and after surviving a frightful storm, the now exhausted Llanbryn-mair immigrants finally docked in Philadelphia on October 26th.⁶

Once the Maria's passengers debarked in Philadelphia, they found homes on the lands outside the city and set about filling their spiritual needs. They were soon joined by scores of other Welsh immigrants who had made similar trips and the new arrivals formed churches outside Philadelphia proper. Baptist minister Morgan John Rhees, who had immigrated in 1794 to seek religious and political freedom for the Welsh, formed a temporary union of Independents, Baptists and Methodists for the purpose of meeting together to hear the gospel.

Rhees' fondest wish was to establish a haven for the Welsh in America. He eventually founded the Cambrian Land Company and with the help of Benjamin Rush, engineered the purchase of twenty thousand acres of land in west-central Pennsylvania. In 1796, Congregational minister Rhees Lloyd led a small party of Welsh from Philadelphia to the lands Morgan John Rhees had chosen for his Welsh colony. They selected an attractive spot in the tops of the Allegheny Mountains and there settled what would become Ebensburg. Somewhat because of luck and largely because of location, Ebensburg grew to be the center of Welsh immigration in western Pennsylvania.⁷

Ebensburg grew quickly. In January of 1825, Ebensburg organized as the county's first borough, and by April the town was crowded enough that the council found it necessary to pass an ordinance restricting horse speeds to a canter or slower. The council also restricted the free running of small swine (under fifty pounds) and all types of fowl within the borough. By 1830, Ebensburg proper boasted 270 inhabitants, thirty to forty houses, three churches, six taverns, seven stores and a post office.⁸

Central in importance to the early Ebensburg Welsh was their church. The Welsh Independent Church congregation constructed their first meeting house in April 1797 and christened it "Ebenezer Chapel." In 1804, the congregation, now referred to as the First Congregational Church, replaced the original chapel with a new, larger log church. Between 1801 and 1809, nineteen new members were received by letter and twenty-nine by

⁶ Ibid., 17-20.

⁷ "Settlement of Ebensburg By Welsh in Year 1796," The Mountaineer-Herald, Ebensburg, Pa. Newspaper clipping in folder marked "Ebensburg (General History) Pioneer Period pre-1797 - 1859." in possession of Cambria County Historical Society, Ebensburg, Pennsylvania; Hartmann, Americans, 64; A History of the First Congregational Church of Ebensburg, Penna. 1797...1947: One Hundred and Fifty Years of Service (n.p., 1947), p 7-8, 51; Williams, Beulah Land, 136-8, 144-74; J. A. Caldwell, Illustrated Historical, Combination Atlas of Cambria County, Pennsylvania (Philadelphia: Atlas Publishing Co., 1890), 13; "Settlement of Ebensburg By Welsh in Year 1796," The Mountaineer-Herald.

⁸ "Settlement of Ebensburg By Welsh in Year 1796," The Mountaineer-Herald; "Ordinances for the Regulation of the Borough of Ebensburg." 1825, document in folder marked "Ebensburg (General History) Pioneer Period pre-1797 - 1859" in possession of Cambria County Historical Society, Ebensburg, Pennsylvania; excerpts from A Gazetteer of the State of Pennsylvania by Thomas F. Gordon, 1832, p. 151, photocopy of excerpts in folder marked "Ebensburg (General History) Pioneer Period pre-1797 - 1859" in possession of Cambria County Historical Society, Ebensburg, Pennsylvania.

confession, a majority of the confessors being converted as the result of a revival in 1804. The increase in membership would explain the necessity of constructing a new chapel. In 1827 Morris Jones was ordained to the ministry and joined George Roberts as co-pastor.⁹

The church continued to grow, benefitting from another revival in 1826, when membership stood at about two hundred members. In 1832 the congregation erected a new, brick church on Sample Street. Over the next seven years membership declined until in 1839, upon the installation of William D. Williams as the newest pastor, the rolls listed only about 110 adults. However, some future members of the Welsh Church at Old Man's Creek were included in this 1839 accounting: Henry and Margaret Clement, Richard and Elizabeth Tudor, and Hugh Tudor being some of the more recognizable names. Morris Jones also later served as minister of the Welsh church at Old Man's Creek.¹⁰

Beginning in the 1830s, daughter settlements formed from established Welsh-American communities. In Pennsylvania, the Ebensburg Welsh soon began to spread out and establish agricultural settlements at Neath in Bradford County, Green Township in Indiana County, Clifford in Susquehanna County, and Spring Brook in Lackawanna County.¹¹

During the 1840s and 1850s Welsh immigration increased, giving rise to many new settlements. As children of the first agricultural settlers looked for fresh opportunities, they were joined by a flood of new immigrants fleeing economic stringencies in Wales, and all pushed west to take advantage of newly available lands. The new Welsh agricultural migrants' favorite destination was Wisconsin, a newly opened territory with plenty of land suitable for farming.¹²

The push west also led Welsh settlers to Iowa, Illinois, and Minnesota, all territories offering excellent agricultural opportunities. Joshua Jones of Flint Creek, Des Moines County, Iowa fervently sang the praises of his adopted home and encouraged other Welsh to join him in enjoying the bounty of the Midwest instead of suffering in poverty in Wales. In fact, Joshua Jones advocated Iowa over any other place for settlement. "There is plenty of wheatland, easy to farm, in this state which would take all the people of Wales and many more but there are fewer Welsh in the state than in any other free state. There are only three small Welsh settlements in the whole of the state but they are better off than the largest settlements in Wisconsin and the other states." Jones gave advice on the best routes to take in immigrating, quoted land prices, and encouraged the would-be settlers to bring as much cash as possible instead of bundles, since everything needed was available in America and usually for less money. He ended with a spirited wake-up call designed to rouse even the

⁹ First Congregational Church of Ebensburg, 8-9; Karen Templeton and Thomas H. Gibb, comps., First Church: A Bicentennial History of Ebensburg's First United Church of Christ (Ebensburg, Penn.: The Mountaineer-Herald, 1997), 2.

¹⁰ First Congregational Church of Ebensburg, 9-10.

¹¹ Hartmann, Americans, 68-9.

¹² Ibid., 69-71, 107-8.

most cautious: "Oh! you unhappy Welshmen, why do you not emigrate to the New Purchase in Iowa instead of quarreling over the lack of land and poverty in the mountains of Wales?"¹³

A young man named William also wrote enthusiastically of his new home in Iowa in 1856. He began with a statement sure to stir the blood of any agriculturalist: "I am sure that there is no more fertile land in creation than in the state of Iowa." He described to his family in Wales the rich topsoil, the ease of plowing such flat fields, the availability of inexpensive government land, and the ready money to be made. At his parents' suggestion that he return to Wales, William answered in no uncertain terms that "there is no likelihood of my doing that very soon as my adopted country is better than the land of my birth," and concluded with the heartfelt plea "if only you had had the heart to come here twenty years ago you would have seen and proved the excellence of the country and we would have been parents and children together."¹⁴

The first Welsh to move west found the land in a state of administrative flux. Iowa itself bowed to many different governments before it finally achieved statehood in 1846. The future state of Iowa was first claimed by the United States as a part of the District of Louisiana in 1804. Over the next thirty-four years, the federal government transferred administrative jurisdiction of Iowa from territory to territory. When the first noticeable number of white settlers began entering Iowa for permanent settlement in 1832, they were doing so illegally, since the Black Hawk purchase of 1832 was not yet open to general settlement; however, the eager pioneers did not wait on government technicalities. Settlement proceeded rapidly, and by the time Iowa finally became a state in 1846, its population had far exceeded the required sixty thousand.¹⁵

Iowa pioneers shared many common qualities, regardless of their origins. Most of the early Iowa settlers came from the northeastern United States and the eastern half of the Midwest, particularly Ohio, Indiana, Pennsylvania, and New York. Most of the settlers came as families with children and the majority had some farming experience. Often the families stopped over at other settlements before arriving in Iowa. Most sought an improved life, through acquiring land for the first time or getting better land than they had had before. Among the one hundred thousand pioneers who had settled in Iowa by 1846 were a few Welsh. The first of these arrived in 1839 when a small group of Welsh farmers moved from Ebensburg, Pennsylvania to Johnson County, Iowa and founded the Old Man's Creek Welsh community.¹⁶

The early Welsh who moved to Iowa and settled in Johnson County followed migration patterns similar to those of the general Iowa population. According to Rev. R. D. Thomas, Oliver Thomas was the first Welsh settler on Old Man's Creek in Johnson County. He was born in Montgomeryshire, North Wales in 1798, moved in 1835 to Ebensburg,

¹³ Conway, *America*, 109-10.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 111-12. No last name given.

¹⁵ *History of Johnson County, Iowa. Containing a History of the County and its Townships. Cities and Villages from 1836 to 1882* (Iowa City, Iowa: n.p., 1883), 48, 56; Dorothy Schwieder, *Iowa: The Middle Land* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1996), 26-34.

¹⁶ Schwieder, *Iowa*, 39-44; W. M. McFarland, Secretary of State, *Census of Iowa for the Year 1895* (Des Moines: F. R. Conaway, State Printers, 1896), 258.

Pennsylvania with his wife Jane, also of North Wales, and then proceeded to Sharon Township, Johnson County in about 1839. The Thomases brought with them at least two children. Mary was born in Wales and accompanied her parents to Pennsylvania and Iowa. Edward was born in 1837 during their sojourn in Pennsylvania. Finally, Oliver and Jane produced Harriet in 1845, after they had moved to Iowa. Oliver Thomas was a founding member of the Welsh Church at Old Man's Creek and a prominent member of the Welsh community.¹⁷

Soon, other Welsh pioneers joined the Thomas family at Old Man's Creek, including Edward and Phoebe Williams, Henry Clement, William Evans and Joseph Hughes, and their families, all of whom came from Ebensburg and settled at Old Man's Creek. Joseph Hughes' story illustrates another migration pattern found among the Old Man's Creek Welsh. He was born in North Wales and in 1829 relocated his family to Utica, New York. The next year they moved on to Ebensburg and then Pittsville, Pennsylvania. They remained in Pittsville for fourteen years and then in 1844 moved to Johnson County.¹⁸

In about 1843, Richard Tudor led his clan to Union Township, Johnson County from Ebensburg, where they had settled in 1831 after leaving Penegoes, Montgomeryshire, North Wales. Tudor's clan included his wife, Elizabeth, as well as their two grown sons, Edward and Hugh Tudor. The Tudors grew to prominence in the Welsh community and participated heavily in local affairs.¹⁹

The Welsh experience paralleled the general Iowa patterns of migration and settlement. That experience is reflected in the activities of Welsh settler David T. Davis. In 1844, Davis and his young family left their home in Cambria County, Pennsylvania and headed west. In 1845, they reached Muscatine, Iowa and then traveled by wagon to Johnson County. Davis entered on government land along Old Man's Creek in Sharon Township, but in order to support his family, Davis hired out for wages. He eventually built a log cabin for shelter and then continued to improve his holdings while proving up on his land.²⁰

Davis' cabin would most likely have been a simple, one room structure. The dimensions were no doubt small, the usual cabin being about seven logs high and sixteen by eighteen feet on the ground. Depending on Davis' carpentry skills, the cabin's furnishings would have been few. Davis and his wife would eventually have slept in a bed, but the children might have slept on the floor or in the loft. The family probably lived with a dirt floor for a few years until Davis could put down boards. The bitterly cold Iowa winters certainly seeped in through the crudely chinked cabin walls.²¹

¹⁷ 1860 Federal Census of Iowa, Johnson County, Population Schedule; R. D. Thomas, *Hanes Cymry America: A History of the Welsh in America*, trans. Phillips G. Davies (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1983), 216.

¹⁸ Thomas, Hanes, 216; 1870 Federal Census of Iowa, Johnson County, Population Schedule; *Portrait and Biographical Record of Johnson, Poweshiek and Iowa Counties, Iowa. Containing Biographical Sketches of Prominent and Representative Citizens*, also *Biographies of the Presidents of the United States* (Chicago: Chapman Bros., 1893), 499-500.

¹⁹ Thomas, Hanes, 216; 1860 Census; *Portrait and Biographical Record*, 468-71, 452-3; 1870 Census.

²⁰ *Portrait and Biographical Record*, 452-3.

²¹ Schwieder, *The Middle Land*, 45-6.

The Davis farm, like other pioneer farms, would have been small and labor intensive. Any livestock would have been housed in lean-tos at first. Eventually Davis would build a barn, but the first years were a struggle and a barn would have required too many resources the family did not have. The family, no doubt, kept a garden to grow vegetables, and probably kept poultry. Davis would have grown corn and kept livestock, which would have been allowed to roam free. The Davis family would have had to work hard to make a go of their new life, but with perseverance they managed to succeed.²²

Throughout the 1850s Welsh settlers continued to trickle into the Old Man's Creek settlement, filling in the spaces between earlier immigrants' farmsteads. Some of the immigrants came from Ebensburg, others from Welsh communities in Ohio and others directly from Wales. The 1860s brought even more Welsh to Old Man's Creek, and saw the departure of others. More single men and women appeared, often working and living with an established family. David Williams, for example, is counted as a farm laborer with the William Baxter family in 1870. John L. Jones, on the other hand, owned a farm in Sharon Township and lived with his renters, the David Williams family. David and Sarah Price Jones arrived in Johnson County in 1867, but soon moved on to Montgomery County, using the Old Man's Creek settlement as a stopping off place.²³

The Welsh settlers did not form a geographically isolated community. Like most of the other early Johnson County pioneers, the Welsh chose their farms on the basis of timber availability and water access. The valley in which Old Man's Creek lay offered good farmland and the early Welsh did not hesitate to stake claim to it. As more Welsh arrived in the townships, they tended to settle near their countrymen, but the Welsh farms were interspersed with non-Welsh farms. Figure 3.1 shows where Union and Sharon Townships are located within Johnson County, and where Old Man's Creek ran through the townships. Figures 3.2 and 3.3 indicate the locations of Welsh settlers in 1889, a pattern which had changed little since 1870.

The Welsh community of Sharon and Union townships exhibited some unique characteristics, but for the most part the Welsh blended in with their neighbors. Language certainly set the Welsh apart from the non-Welsh, but English was the language of business and education and wider social interaction, so the Welsh adapted. One of the more public demonstrations of "Welshness" was the Welsh church at Old Man's Creek.

²² *Ibid.*, 46.

²³ 1860 Census; 1870 Census; *Portrait and Biographical Record*, 543-44, 622-23; Thomas, *Hanes*, 216.

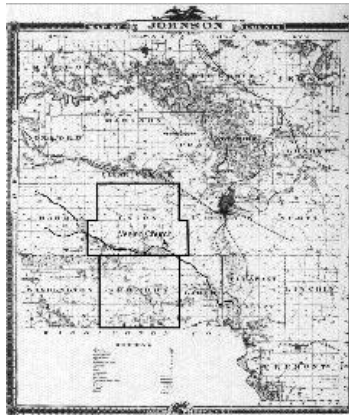


Figure 3.1. Johnson County, 1875. Union and Sharon Townships are outlined and Old Man's Creek is emphasized. Source: *A. T. Andreas Illustrated Historical Atlas of the State of Iowa* (Chicago: Andreas Atlas Co., 1875), 56.

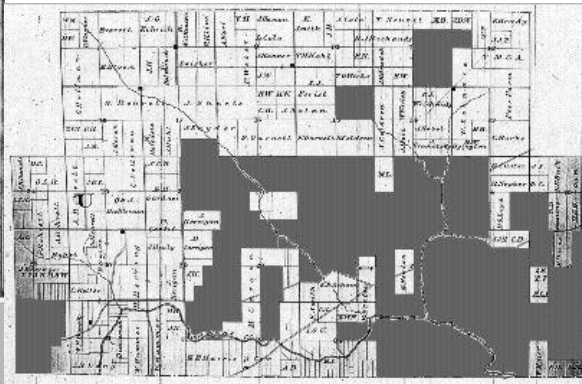


Figure 3.2. Union Township, 1889. Shaded areas indicate land owned by Welsh settlers. Source: *Novak's New Map of Johnson County, Iowa* (n.p., 1889), Plate XV. Shading added by the author.

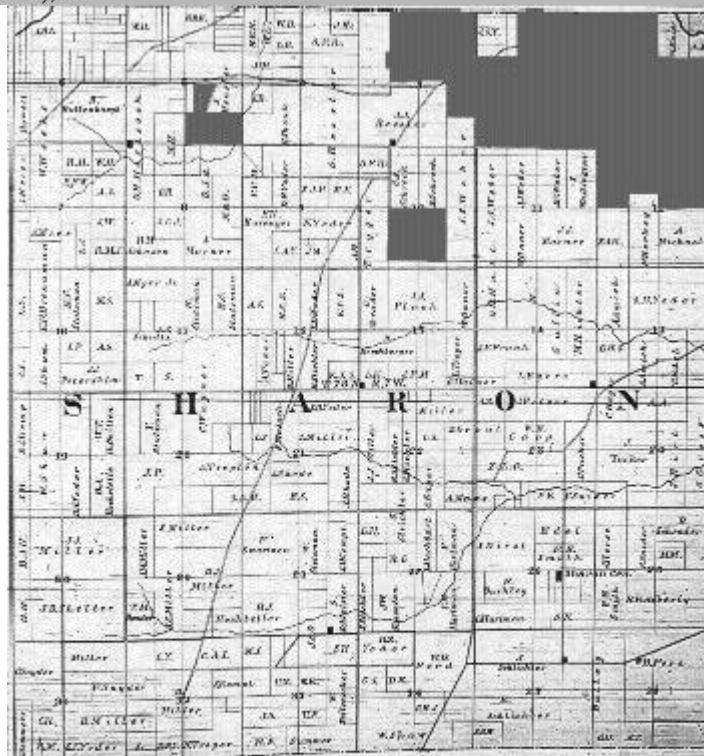


Figure 3.3. Sharon Township, 1889. Shaded areas indicate land owned by Welsh settlers. Source: *Novak's New Map of Johnson County, Iowa* (n.p., 1889), Plate XIV. Shading added by the author.

As the Welsh settlers established homes and farms in Sharon and Union Townships, they soon felt the need for worship services. Most Welsh communities quickly established churches in which they could worship according to their own custom and in their own language. As most of the Welsh on Old Man's Creek were Congregationalists, that denomination served as the basis for the local Welsh services. Interested worshipers met together in various homes at first. On January 20, 1846, missionary preacher Reverend David Knowles organized The First Welsh Congregational Church on Old Man's Creek. He accepted fifteen early Welsh settlers as founding members, including the Tudor clan and Oliver and Jane Thomas. During 1846 and 1847, Reverend Knowles accepted eight more members by letter.²⁴

In 1849, Reverend George Lewis accepted charge of the congregation and accepted seven more members by letter and profession. At some time during George Lewis's pastorate, the congregation disorganized and certain members were granted letters of departure. Records do not indicate the reason the church dissolved, though some hint that there were disagreements between some of the members and the pastor.²⁵

On November 25, 1855, Reverend Morris M. Jones traveled from the Welsh community in Radnor, Ohio and briefly visited Iowa. While there he reorganized the Old Man's Creek congregation, including six of the original members of the 1846 church. The Welsh Church at Old Man's Creek could in some ways be considered a daughter church of the Welsh Independent Church in Ebensburg, Pennsylvania, as a number of the Ebensburg Congregationalists had moved to Old Man's Creek and were founding members of the church there in 1846. In addition to the Tudors and Thomas and Jane Jones, Evan H. Roberts, Abraham and Mary Jones, Evan D. Jones, John E. Roberts, and Henry and Margaret Clement all made similar religious journeys, worshipping first in Ebensburg and then at Old Man's Creek.²⁶

When Reverend Jones reorganized the church in 1855, he encouraged the members to build a chapel to accommodate the growing congregation. Perhaps anxious to cease holding worship services in members' homes and the Sehorn's barn, the building committee broke ground for the new church on May 5, 1856. Hugh Tudor donated land for the church and cemetery atop a beautiful hill near Old Man's Creek itself, and with a \$200 grant from the Congregational Association of Iowa and generous member contributions, the men completed the chapel in the spring of 1858. The new church was built in traditional style, divided down the center so women and men could sit modestly segregated. Members constructed simple pews for the church at the Sehorn sawmill, but provided no musical instruments; singing was done a cappella. Members knelt for prayer in this early church. In

²⁴ Mrs. D. O. Thomas, "Church History" presented on May 8, 1932, containing history translated from *Llyfr Eglwys* by Mrs. D. O. Thomas, microfilm copy of manuscript (Reel # US/CAN 0986172 item 1, Utah Genealogical Society, Salt Lake City, Utah); *Llyfr Eglwys, Old Man's Creek, Johnson Co., Iowa*, microfilm copy of manuscript (Reel # US/CAN 0989452 item 1, Utah Genealogical Society, Salt Lake City, Utah); Charles Arthur Hawley, "Asa Turner and the Welsh," *The Palimpsest* XVIII (January 1937): 10-19.

²⁵ Mrs. D. O. Thomas, "Church History"; *Llyfr Eglwys*.

²⁶ *History of the First Congregational Church of Ebensburg*, 10; Donna M. Thomas, "Welsh Congregational Church of Old Man's Creek", photocopy in possession of author; Mrs. D. O. Thomas, "Church History"; *Llyfr Eglwys*.

the days preceding the call of a regular minister, worshipers met for prayer meeting at ten o'clock Sunday morning, then returned in the afternoon for Sunday School. With a regular minister in attendance, an additional sermon was added in the evening. Families traveled to church by oxcart, often having to make two treks each Sabbath to attend all services and still keep up with the chores at home.²⁷

The congregation officially incorporated in January 1858, calling itself "The First Welsh Congregational Church on Old Man's Creek, Iowa." On March 7, 1858, the Old Man's Creek church resolved to unite with the churches at Williamsburg, Long Creek in Louisa County (thirty miles southeast of Old Man's Creek), and Flint Creek in Des Moines County (twenty-five miles south of Long Creek) to hold a yearly meeting:

March 7, 1858 the church assembly does resolve to be in union with the churches at Williamsburg, Long Creek, and Flint Creek to hold a yearly meeting beginning around the twentieth of next June, and will give invitation to Reverends M. Everett [of] Remsen and David Price [of] Utica New York to preach to us in the meeting. [If they cannot come we will] give invitation to Reverends Griffith [of] Racine [Wisconsin] and J. Parry [of] Wisconsin to visit us.²⁸

A major event for Welsh-Americans was the annual *Gymanfa Ganu* (meaning "singing festival" literally, or the "Big Meeting" locally), and for those attending, the two-day event provided opportunities for spiritual renewal and fellowship. The Board of Trustees would invite out-of-town preachers from large Welsh communities to visit and present sermons during the *Gymanfa*. The congregation appointed certain members to canvass the neighborhood for contributions to be used to bring those preachers to the community. David T. David and Thomas P. Jones received the funds-gathering privilege for the first *Gymanfa*. In later years children performed collection duties.²⁹

The *Gymanfas* usually began on Friday night with two sermons, each an hour long, and then more sermons and socializing on Saturday and Sunday. Occasionally, the festival would last a week with the activities moving to a different church every few days to give all congregations a chance to enjoy the event. Integral to the service was the hymn singing in Welsh, which activity lent the meeting its name - *Gymanfa Ganu*. M. A. H. Jones reportedly reminisced that the sermons did not seem long since the music was so good. He also recalled that some of the best singers in the past (before 1938 when he made the comment) were William J. Davis, Morris Ellis, and John Roberts. Congregational singing followed a

²⁷ Mrs. D. O. Thomas, "Church History"; *Llyfr Eglwys*, Hawley "Asa Turner and the Welsh", 15-16. The words "church" and "chapel" are used interchangeably when referring to the physical structure. In Wales non-conformist denominations use the word "*capel*" (meaning chapel) to make the crucial distinction between themselves and the historically dominant and much hated Anglican churches. In America this distinction blurred and both terms can be used to indicate small meetinghouses.

²⁸ Mrs. D. O. Thomas, "Church History"; Donna M. Thomas, "Welsh Congregational Church"; *Llyfr Eglwys*, translation by author.

²⁹ *Llyfr Eglwys*, "Homecoming" program presented October 16, 1938, microfilm copy of manuscript (Reel # US/CAN 0986172 item 1, Utah Genealogical Society, Salt Lake City, Utah).

pattern where the leader would read a line and the congregation would sing it back, all in perfect rhythm.³⁰

The preaching itself was apparently a performance to behold. According to Gwen Reese, the minister started out quietly then gradually increased in pitch and fervor, developing the intonation and emotion characteristic of Welsh *hwyl*. From all accounts, this usage of the word *hwyl* is impossible to translate directly into English and is difficult to describe even indirectly, but evidently *hwyl* makes for the most effective preaching possible. The right effect can supposedly only be achieved in Welsh, due to the cadence and melodic value of the language.³¹

Absolutely intrinsic to the Welsh community's identity in their first sixty years in Iowa was their shared language. The Welsh looked like their Yankee neighbors, farmed like them, mostly cooked like them, but the Welsh were different in that they spoke Welsh. Proud of their melodic language, the Welsh usually spoke their mother tongue at home, at church, and in social situations where only Welsh people were present.

While the Welsh language characterized the Old Man's Creek community, the settlers did experience the inevitable loss of language over time. The Old Man's Creek Welsh lived in a non-contiguous settlement surrounded by non-Welsh speakers, and were therefore forced to adopt English as the language of everyday life outside their own homes. English was the language the children used in school, the language spoken by merchants in town, the language of neighborly socializing. First generation immigrants would, of course, speak Welsh, and at Old Man's Creek they would probably have learned at least passable English. But large numbers of the Old Man's Creek Welsh families had already lived in America for several generations. Those that had been born and raised in Cambria County, Pennsylvania enjoyed a strong Welsh-American community, but would have also learned English. The second generation was most likely bi-lingual in Welsh and English. From there, language persistence was influenced by family decisions and personal aptitude. Some families replaced Welsh with English at home so their children could succeed in school and in the larger non-Welsh community. Other children learned English at school and continued to speak Welsh at home. Eventually English took over to the point that some children could understand Welsh but not speak it, and finally only a word or two of Welsh were used between family members.³²

The church was inextricably linked to the fate of the Welsh language in the Old Man's Creek community. Sunday School became not only a means of instructing the young in theological matters, but also a way to transmit the Welsh language to the upcoming generations. In 1938, Emma Weeber recalled that Mrs. John E. Roberts had conducted a small class in the front of the chapel and would have the children pronounce their letters in Welsh. The classes were later conducted in English.³³

³⁰ "Homecoming"; Hawley, "Asa Turner and the Welsh", 17.

³¹ "Homecoming".

³² The Welsh Way: Oral History of the Long Creek Welsh Community in Iowa (Iowa Welsh Society, 1995), 15-20, 43-46.

³³ "Homecoming".

By 1871, however, a sufficient number of the Welsh Church's congregation felt more comfortable in English than in Welsh to warrant a change in preaching practices. The question of using English at church had caused much discussion in the congregation and finally in a church business meeting held December 8, 1871, T. D. Davis formally introduced the question of including English church services. On Friday, December 22, the congregation voted to include one English sermon per month, add a few English songs to the Sunday School singing, and to organize English Sunday School classes for those that did not know Welsh and could not, or would not, learn it. When Reverend D. E. Evans accepted the pastorate in 1883, his contract specified that he was to preach one sermon out of every four in English. By the time Reverend J. E. Jones was called in 1891, the congregation required one English sermon each Sunday, as well as one in Welsh.³⁴

While for the most part life for the Welsh of Old Man's Creek resembled that of their non-Welsh neighbors, some aspects of their lives did reflect their Welsh heritage, such as nicknames to distinguish between the inevitable plurality of men named David Jones or William Evans. Certain comestibles were also favored by the Welsh, including leeks, lamb, and tea. And Welsh life was full of religious influences. Families often kept a strict observance of the Sabbath, such as not baking on Sundays. Prayers at mealtimes were ubiquitous, and some families had Bible study at the same time. The Welsh enjoyed singing hymns, especially on Sundays when other entertainment was restricted. Another acceptable Sabbath activity seemed to be visiting family and neighbors. Some of the families forbade card games, and many Welsh advocated temperance.³⁵

Wales is famous for its male choirs and the Iowa Welsh carried on this tradition of fine singing. In the later years of the nineteenth century, the Welsh Congregational Church at Old Man's Creek produced a locally famous quartet comprised of David T. Davis, Elais J. Hughes, John Howell and I. N. Rowland. A large Welsh choir made up of singers from around Iowa traveled to the 1893 World's Fair in Chicago and won third prize in the choral competition.³⁶

School was a vital part of the Welsh children's lives, as it was for the non-Welsh children. Some of the Welsh children encountered difficulties in attending school in the English-speaking townships. Neither Old Man's Creek nor Long Creek had enough Welsh to form a Welsh-language school, so the Welsh children had to go to the community school and participate in English the best they could. The Old Man's Creek Welsh community existed within a larger community and the Welsh assimilated the best they could. Some children in the Welsh community had the advantage of English-speaking parents and siblings, while others immigrated directly from Wales and would have found the public school system bewildering at first. The challenges the children met depended on their native language, their age, and even their birth-order.

Those children who had come directly from Wales, or whose parents only spoke Welsh at home, entered school and learned English by the total immersion method. Bill Edwards of Long Creek said that the Welsh children could not communicate with the

³⁴ *Llyfr Eglwys*; Mrs. D. O. Thomas, "Church History."

³⁵ *The Welsh Way*, 21-37.

³⁶ Donna M. Thomas, "The Welsh Congregational Church", 7.

teachers or the other children well at all. The Welsh would have to learn by following the others' example until they had learned English. Mary Ann Elgan Edwards, also of Long Creek, related that her husband started public school at age seven but had to return home and learn English before he could continue with his education.³⁷

Demographic analysis of the Welsh community and the larger community of Sharon and Union Townships reveals that while in some respects the Welsh were indeed different from their neighbors, the two groups shared other characteristics in common. Birthplace analysis indicates that the Welsh community was consistently more foreign-born than the townships' non-Welsh community. This prevalence of Welsh-born inhabitants helped preserve the Welsh language and culture. The Welsh community grew most dramatically during the 1860s, bringing surprising numbers of single young men for a region no longer considered the frontier. The cycle of Welsh migration in and out of the community affected the age distribution, as well as fertility rates, further setting the Welsh apart from their neighbors. In comparison to the rest of the country, however, the Welsh and non-Welsh were more similar than not in their demographic characteristics. Through the 1870s both groups had larger-than-average households, and exhibited higher fertility rates. Even then, however, by the 1880s the Welsh and non-Welsh were both coming into line with national norms, reflecting the more settled nature of the community.³⁸

The Old Man's Creek Welsh never intended to create an isolated Welsh settlement. The first Welsh settlers immigrated to Johnson County in order to obtain land and farm, just as most of their non-Welsh neighbors had. Once a few Welsh established themselves along Old Man's Creek, more Welsh joined them from Pennsylvania, New York, Ohio and Wales. Settling where they could find land, the Welsh formed a non-contiguous settlement. While enjoying the fellowship provided by worshipping and socializing together in Welsh, the Old Man's Creek community also willingly mingled with the non-Welsh among whom they lived and worked. The Welsh language served as a source of cultural identity for the Welsh, and they strived to maintain it to a reasonable degree, but when the practical matters of assimilation arose the Welsh readily adopted English. The Congregational Church at Old Man's Creek stood as both a symbol and a means of preserving the community's Welsh identity. As the community adopted English, so did the church. Early on in the community's development, the Old Man's Creek Welsh made peace with the non-Welsh world around them.

³⁷ *The Welsh Way*, 44.

³⁸ Cherilyn A. Walley, "The Old Man's Creek Welsh Community of Johnson County, Iowa," M.A. Thesis (Ames: Iowa State University, 1999): 51-109.