

Interviewer:

So this is Terry Ford interviewing Lillian Milne on 18th of November, 2023 at South Shields Local History Group and she's going to tell us a story about a Cosy Shelter and then some information about her uncle and father in the Second World War.

Lillian:

Father-in-law,

Interviewer:

Father-in-law in the Second World War.

Lillian:

Okay, right, this is Our Cosy Shelter.

After 1939-1945 war changes took place in our lives that before the war we could never have imagined. And to how quick and yet very subtle these changes would take place. Some may say it was for better and to others, well, they preferred the things the way they were.

As a youngster living on the Lawe Top during the war, I recall they were dark days, no light in the shops, streets, and at times in the home itself it was called the blackout.

Yet life went on, families made the best of what they had, which was nothing, but would do make do, much lending and borrowing went on, to the point where the cake tins had been passed around from neighbour to neighbour so many times they were undecided whose cake tins they actually belonged to in the first place.

Much possing and scrubbing went on in the backyard washhouse with a mangle so heavy, a block and tackle could not move it. Milly, my mother, could put a 3x4 carpet through the mangle folded, soaking wet after she had carefully laid it out in the backyard and swilled it with hot, soapy Domestos water then scrubbed it with the yard broom, followed by buckets of cold water as the final rinse. After the mangle, she would then continue to throw it over the backyard wall to dry. Then we all had to stand on cat patrol chasing the cats away from the clean domesticated carpet to stop the cats from peeing on it such is life.

The washing would be hung out in the back lane on a clothes line which was tied above the backyard door to the neighbour's opposite, then dismay. The coal man would arrive with his deliveries and the washing would have to be brought back in much to the despair of the woman. This could also be followed by a length of the clothes line being cut off to make a pair of skipping rope for the kids in waiting.

Our young lives seemed full, we played hard always outside games, no television or Play Station in those days. I remember the games well pine away chasies, chucks and handies, bays, ball games and skipping and sometimes knocky door neighbour until your da found out and give you a clip. Then there was

always the bombed buildings to climb about, on followed by a concert in the backyard for all in sundry. Sometimes we only went to school half days, especially if they'd been an air raid the previous evening. The infant school for the area was Ocean Road Infants as Baring Street Infants was used as a barracks for the soldiers. I also remember that fruit was very hard to come by and imagine how delighted we were when the Canadians sent over red apples and chocolate drinking powder, each child was given a small ration of both.

The air raid shelter became a part of our young lives, and it was also a meeting place for adults where local gossip took place amongst friendly neighbours and not so friendly neighbours. During the air raids, our shelter was a popular shelter, our grandfather had managed to fit a shelf at the back of the shelter for us kids to sleep on, and a small stove to keep us warm, plus forms for us to sit on until one night when too many neighbours and friends gathered in our friendly shelter, one of the forms collapsed. It seemed to be too much for Milly, never seen her so furious as she told one of the neighbours to go back to her own shelter, apparently the neighbour's gossip had been overheard by mother earlier that day. The collapsed form was final straw so out she went never to return to the comfort of our friendly, cosy shelter.

The women were fiery and protected their own. Many an argument went on in the street between mothers, over their children. Many of the men were at war and the woman took the major role in bringing up of the family, besides the washing, cooking, cleaning, and standing in long queues for a small morsel of meat only to discover by the time they were served there was only sausage left.

I remember one day my aunt had queued for nearly an hour for a pound of sausage. She brought it home to make the family a great meal or so she thought. The frying pan went on the fire with the sausage all neatly arranged and then to her dismay, halfway through the cooking there was a fall of soot all over the sausage. Aunt would not be beaten she quickly took the sausage out of the pan, washed them, cleaned the frying pan, started all over again, and let's face it with a bit of gravy on who would be any of the wiser.

The hub of the community during and after the war was Bowman's mission the mission stood just by Lady Lane at the top of Mile End Road near the Beehive Pub. By 1948, the entire congregation would be given a new place to worship, which was the church standing in Fort Street and stretched into Baring Street, then into the top of Robertson Street. Then renamed the People's Mission. Sometimes they could be well over a hundred children visiting the Sunday school. The church hall was used for the infants and juniors, then progressed as an older child into the main church.

Sunday school started at 2.00 pm until 3.00pm and off we would go after Sunday dinner dressed in our finest. The teachings at the Sunday school would set us in good stead for future life. It was more than a church it was a community drawn together, it provided a happy atmosphere where the children learned jovial singing choruses as well as the teachings of Jesus.

There were Sunday school trips in the summer to places such as Finchale Abbey, Crimdon Dene, Tanfield Lea, Ryton and each child would be given a paper bag of goodies we loved it. There was also the yearly Sunday school anniversary and a presentation of a reading book for good attendance. Annual Good

Friday marching as we followed the most popular band, the People's Mission Brass Band and the mission banner. Much which went on in at the mission during the week. It was very similar to a youth club and each year when once in the senior section there was a scripture exam, which was sat at Westoe Girls School, most family homes would be decorated with the framed certificate presented once the exam was passed.

The teachers of the church gave up quite a lot of their free time to be with the children at the mission. I recall a few of them. Mrs. Ogle she played the organ, Miss Ingoe taught the singing and both had other roles in this small society. There was Mr and Mrs. Bianchi, the Bedlingtons, Mr Ogle, Mr Turner, Mr. Palmer, Mr Turnbull, Mr Brymer just to mention a few. I also remember Edward Wilson being a regular member of the Mission, Edward became an actor and is remembered for his role in When The Boat Comes In. The church hall was also used Monday to Friday at lunchtime as a canteen for the pupils Baring Street to eat their school meals. The large green van marked school dinners would arrive just before 12 and the large containers carrying the meals would be carried into the hall. In waiting would be the dinner ladies ready to serve you as soon as you got in line. Every day it was a different meal, always vegetable followed by a pudding, never a chip in sight and only water to drink.

About the same time as the church was renamed the Lawe Top gates were open once more, with swings, a teapot laid in a slide put there for the children. Yet still in the centre of it all was the gun, this gun was put there in 1940 by a group of Royal Marines to keep the enemy at bay. Stories go that within three months the kids had just about demolished it and it had to be restored and by 1941, after the Marines left, change of gun took place being transferred from Frenchman's Fort, it still remained in its place of glory then after the war was all fenced off, never knew if it was ever fired. It was dismantled in 1956 by South Shields Corporation.

Running from the gates down the inside of the hilltop towards the North Marine Park stood the old army huts, which now had become a place for people and their families to move into, the conditions were awful, but eventually they were rehoused.

The long streets and back lanes, which made most of the Lawe Top living area, with shops galore in Robertson Street, there was a shop on most corners, starting at the top end was Maggie Grant's shop, which was famous for her penny toffee cakes, then there was Dora Bone a general dealer, Scotts fish and chip shop, Arnott's cake shop, a butcher, Mary Pattersons' vegetable shop and Mr. Noble the cobbler.

Then just a stones throw away was the infamous Mile End Road with every kind of store you could think of, including Saddlers haberdashery where you could purchase most of your needs. The local midwife nurse Lee lived in the side street and also two doctors have their practises in Mile End Road with the lovely brass plates on the door with the names and initials gleaming and well polished. It could also boast a dentist. The people in the area could shop in their slippers, which many did as everything was just around the corner.

While the war continued, at times, we as children would play in the Roman Park, which had a few swings, a grassed area and many stones, which we hopped around on, these stones turned out to be

part of the old Roman Fort. This was our playing field and continued to be while there was no access to the beach or the Lawe Top, did we enjoy the changes? Most did, but the loss of a fine community could never be forgotten.

It's been well said that the Lawe Top was like a village, everyone knew each other with generation after generation living there. Is that true? Of course it is. Once a Lawe Topper always a Lawe Topper!