

**“Hen Wlad Fy Nhadau” (“Land of My Fathers”): A Comparative
Study of Welsh Language and Culture in Settlements of Riley, Lyon,
and Geary Counties, Kansas, 1850-Present
By Kathryn G. Jones**



The Welsh flag flying over Raglan Castle in Monmouthshire, Wales. (Author photo, 30 October 2010.)

“Mae hen wlad fy nhadau yn annwyl i mi, gwald beirdd a chantorion, enwogion o fri; ei gwrol ryfelwyr, gwladgarwyr tra mad, tros ryddid gollasant eu gwaed,” the congregation sang at the Presbyterian Church in Emporia, Lyon County, Kansas. It is the Welsh national anthem, sung by families of immigrants to celebrate the land of their fathers.¹ The language is strange and beautiful to this visitor’s ear. Although it may seem like it, this is not a scene from the distant past, a service held for those Welsh-speaking immigrants; this was part of the St. David’s Day celebration on March 4, 2012. It is put on by the descendants of the Welsh in the community, and has been for the past 124 years. Although today the only people who understand the Welsh is the music director invited from Wales to lead the service and the Welsh family, tourists in the area, who happened to be in Emporia that weekend, these words printed in the program are sung with pride and a sense of their meaning, if not a perfect understanding of them.

In this particular community, Welsh language has survived in some form since the first Welsh settlers to the area in the 1850s. This is especially remarkable since these immigrants and their offspring were settling Kansas at a time when the language was under attack even in its homeland. Although Wales had been technically part of England since the 1500s, the language did not really fall into decline until the 1800s, perhaps due to the Industrial Revolution and the resulting influx of English workers into Wales.² In addition, the English government created a push for Welshmen to be educated in the English language in what they saw as an attempt to quash Welsh resistance to English

¹ Rough translation: Old land of my fathers, dear to me, roots of poets and singers, famous men; his brave warriors, patriots, shed their blood for freedom.

² “Welsh and 19th Century Education,” BBC Wales, http://www.bbc.co.uk/wales/history/sites/themes/society/language_education.shtml Accessed 29 May 2012.

government.³ As a result, within a few generations most of Wales was bilingual or monoglot English-speakers, with monoglot Welsh-speakers existing only in the older generations and in a few enclaves, especially in villages of northern Wales, separated physically and therefore often culturally by mountains.⁴ Therefore these Kansas settlers, depending on where in Wales they came from, spoke anywhere from no English at all to mostly English; furthermore, not all these Kansas settlers came directly from Wales, as many settled first in other Welsh settlements in America such as Utica, New York or areas of Ohio before moving farther West.

This study examines three types of Welsh communities in eastern Kansas: Bala, in Riley County, which was made up almost entirely of Welsh; Emporia, in Lyon county, which was a community of Welsh settlers within a larger melting-pot community, and the Edwards homestead in northern Geary County, a family fairly (and increasingly) isolated from other Welsh homesteaders. My findings indicate that the persistence of Welsh culture and language has more to do with the success of the actual community and size of Welsh population rather than the purity or proportion of the Welsh population as compared to the larger settlement. In fact, in the case of a few women in Emporia, the presence of non-Welsh-speakers in the area encouraged their use of Welsh.

Welsh settlers arrived in the Emporia area first. Revered George Lewis was one of the first Welshmen in the area, having arrived by 1857 and soon encouraging many more Welsh to follow.⁵ The town of Emporia was already established, and south of it

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Joseph V. Hickey, "Welsh Cattlemen of the Kansas Flint Hills: Social and Ideological Dimensions of Cattle Entrepreneurship," *Agricultural History* 63.4 (Agricultural Historical Society, 1989), 59.

along Dry and Coal Creeks were where many families settled; by 1860, there were 163 Welsh in Kansas, mostly in this area.⁶ The Howe House still stands in the southern part of Emporia today, a testament to the typical experience of these Welsh families. Richard and Sarah Howe emigrated from Wales to Lew London, Canada, before becoming some of the first Welsh settlers in Emporia.⁷ Howe was a stonemason, like many of his countrymen, as we shall see, and he built this home in 1867 (see Photo 1). In addition to his own home, he had a hand in building other houses as well as public structures, the Chase County Courthouse in Cottonwood Falls, Kansas, being an example.⁸ By 1870, 600 of Emporia's 2,500 residents were Welsh, although this proportion would go down considerably afterwards, rarely exceeding ten or fifteen percent of the population in the later part of the nineteenth century.⁹

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Brochure for The Richard Howe House, Lyon County Historical Museum, obtained 28 January 2012.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid; Hickey, "Welsh Cattlemen," 70.



Photo 1: The Howe House in Emporia, Kansas. Built in 1867, it is one of the oldest homes still standing in Emporia, as well as a brilliant example of Welsh stonemasonry from the time. (Author Photo, 28 January 2012)

Arvonnia, Kansas, was a Welsh settlement 20 miles northeast of Emporia, and was settled somewhat later, in 1869, as part of the railroad boom in the area.¹⁰ The group was led by J. Mather Jones, editor of the Welsh newspaper out of Utica, New York.¹¹ Many of these settlers came directly from Wales; while some, such as stonemasons John Mason Davis, John Jones Cwmddy and W. W. Davies, came from Welsh settlements in America (Ohio, in their case, to where they later returned).¹² The colony did not survive long after

¹⁰ Marybelle Jones, *Arvonnia: The Little Welsh Village in the Valley*, 1962. Lyon County Historical Museum.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

the railroad failed to come through, and since most inhabitants moved into Emporia and were absorbed into that Welsh community, it will be considered part of the Emporia-area Welsh for the purposes of this study. There still stands a small stone schoolhouse, another attribution to the Welsh as stonemasons.

Bala, in Riley County, is another Welsh settlement, this one driven by the railroad and the Welsh Land and Emigration Society of America, organized by a dozen Welshmen out of Utica, New York.¹³ This group was led by James H. Jenkins, and they left New York in early April 1870.¹⁴ Upon reaching Kansas, they first spent some time in and around Emporia and Arvonia, and after about a month traveled up to Riley County and settled at a site two miles east of present-day Bala, naming their settlement Powys. Later in the year, 17 more Welsh families from the east coast arrived, with less capital but of diverse occupations.¹⁵ The leader of this group was William H. Jones, a “bard of Wales,” and his family, including son Humphrey W. Jones, all born in Wales.¹⁶ Many of the settlers had been slate miners in Wales, and so when they began to excavate a well at the Powys site, they were unconcerned with the procedure.¹⁷ However, after a few days of digging the earth issued a sound from the hole they had made, and although they left the site alone, the sound continued for a number of days.¹⁸ Rather than risk danger by staying near this unexplained phenomenon, the settlers moved a little east to the town site of present-day Bala.¹⁹ When the railroad came through somewhat south of the town, a secondary

¹³ Mary (Davies) Ahern, *Bala*.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

settlement was founded, called Bala City, to provide for the railroad such services as hotels and a mill.²⁰ Although not much of Bala remained when the railroad quit running through Bala City, there are still some houses and the beautiful stone bridge, as seen in Photo 2, reminding us that stonemasonry was a popular occupation among the Welsh in this area as well as in Emporia.



Photo 2: The Bala bridge, built by Welsh stonemasons. The railroad running over the bridge has not run since the nineteenth century, but the bridge is still a beautiful and large testament to the Welsh stonemasons who settled the area. (SOURCE: Mary Davis, Fall 2011)

²⁰ Ibid.

The James Edwards family sailed from England on the S.S. Colorado, arriving in New York on April 19, 1870.²¹ According to Margy Stewart, the current owner of the Edwards homestead, James was a stonemason who came from Wales, responding to a need for stonemasons to build up nearby Fort Riley. Although on the 1880 census the Edwards are listed as being English instead of Welsh, evidence of his Welsh origins are suggested not only by his very profession, but by his name and that of his son, Edward Edwards, a very typical Welsh naming scheme. James's work as a mason can be seen in his original stone home, which still stands on Lower McDowell Creek Road (Photo 3), as well as in an old picture of him and coworkers working on a stone wall (Photo 4).

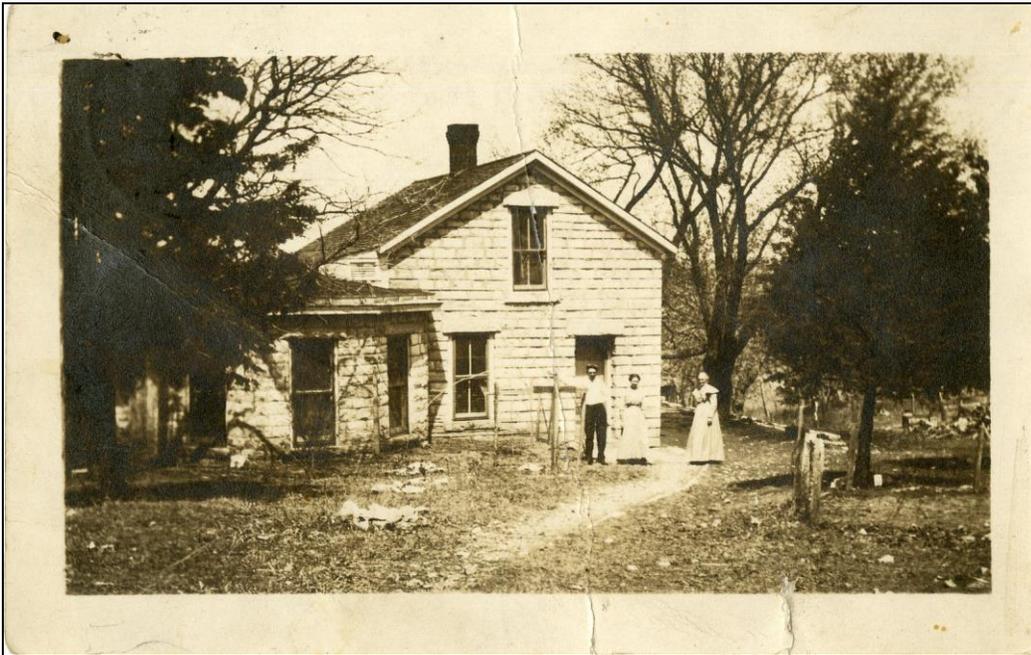


Photo 3: A picture of the Edwards homestead in Geary County, probably before the turn of the century and their newer, larger wooden house. (SOURCE: Margy Stewart)

²¹ Copy of ship manifest, in possession of Margy Stewart, current homeowner of Edwards homestead.



Photo 4: James Edwards and other stoneworkers building a wall. The back of the photo said “Alta Vista,” a town about 23 miles from the Edwards homestead, suggesting the wall was built as a job rather than as a favor for a neighbor. (SOURCE: Margy Stewart)

Besides stonemasonry, the two larger Welsh settlements have another characteristic in common: the love of music and poetry, a characteristic associated with the Welsh the world over. A large, organ-like instrument sits in the Riley County Historical Museum, brought by the Welsh settlers of Bala, which was not a small feat for overland travel at the time. The instrument was obviously very important to the family who brought it, as they surely had limited space with which to pack possessions, and it was certainly large and unwieldy for overland travel. Further evidence of an affinity for music in the Bala community is in the accomplishment of one of its leader’s sons, Humphrey W. Jones (and one of my personal favorite discoveries). Humphrey walked back and forth from Bala to Kansas State Agricultural College (currently Kansas State University), a 25-mile jaunt,

every day to attend college. He later attended the college at Emporia for an education degree and was an administrator in the Topeka school systems. His accomplishment tying him to the Welsh musical tradition and biggest claim to fame is as author and composer of K-State's Alma Mater. Both communities also competed in Eisteddfod festivals for many years. This is a traditional Welsh folk festival in which people and groups compete with poetry and music, all in Welsh. The *Emporia News* reported in 1875 that Emporia won an Eisteddfod in Osage City, competing against groups from Girard, Kansas; Arvonia, Kansas; Bethany College, Kansas; Utica, New York; Ohio; and West Virginia. Bala competed in a state Eisteddfod in Emporia several times, winning at least once.²² In this way the language, too, was kept alive, even outside of formal settings like school or church.

Pinpointing the moment of a language's disappearance is a slippery task. It is not at the same time in every family, and since most evidence for the persistence of the language is oral, it is hard to find as a historian dealing in written records. However, there are indicators to be found. The first place I looked was in cemeteries. In the Bala cemetery there was just one headstone in Welsh, that of Richard Jenkins, Esc. He died in 1879, and his wife, Ann, of the same headstone, died in 1888, which were fairly early dates for the Bala settlement and is therefore unsurprising that it is in Welsh. However, many other headstones date from at least that far back but are in English. In Evergreen and Greenwood cemeteries, the cemeteries used by Welsh settlers south of Emporia, there is an even more interesting phenomenon. One of the earliest headstones I made note of was for a Jones who died in 1862, and it was mostly in English with a Welsh

²² Ahern, *Bala*, 14.

verse at the bottom. However, the headstone for a John Nicholas, who died in 1892, three decades later, was written entirely in Welsh. Several headstones from a Davis family were entirely in English but said what county in Wales the deceased was from; these were from 1895 to 1905. The Edwards' headstones, in Humboldt cemetery in Geary County, were all entirely in English, James having died in 1916 and Sarah in 1925. These results give mixed signals: they do not show a pattern of the waning use of Welsh as time goes on. This can be explained in a number of ways. Keep in mind that some families had lived in the United States for years before moving to Kansas, therefore likely becoming familiar with English if they were not already. Depending on the area of Wales each family came from, too, determines in part the extent of their bilingualism. Finally, each family would have been different in the amount of emphasis they placed on making sure the younger generations continued to use Welsh, especially important in this example as the younger generations are the ones deciding what is written on the headstones.

Outside of home and family, the most important centers in determining language use for rural families are school and church. The church landscape in Bala is complex because of the number of churches: a journalist in 1883 wrote that Bala had a Welsh Calvinist church, an English Methodist Episcopal church, and a Congregational (Welsh and English) church.²³ In the records of the Welsh Calvinistic Methodist church, there is a translation from the books from 1880 to 1902. There are no originals in the box of church records at Riley County Historical Society, but the fact that this is a translation suggests that the records were entirely in Welsh as late as 1902. The evidence from

²³ A. T. Andreas, "Bala Township," *History of the State of Kansas* (Chicago, 1883).

Emporia churches is a little thicker. In 1858, the Emporia News wrote of the Welsh Congregational church building to be finished soon: “Efforts are being made to secure the services of a regularly educated and ordained minister to preach in the Welsh language. While most of them mingle freely with the Americans and are able to communicate upon common topics, yet the Welsh is their devotional language. They must pray in Welsh.” On October 19, 1884, the paper reports “English services in the Welsh Congregational Church tonight” for a memorial service for Reverend John D. Davis, suggesting that all other times services are in Welsh. In “History of the Welsh Auxiliary of the American Bible Society in Emporia and Vicinity,” the minutes of the society are mentioned a couple of times: in 1896 the minutes by Reverend J. Michael Hughes were in Welsh, and the author provides a translation; however, the 1916 minutes are quoted, with no mention of having translated them.²⁴ The fact that the history itself, written in 1937, is in English is telling, although no translator credit is given for those 1896 minutes, so perhaps the author was fluent at least in written Welsh at this time and did the translation herself. The history goes on to say “in earlier years Welsh-English Testaments were studied by the younger people while the older classes used the Welsh translation.”²⁵ Lyon County Historical Museum’s box on Welsh settlers also included a handwritten translation of an article in the Welsh language, published in the *Round Table* magazine in April 1933, suggesting someone was still fluent in written Welsh in or after this year. The box also contained programs from the St. David’s Day celebration in 1941 and 1982, which I add to the one I gathered at the 2012 service. In 1941, only the Welsh national anthem was sung, while in 1982 and 2012 this was sung only after the American

²⁴ Klaudia S. Lewis, 1937.

²⁵ Ibid.

national anthem. Some of the Welsh songs in all three are in the church's hymnal. Several songs were sung all three years, such as "Cwn Rhondda," and all three programs include an invitation to a reception with *bara brith* (Welsh bread) and tea after the service. In the box was also the transcript of an interview with Mrs. David Isaac in 1978. The interviewer asked what she knew in Welsh, and she knew a few phrases and numbers, including the Welsh National Anthem, which she said she had learned phonetically.²⁶

As for the Edwards family in Geary County, I could find no evidence of what church in the area they went to, although they were Protestant and there was some dispute in the family when the son Edward married Ida Black, a daughter from a Catholic family in the area. The children most likely attended Tully School, and I could find no evidence that any language besides English was ever used there.²⁷ I found no evidence of the language used at the Bala school, either, but it is safe to assume since there were Welsh church services that Welsh was used in the school, too, at least at first. The Welsh in Emporia used a school house, which, according to the Emporia News in 1869, was "over south of the cottonwood, on Dry Creek, known as the "Welsh School House" is the best built one in the county," which could mean that either Welsh language was used (and at this early date I find that likely) or just that the Welsh children attended there, as well as attesting once again to the Welsh skill at stonemasonry.

²⁶ Lucy Eusey, "Flint Hills Oral History Project," Emporia State University, 15 November 1978.

²⁷ Mildred Walker, "Tully School," *Project-Heritage History of Early Schools in Geary County Prior to Unification* compiled by Junction City Area Association of Retired Teachers, 1979; "Historical Companion: Lower McDowell Creek Rd.," prepared by residents of Lower McDowell Creek Road, Geary County, Kansas.

At last, there is the evidence provided by personal effects left behind and reminiscences of the descendants of these Welsh settlers. Among the papers left behind by the Edwards family, there is no evidence of Welsh whatsoever. The papers are mainly legal documents such as deeds and wills, but even notes written on Valentine's Day cards and the back of photos are in English. By looking at census information, I believe there were more Welsh in the area in 1870 than in 1880. My theory is that many came to work as stonemasons, and when the job at Fort Riley was finished, they dispersed, leaving behind little backbone for a Welsh-language community even for those like James Edwards who stayed and settled. Therefore, the language and culture from the homeland had a very short life in this Geary County area.

As for Bala, almost no personal effects survive in the Riley County Historical Society. However, *Y Drych*, a Welsh newspaper out of Utica, New York, had continuous subscribers as late as 1951.²⁸ A copy of *Ninnau*, another Welsh newspaper, was found from 1 February 1981.²⁹ The paper is largely in English, but contained an article on St. David in Welsh, as well as several advertisements in Welsh, and a crossword with clues in both Welsh and English. It also included a column called "Welsh for Americans," which taught Welsh numbers and phrases, using linguistic terminology that was surprisingly technical. This paper suggests something about a wider pattern of the language in North America, if not Bala: the paper's audience is expected to be anywhere from fluent in Welsh to completely clueless about even simple words. However, the Bala community did not thrive well into the twentieth century, so again offered little support

²⁸ Ahern, *Bala*, 4.

²⁹ *Ninnau, the North American Welsh Newspaper*, Ninnau Publications, Basking Ridge, New Jersey, 1 February 1981.

for the survival of a Welsh-speaking community. The Welsh dispersed to neighboring towns, such as Broughton.³⁰ There is some evidence of an attempt in the diminished Bala population to have a yearly St. David's Day celebration like that in Emporia; the Bala Pioneer Heritage Society newsletter in 2002 mentions a "third annual" St. David's Day celebration, and the spring 2003 newsletter mentions another, while there appears to be no mention in the 2005 newsletter.³¹

In Emporia, many of the Howe's books remain in the house, showing a wide range of Welsh, English, and Welsh-English options. There was an all-Welsh Bible, and many songbooks left on the piano were either entirely in Welsh or in Welsh and English. In a group interview after the St. David's Day service, I discovered what was left of the language in today's residents, as well as their thoughts on the disappearance of the language.³² They all knew their numbers up to three, and some could count all the way to ten and remember short greetings. They all said their grandparents spoke Welsh, and some spoke only Welsh. Some in the group knew much more when they were children so as to communicate with their grandparents, and some were simply unable to talk to their grandparents. None remember school or church services in Welsh. Tom Fowler remembered that his mother and her sisters would speak Welsh when talking to each other on the party phone lines to avoid being understood by eavesdroppers, and that after the advent of private phone lines he does not remember hearing her speak Welsh anymore. This tells us two things: Fowler's mother and aunts did not expect anyone

³⁰ Dr. M.J. Morgan and Students at Kansas State University, *Broughton, Kansas: Portrait of a Lost Kansas Town, 1869-1966* (Chapman Center for Rural Studies, 2010).

³¹ Bala Pioneer Heritage Society newsletters found in "Bala" box at Riley County Historical Society, March 2012.

³² Interview with Shirley F. Thomas, Trevor Rees, Tom Fowler, and Evora A. Wheeler (Rees), by Kathryn Jones, 4 March 2012.

besides themselves to understand Welsh at this time, and the last known evidence we have of Welsh being used in daily conversation disappeared with party phone lines, which was probably in the late 1950s or early 1960s in rural Kansas.

Although little of the language remains in these settlements, the values of the Welsh settlers live on wherever their descendants do, just as solid as the beautiful stone structures they left behind. About the Bala community was written “It has been said that no race adopts itself more readily to the language, customs, and tastes of the American nation than do the descendants of the Ancient Britons – the Welsh, and no people are more loyal as citizens or are held in greater esteem. Welshmen have ever had four outstanding characteristics – patriotism, love of literature, music, and religious zeal.”³³ The Emporia News wrote of the Welsh settlers in 1866: “Among the daily additions that are making to our population, we notice with satisfaction many Welsh families.... There are no more thrifty, temperate and honest people in Kansas or elsewhere than the Welsh and none that cling more tenaciously to the home of their adoption.” While this noted love of their adopted nation caused much of the Welsh language to disappear within a few generations, the other characteristics remained, making the Welsh and their descendants important cornerstones in the settlement of communities across Kansas.

³³ Ahern, *Bala*, 9.

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