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LISA M WILLIAMS
OPEN FOUNDATION
AUSTRALIAN HISTORY
WEDNESDAY NIGHT ROOM V102
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
DUE DATE 30 AUGUST 1989

TOPIC:

THE ABERMAIN EISTEDDFOD

Welsh immigrants to Australia in the later half of the 19th Century brought with them a tradition that dates back to the 14th Century. Eisteddfodau were held throughout Wales to promote music, poetry and singing. The champions of these events were hailed as 'chaired bard'. Over the years many attempts were made to establish such competitions in Australia. One of the earliest attempts in Australia was conducted by Welsh coalminers at Ballarat, Victoria in 1855. In 1875 miners in Newcastle NSW attempted to promote their traditional festival with little success so the Newcastle Eisteddfod didn't enjoy success until much later. Many Eisteddfodau emerged throughout the country, a number of which have become well respected events, while others have folded through lack of support.

The Abermain Eisteddfod has enjoyed a long and successful history due to the tireless efforts of volunteer workers. The majority of the Abermain committee members throughout the years have been pensioners; only recently have younger people joined the committee. In 1917 Robert Hanley organized a small two day singing tournament at Abermain. The tournament became an annual event and on the 7th and 8th November 1919 the competition became officially known as, The Abermain Eisteddfod. The programme for the 1919 Eisteddfod consisted of singing, piano, violin,

choirs and recitation sections. The committee for the event were as follows: President Rev G. I. Pearson.

Treasurer Robert Hanley.

Secretary R. Robertson.

The official accompanist for the event was Miss Edna Sheldon. Committee members: Messrs J. Ross, W. Reckenberg, A. Hall, J. Davey, F. Moore, G. Lord, C. Blackburn, A. Logie, G. Reid and W. Rice completed the hard working team. Prizes for this first official event consisted of Gold Medals for the winners of each section. The event proved successful, attracting competitors from Cessnock, Kurri Kurri, Weston and a strong contingent from the Newcastle area as well as Abermain entrants. The proceeds from this first event were donated to the Abermain Methodist Church Fund. There were other Eisteddfodau held in the area during the early 1900's at Weston, Kurri Kurri, Cessnock and Maitland but all were surpassed by the Abermain event.

In 1920 the Eisteddfod again ran for two days, with preliminaries conducted on Friday 27th August and the main competition being completed on Saturday 28th August. During the early 1920's male voice choirs were popular in the district with many competing at Abermain. The male groups that performed at Abermain comprised not less than 20 and no more than 30 voices per group, some local groups being quite successful at Abermain.

The 1925 Eisteddfod enjoyed a successful 3 day programme at the Star Picture Palace on Cessnock Road. The adjudicators for the 1925 event were Mr E Bennett North and Madam North both of Sydney. The Eisteddfod was held annually at the Star Picture Theatre until the 1930's when two

venues were needed. The Plaza Hall in Bathurst Street Abermain is still being used today for the Vocal and Instrumental, Speech and Drama and some Dance sections. Larger sections are held at the Cessnock Town Hall in Darwin Street Cessnock. During the 1952 Eisteddfod three venues were needed to complete the event, which ran from August 25th to 30th.

For many years a final Grand Concert was held at the end of all competitive sessions for all major winners. The venue for this Grand Concert was the Star Theatre for many years. These concerts would attract full houses with some adjudicators taking part in the entertainment. The final sessions in 1949 were broadcast over Radio Station 2CK, 'The Voice Of The Coalfields' and in 1950 the final session was recorded and broadcast the following week by the Station.

From 1949 entries grew and the duration of the event grew as well. 1951 saw the Eisteddfod run for a total of nine days from August 27th to September 5th at the Plaza Hall and at the Church of England Hall. Admission to sessions during this event were 2/-, with final night sessions 3/- each. Patrons could purchase a season ticket for 15/-, with children being admitted at half price. People wishing to reserve a seat could do so for the small price of 6d each. Mark papers were available for purchase by competitors for 3d each. During the nine day festival 1790 people competed in 26 sessions, 9 of which were dance sessions. Of the 1790 competitors 755 took part in the dance section which comprised of tap, schottische, clog, song and dance, duo dance, waltz tap, highland, National character, sailors hornpipe and Irish jig segments. The remaining 17 sessions saw competitors in recitation, singing, piano, choir, duets

and group verse speaking. Competitors ages ranged from under 6 years to the over 21 years and adults.

During the 1950's the Eisteddfod grew in popularity resulting in longer events. From 1951 to 1959 the Eisteddfod averaged ten day events with large entries. The larger entries were the result of increased prize money for some sections. 1956 saw prize money increase from £500 to £1200. The prize money for the Ladies Solo winner in 1939 was 15/-, and for the same event in 1956 the winner took home £5. More than 3000 entries were received for the 39th Eisteddfod providing excellent entertainment for all audiences.

Adjudicators over the years have given competitors and the committee high praise for excellent standards. Mr Hubert Evans, Vocal and Instrumental adjudicator at the 1958 festival paid tribute to the committee and Secretary, Mr Charles James for such a wonderful event. Mr Evans said he had attended many Eisteddfods but had yet to find one that was better conducted. Adjudicators have come from far and wide, with many travelling from interstate for the successful country event. Many have returned a number of times over the years.

The 1960's provided the Abermain Eisteddfod with some of it's most successful years. The 45th festival saw entries total well over 3000, with 533 sections to complete, ~~Some~~ sections having as many as 20 competitors. The 1962 event also saw a record first day crowd of over 500 people, quite an acheivement for such a small coalfields town. The Eisteddfod also experienced it's longest period of duration, a total of 16

days. Over the next five years the Abermain Eisteddfod enjoyed successful events with large entries and crowds.

In 1965 the Eisteddfod was forced to split into two separate periods. Due to the large entries for the dance sections the Eisteddfod had to be held in May and in August/September. The dance section attracted over 1750 entries alone, with all other sections attracting over 1600 competitors.

Many competitors have achieved varied success since competing at the Abermain Eisteddfod. Ernest Llewelyn, formerly of Kurri Kurri, competed at Abermain in the 1920's. He went on to a career as assistant conductor with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra. Later he took up the position of the head of a Federal Government School of Music in Canberra. Three other Kurri Kurri men went on to careers as leading violinists in the Sydney Symphony Orchestra.

More recent competitors have had their share of success nationally and internationally. Dancers, Elizabeth Toohy, Karen Barker, Robin Turner and Kendall Cameron have all had successful dance careers. The Abermain Eisteddfod, now in its 72nd year, can also boast of long serving officials. Long serving Presidents include; D James (13 years), D B Hunter (6 years), A Fallock (13 years) and C Smith (17 years). Secretaries with long standing service include; R Hanley (7 years), J Dever (5 years), C A James (23 years) and N Smith (14 years). Treasurers include; R Hanley (10 years), G Paul (6 years) and T Fairfull (14 years). Mr A Swain has also given over 23 years service to the Eisteddfod, serving as president for a time as well.

The Abermain Eisteddfod has come a long way since 1917 and looks set to carry on well into the 1990s. With the dedicated committee of volunteers, the Abermain Eisteddfod should survive another 72 years and break all records. It is a well respected event in Australia and has the honour of being the longest running Eisteddfod in Australia.

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SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW
WITH AGNES MADELINE JAMES
SATURDAY 29 JULY 1989

My grandmother, Agnes Madeline James was born in Wales on the 5th August 1907 and arrived in Sydney on Monday the 27th November 1922. She travelled to Abermain NSW with her family, where she met Charles Alfred James, her first cousin. They were married at Kurri Kurri NSW in 1926. Before arriving in Australia, Madeline and her older sister, Blodwen, had performed in an Eisteddfod in Wales and sang in church choirs. Madeline sang in mine concerts at Abermain, Kurri Kurri, Weston and Cessnock during the mine lock out years to help the unemployed. Madeline and Charlie became involved with the Abermain Eisteddfod during the 1940's. She assisted her husband who held the position of Secretary from 1948 until 1970, clocking up over 23 years of service.

Madeline witnessed the growth of the Eisteddfod from a three day event to a full three week programme. Madeline was assigned to the position of Ticket Seller, which she handled for many years. During her time with the Eisteddfod the Plaza Hall underwent many changes. Renovations were carried out by the committee members on a voluntary basis. Dressing rooms were built at the rear of the stage, the stage itself was enlarged for the dancers and a foyer added to the front of the building. Previous to the foyer being built, Madeline sold tickets to patrons on the footpath sitting on two fruit box cases.

When entries began rolling in, Madeline assisted Charlie around the clock. She would answer phone enquiries and take entries at their home in Abermain. All monies taken for entries, door fees, mark papers and canteen sales were put back into the Eisteddfod to purchase trophies and used for the maintenance of the hall. Trophies were purchased at Sydney warehouses annually.

For the duration of the event competitors and their families would camp near the Abermain Railway Station or stay with relatives, friends or at Hotels in the area. Madeline had many family members compete at Abermain as well as serve on the committee. During the 1950's and 1960's entries for the Tap Dancing sections were very large, some sections having over 20 competitors. Some sections became too large for the Plaza Hall and they had to be held at the Cessnock Town Hall. Madeline never thought that the Abermain Eisteddfod would continue for as long as it has because of it's locality. She enjoyed her involvement with the event and does miss the family entertainment atmosphere of the small but successful 72 year old event.

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TRANSCRIPT
OF
TAPED INTERVIEW
WITH
AGNES MADELINE JAMES
SATURDAY 29 JULY 1989

Today is Saturday the 29th of July 1989. My name is Lisa Williams and I am interviewing my grandmother, Agnes Madeline James, at my home in Weston about the Abermain Eisteddfod.

For many years she supported her husband, Charles Alfred James, in running the Abermain Eisteddfod, which began in 1917 as a small three day talent quest. During Nana's time involved with the Eisteddfod she saw it grow to a three week programme which ran from 9am till midnight daily. The Eisteddfod is still going strong today and is now in it's 72nd year.

LISA: Nana thanks for your time today to talk to me about the Abermain Eisteddfod. To start with I would like to ask you a few general questions about your life. Can you tell me when and where you were born?

NANA: I was born in Wales in Aberbargoed 5th August. I was born 1907.

LISA: What was your full name at birth?

NANA: Agnes Madeline James.

LISA: When and where did you marry Pop?

NANA: I married him in Kurri. I got married in Kurri. Now you are asking me a few good questions...I am not very good at dates. I married him in a Church in Kurri and my age I would have been...I was about 18.

LISA: You married at 18...

NANA: Was I 18?

LISA: That's young to get married isn't it?

NANA: I was young married...

LISA: Did you...

NANA: ...and he was my first cousin so I didn't change my name.

LISA: So that's why your name is still James.

NANA: My husbands father, and my father were brothers, so...

LISA: Well because you've got Welsh blood I suppose you would have a pretty strong background with Eisteddfods and public concerts?

NANA: Yes. We were in Church choirs at home in Wales and my sister and I loved singing and she played the piano.

LISA: Aunty Blod?

NANA: Yes and we taught each other a duet and we entered in a Welsh Eisteddfod and I think but I'm not sure whether it was in Llandudno or Ystrad Mynach but I think it was in Ystrad Mynach.

LISA: And how did you go in that?

NANA: We competed and entered in it and we being sisters, the adjudicator praised us for our blending in voice and we won in an adult section.

LISA: That's good.

NANA: So we were quite proud of that but we never entered another Eisteddfod after. We sang alot in Australia after we came here, during the lock out years and depression years, we sang in mine concerts.

LISA: In the Abermain area?

NANA: Abermain area. In Abermain, Cessnock, Weston, Kurri. We sang in the concerts to help the unemployed. There was no work for

anybody, never mind how good a man you were and we also sang duets then and no concert was announced without the James sisters being in it. That's what they called us. That's quite true.

LISA: * You and Pop were involved with the Abermain Eisteddfod for many years, how was it that you came to get involved with it?

NANA: Well Bob Hanley, old Mr Bob Hanley at the time was running it and he retired and he had a small, very small Eisteddfod of three days, that the preliminaries were held in the Church of England hall and the Plaza held the Eisteddfod. I think at the beginning the Eisteddfod was held in the Church of England hall, I am not quite sure about that but then when the Plaza...when he retired and your grandfather, Pop he took over...

LISA: Did he love it?

NANA: He loved every minute of it, the music although he could not sing he could whistle and he loved bringing the talent of children, the local children out to the front. Which he did. He built it up from three days to three weeks to three sessions a day.

LISA: From what time would it start in the morning?

NANA: We were down at the hall at about half past six to seven in the morning...

LISA: At the place...

NANA: ...and it started at nine. Every session started at nine there was prelim's held in those days too, which have gone by the board now...they only take so many now into a section and they did not go through with the whole section, and there are no preliminaries to cut any people out. But in those days I wasn't involved in the committee to start, they had a committee of men. I could remember some of their names.

LISA: So they didn't have the ladies committee...

NANA: No...

LISA: They didn't start off with a little shop, or anything or the little canteen...

NANA: No that was after Pop took over, see he built it up for that hall, that he enlarged the hall, he put dressing rooms at the back, he made the stage bigger for the Choirs and the ballet sections, the groups and he put a foyer at the front of the hall so that people could come inside to buy their tickets. Well up to then I had been selling tickets through the window on to the footpath, because the people queued up on the footpath to come in and I even sat on two fruit box cases to sell tickets through the window and I sold the tickets and if it rained people stood in the rain with umbrellas up you know to buy tickets.

LISA: Waiting to come in.

NANA: Well when he put the foyer on it made all the difference and he added another kitchen on to the room on the other side that we could cook in and put afternoon teas and morning teas and had our lunches there. Then I had a ticket office after, I was quite flash I had a ticket office to sell my tickets through to the public in the foyer,*I was the ticket seller. But I was involved in taking entries at the home, my house, over the

phone and taking people personally to the door, I took their entries.

LISA: So you supported Pop.

NANA: That way yes but then when we took the hall over and he wanted more staff into the hall to run it, I came down every morning with him and I did that window three sessions a day, but really I was the main one for the ticket selling and I handled that money at the window and checked with all the tickets you know that all the tickets were all numbered and that everything corresponded, I was very good on money.

LISA: Yes

NANA: ...and those tickets always corresponded with the money taken at the window which was counted every night and that money went back into it and we travelled to the warehouses in Sydney for trophies for the Bisteddfod and shields for the Bisteddfod you know.

LISA: Yes

NANA: Any choir that won well the names went on it and we bought all those in the warehouses in Sydney at cost price and that money which was taken at the hall was all refunded back in because there was no profit for any anybody. Any work my husband did on that, carpentry, was done voluntarily cause he loved the work and he loved what it was causing, what it was bringing out.

LISA: So it was quite popular around the district wasn't it?

NANA: That's right. And we had a private bus service from Cessnock which still exists, Rover Motors and they provided all the buses for the Schools from Paxton, Weston, Maitland and Newcastle they used to come and all the Catholic Schools, convent Schools, they all came with their choirs which were beautiful to listen to.

LISA: And Pop used to have the sessions finishing in time so that they could catch trains...

NANA: He was a very well organised man in his manner he had even the sessions and the items timed that a mother could come up to him, which they did and they would say ah, what time could we get...will we be in time, my daughters in such and such in the programme in the session and can she, will we be able to catch such and such a train. He'd look up the section and he'd say yes you can catch such and such a train you'll be right.

LISA: And when the schools sessions were on he used to have it organised so that the kids would come in the front door and leave by the side door.

NANA: Yes he did and there would be buses always out the front and the bus drivers loved every bit of it cause they used to have fun with the kids all on the bus all dressed up to get onto the stage. They loved it and Rover Motors were very, very good in those days and they had everything there for us there was no bus hold ups, as soon as the school arrived they loaded them onto a bus and down to the Abermain Bisteddfod. It was really happy days for the kids and all you know.

LISA: Did you enjoy the public contact?

NANA: I loved it but I couldn't deal with it as much as I would have liked to 'cause I was in that ticket box so much and the kitchen.

LISA: Do you miss the Eisteddfod?

NANA: Oh I missed it alot cause I gave it away. Only once they came back for me after he passed away to take the window they had nobody and I did it under stress which I am now...

LISA: Oh you silly...

NANA: I did it under stress but I took it once and I took that window once for them after he had died but I wouldn't do it again, I couldn't.

LISA: No. Would you...You've been back though to see family perform at the Eisteddfod?

NANA: Yes I've been back to see my family performing, but it was a wonderful life that we both enjoyed and we did it together every bit of it.

LISA: Was Pop...Pop would have still been working at the pit then too wouldn't he?

NANA: When he first started yes but then after he retired well he put his whole life to it cause that's when he did the carpentry for the hall to make the hall more suitable to take the larger Eisteddfod which it wouldn't have done otherwise, see.

LISA: It would have been alot of work then?

NANA: Oh yes.

LISA: And where...people who came from Sydney and some came from Melbourne even to compete, where did they stay?

NANA: Well they stopped...well a lot of people married and went away from the township to live. Well they'd come back during Eisteddfod years and they'd live with their family and we also had down at Station where the Station was that isn't there anymore, we had a nice green patch there where they had caravans on it. And some even put tents, couple of tents, small tents.

LISA: So they just sort of camped for the duration of the Eisteddfod?

NANA: That's right, yes.

LISA: Oh that would be good. What did they do for facilities then?

NANA: Well they shopped around the shops, the shops did well during that time in Abermain because we had a shop there that like put on the lunches and things and sold pies and things that people would put up with for that time. Oh they found plenty to, and then they could go to Cessnock, see Cessnock had everything there they wanted so they really had...the accomodation suited them cause in those days camping was most of their holidays see it was all tents we didn't see that till we came to this country see we never saw tenting in our lives in Wales not till we came out to this country it was all tents then.

LISA: Did you ever, you wouldn't have ever competed in the Abermain Eisteddfod?

NANA: No.

LISA: Did any of your children compete?

NANA: Yes. My eldest daughter only one year she wasn't fond of it and that's all she competed one year in singing.

LISA: What did she do?
 NANA: In the singing section. Then my youngest son was in the humorous section the elocution and he beat adults and he was...even the adjudicator told him that if he stuck to what he had seen of him that day he'd have gone far. It was humorous and he had them lying in the aisles you could say. He recited a piece called Bigamy but in his...he was a judge in it and in his ignorance in those years you were'nt as well read as people are today he called it Big Amy and it was all the judge talk right through and he won it hands down.

LISA: Oh that's good and what about...
 NANA: Then I had a...I had grandchildren in it I had one ...I had my daughters child was in a humorous recitation I had two...the other daughter I had two ballet dancers they were in the ballet section and I had my daughter she was on the piano.

LISA: You've had quite a few members of the family compete.
 NANA: Yes quite a few.

LISA: So the love of the Eisteddfod is sort of inbred?
 NANA: Yes that's right, it did.

LISA: The crowds would have been quite good, did...
 NANA: Well we had three weeks and three sessions a day in the choir...

LISA: Was the hall packed?
 NANA: ...in the singing like...the elocution, singing, dancing and then apart from that we had another part of the year we ran highland dancing, just especially for the Scotch people.

LISA: During your time with the Eisteddfod was there any one section that you enjoyed more than another? Did you enjoy the dancing more or the singing or...
 NANA: Well I loved singing I loved the singing part and I loved the dancing and the humorous recitation I loved.

LISA: So you loved it all?
 NANA: Yes cause we had Shakespearian sections too for the elocution and I really loved all the sections but I didn't have that much time to sit and watch because of selling tickets. I didn't have the time I would have liked to have spent watching the items on the stage. But the children were sent in by their mothers to me for me to see them in their dance clothes and the Scotch people used to come in to show me their beautiful velvet jackets they wore with their kilts. Even the adult ones came and bought me their wedding photos back, they'd been married during the Eisteddfod.

LISA: Gee.
 NANA: To shhow me.

LISA: And what about some of the dance teachers were the dance teachers always there at the Eisteddfod for their students?
 NANA: Not always the teachers but mother's belonging to the teachers used to come because they were involved in their daughter's studio's.

LISA: Right.
 NANA: And we used to have some bad times and good times with the mothers.

LISA: Were they funny were they?

NANA: They were more than funny it would reach an argument many a time but my husband was capable of handling them in a nice manner and he could get out of it and he was pretty domineering with it to but it didn't show he usually come out in his way...

LISA: He came out on top...

NANA: Yes he came out on top.

LISA: Kept them all under control. Was there any one particular mother that you remember?

NANA: Well I shouldn't...I can't mention names you see because I might involve myself in...so I could, I could but I wouldn't like to mention.

LISA: What about any funny little antics they used to get up to?

NANA: Well there's one special mother I won't mention her name.

LISA: Alright don't mention any names.

NANA: She was the mother and her and her husband used to come with the daughter's school, the daughter didn't come. And she had a habit of...she was a very domineering person, a defiant person this woman, she still is today at 90 odd and she's still in the business.

LISA: She's still alive?

NANA: Yes and she lost...she said she'd come without her music, she'd come from Newcastle and her husband, poor thing he worked like a dog for her. She just said to him, now we thought that really funny, but although we were sorry for him, she said, I can't think of his name, we'll call him Bill.

LISA: Ok.

NANA: She said Bill I've left my music behind go straight back and get it for this next section. He went like a little poodle dog and he went back and he couldn't, he came back and he said I couldn't find it anywhere, she said how could you I had it here with me.

LISA: And he went all the way back to Newcastle.

NANA: Now we were that sorry for him but still it caused a great laugh to think that she could do that and he did it for her that's how involved they became. See the husbands would stick with them see.

LISA: And did the dance mother's and all the dance competitors did they used to take over the hall more or less?

NANA: Oh yes and they sat in their groups in their sections all glaring across at the others and the teachers and schools you know. And saying...and if one...the one special school won too many prizes they insisted that they were robbed, they were always robbed. But the adjudicator was the head one, we had no say in that, that was nothing to do with us we chose the...my husband chose the adjudicators and he got them all out the township, out of the district, he got them from Sydney, from Melbourne, and we put them...we accommodated them in Hotels in Cessnock, that's where they stayed and they didn't know people from a bar of soap, but of cause every mother thinks their own crew the blackest and when you compete they think, oh she was robbed or he was robbed you know, cheated, but it had nothing to do with it we were in the clear.

LISA: Do you think that there was any one section that was more popular with the competitors than another?

NANA: Yes there is because there's not as many people involved today in singing or those days as there was in dancing, and especially the tap. The tap used to bring packed halls cause it was more like variety show see, more variety that people liked on the stage and the costumes were so beautiful but now I think there's just as much following for all the types of dancing now as there ever was.

LISA: I was reading in some of the old programmes that there was sometimes 20 - 21 competitors in one section in tap. I bet the adjudicators were just about driven up the wall.

NANA: They were and that was really small sections too cause some were bigger than that again.

LISA: Were they, oh I didn't know.

NANA: Some were bigger than that again and that's why the preliminaries were bought in in the beginning but then they dropped them but after that they had to take all who entered see if there was 40 in there was no prelim's, they had to go through that whole 40 in the section and there could only be a first second and third.

LISA: And so the adjudicator would have to sit there and watch 40 people?

NANA: That's right and adjudicate on that lot.

LISA: That would have taken a long time.

NANA: ...and no teacher or pupil or any competitor was allowed to go near the adjudicators stand, you didn't converse with the adjudicators for one minute.

LISA: Did they always have a penciler?

NANA: Penciler we had a very good penciler she was a high school music teacher at Cessnock and at the finish there a couple of years before our part ended in it we had a brass section, they bought the orchestra's into it and that was very popular. And lovely to listen to, beautiful to see. Those school kids up on the stage playing their instruments you know.

LISA: Was the accustics good in the hall?

NANA: Beautiful in the Plaza they were but when the town hall was built in Cessnock and we had to put all our big sections in Cessnock Town Hall the Plaza wouldn't have held them and the accustics weren't as good there as the old Plaza Hall.

LISA: It would have lost some of it's charm anyway.

NANA: It did, it went more of a...where it was a family like and relation affair we felt it no matter where those candidates came from, they were all like family to us you know. And they could run in and out to us and say look at my dress Mrs James or do I look good and do you like this and even the Scotch people would come in and say, what do you think of this jacket on me, cause they wore different coloured velvet jackets, and it looks that when they go into a bigger hall , it was more like a family and relation affair.

LISA: You would see the same faces?

NANA: Same faces but oh more different faces too, sort of, you didn't mix together.

LISA: But there were regulars?

NANA: Yes there were regulars and they used to come looking for us. They used to look into the box through the door at the Plaza and they'd say, the kids would see who's in the box and they'd say it's Mrs James mum, Oh they're here. That's right.

LISA: Do you think that it's important for young people to participate in Eisteddfods?

NANA: Well I think if there was more of that today there wouldn't be so much vandalism, there wouldn't be so much crime cause those kids their time was spent in learning music, instruments, elocution, speech see there was speech as well. Those children were occupied all the time with their teacher with their lessons, today there's not as much of that now and that's why I think all the violence is today.

LISA: Did you ever think when you first got involved with the Eisteddfod that it would run for as long as what it has?

NANA: No we never thought for one minute it would run as long as it did and for so many sessions and get as big as it did, but my husband he paced the shops for donations the different industries he got donations from, which kept it going all that money kept it going.

LISA: So there was people who would donate money just to keep it running?

NANA: That's right they did and they knew what a big job was going on and how talented the children were that came from it and alot of them got jobs, they got like talented teachers jobs from the Eisteddfod and that's why people in big industries they were quite willing to give towards it. And my husband had to go around every year to those same people to get their donations.

LISA: That would be alot of work.

NANA: He was occupied all the year after he gave his job up, with renovating the hall, enlarging it the size of it and going around all the people that gave donations, placing his programmes in all the shops that sold them and everything like that he had to do see.

LISA: It probably would have been a hell of a lot more work when entries started to pour in?

NANA: Well that's it he never lifted his head up getting the entries in and they had to go to the printing office at a certain time to get those programmes out, which we sold I can't state a number but I know, I know there's hundreds, hundreds of programmes had to be printed and all the committee's names then, it was a committee then, that's when we were called a committee sort of thing, and the committee names were put down in the programme and the adjudicators names were in the programme, the patrons everything see, it was alot of work for such a big affair which it turned out to be in the long run.

LISA: Do you think it was strange that such a small township held such a well respected and large Eisteddfod?

NANA: People couldn't believe it when they come to the town to see the size of the town, that was a mining town, that an Eisteddfod that size was run there and it always went under the Abermain Eisteddfod.

LISA: It seems funny with the City of Cessnock and they only had an Eisteddfod for a short time and there was an Eisteddfod at Kurri and Abermain has just kept going.

NANA: Well we practically closed all of them down and my husband was approached wherever we went, like with the...any relation in the family...well especially the two dancers, cause they were...they travelled to alot of the Eisteddfods and I went with them and my husband went with me, we both went together to see them compete. And the minute they knew we were in the hall he was taken away from me into the office wanting to know how he run it and what system he had.

LISA: What the secret was?

NANA: Yes what system he had. He helped quite alot of other people that wanted to run Eisteddfods.

LISA: I always remember when we used to be up there and I was in the ticket box with you and Linda would be there too and we would be peering through the little window to see who's up on stage...

NANA: Yes that window was put in after when I couldn't see enough you know, and I was saying look I can't see a thing and they used to come up to the window to me they'd say what section is on, I'd say I don't know love I can't see from here. So my husband put a window in for me to look through so that I could look straight through into the hall onto the stage and I could tell the people coming in ...they didn't want to come in before their section, you see to get their children all excited or anything or worked up and they'd wait out side. They'd buy their ticket but they'd wait out side till their section was due and they say what's sections on now and I'd look through the window and I'd say such and such and they'd say we're next we'd better get in.

LISA: Did they stick pretty strictly to the rules of...like not letting people in until a section was completed?

NANA: Oh no they could sit in the hall for the dancing and watch the other contestant dance.

LISA: No, no I mean like if somebody was performing on the stage and somebody had bought a ticket from you did they have to wait outside till the section was over?

NANA: They had to wait till that section was over, oh definately.

LISA: The complete section?

NANA: Yes you couldn't open the door while there was anyone on the stage performing, that wasn't allowed, the door keeper had that in charge.

LISA: Is there anything else that sticks in your mind particularly?

NANA: Yes, there's one funny thing I could tell you. It was quite funny. Complaints always get brought in like anything else to whoever was running the affair. Well a...we had a fellow on the door this time and he was very, very tall he was closer to seven foot than six and he wasn't a...we can say he didn't have all his marbles sort of thing, you know. And he thought the sun shone out of my husband you see and he'd say...and he'd call him Charlie, call him Charlie and whatever Charlie told him to do he would do, never mind what it was. So he cautioned him he didn't dare open that door, he wanted to be on the

door, and he said yes, so he gave him the job. Well he said don't dare let anybody in that hasn't got a ticket, they've got to pay to come in to keep this Bisteddfod going and he said don't let anybody in if they were under the influence of drink, nothing like that could come in, he had to watch that. That was his charge, of that door. So anyhow, complaints came in and said what about having a box a questionnaire box for putting what we would like to happen at the Bisteddfod, see, things that we want changed. So your Pop he said right-o if you want it we'll have a box there you can all put what you want, what you want altered, what sections you want altered or what adjudicators, anything wrong with the adjudicators and I'll see what I can do about it. Put all your...drop them in this box, ballot box. So that was there. Well there was very few complaints came in about how the thing was run but one 'specially, complaint came out that everybody was hysterical, all the requests was, get rid of the big lug off the door. That was the fellow who did his job so well, they didn't like it, they couldn't sneak in you see so they put a thing in the ballot box, get rid of the big lug off the door.

LISA: I remember once he wouldn't let mum in.
NANA: That's right. He was very, very good.
LISA: What sort of things did the ladies committee do?
NANA: Well they had a table in the hall where they made out all the sections. Every section of every item and they put the winner on it and how many points they got from the adjudicator and they were sold, even at the table.
LISA: How much were they sold for?
NANA: They were sold for about oh I think...
LISA: Two cents or something...
NANA: Yes something like that it was...might have gone up to about, perhaps 3 pence or six pence at one time I don't know. But they bought them and they would rush straight up after the event was given you know, after the adjudication was given, they'd rush straight up and want their paper see it was a paper they put on then...
LISA: And they helped to run the...
NANA: And it gave them advice on the paper too so they weren't only buying thier marks they got for the section but it gave them advice from the adjudicator. What he or she thought they could have improved on see so it was really a good thing for them to buy they were...everyone sold.
LISA: And that money went back into the Bisteddfod.
NANA: That went back in to pay see every penny went back into the Bisteddfod there was no money for anybody it was all voluntary work.
LISA: Well then I think to finish this off I'd like you to sing the Welsh National anthem for me, would you?
NANA: This is where I'll quiver.
LISA: No you won't, just do it normal.
NANA: No I can't...no, let me quiet down.
LISA: Just natural.

NANA: Wait till I quiet down. I'll think I'm singing this just for Lisa cause I'm nearly 82 you don't have that Welsh singing voice that I had when I was young you see

LISA: That doesn't matter.

NANA: Now then,
Mae hen wlad fy nhadau yn annwyl i mi
Gwlad beirdd a chantorion, enwogion o fri,
Ei gwrol ryfelwyr, gwladgarwyr tra mad,
Dros ryddid collasant eu gwaed.
Gwlad, gwlad, pleidiol wyf i'm gwlad
Tra mor yn fur i'r bur hoff bau
O bydded i'r hen iaith barhau.

LISA: Do you know it in the English words?

NANA: Yes I think I do.

LISA: You think you do, give it a go.

NANA: Wales, Wales
My mothers sweet home is in Wales
Till death depart my love will last
My longing my yearning for Wales.
That's all I'll sing in English.

LISA: That's good, thankyou very much.

NANA: I hope that comes out not too bad. Oh who's going to listen to this!

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Signed A.M. James

Date SATURDAY 29th JULY 1989

Interviewer L.M. Williams