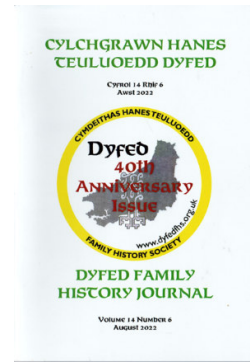


Have I Finally Struck Gold?

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This is a three part tale of mining – data as well as valuable metals. It is also a reminder of the need to keep revisiting online resources that you have used in the past to check whether new content has been uploaded.

Part 1 - The Article That Started It All

Every week or so I make a habit of checking what new Skyrme articles have appeared on The British Newspaper Archive (www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk). Its advanced search has a useful feature in that you can filter by the date content is uploaded. As I did one of my regular trawls in early 2019, this headline from *The People* of 13 June 1926 caught my eye,



The Chief Constable was that of Swansea, who was approached by a Californian firm of solicitors hunting for heirs of William Skyrme. The article goes on to report that William was thought to have been born in Portsmouth but then had a succession of jobs in Swansea before emigrating to America. Over his working life he was believed to have amassed a fortune worth anything from £20,000 to half a million.

At the time I wrote in the news section of my website (www.skyrme.info):

“This story has so intrigued me that I am keen to find out more about William and find out what ultimately happened. I haven't really started my hunt for gold yet - there is no William Skyrme born in Portsmouth or Swansea in my database - and it would help if we got to know his age. My family did live in Portsmouth at the time, but if they made a successful claim it didn't get passed down to me! So, if any of you know about this William, please let me know.”

Part 2 – Millionaire Miner: Fact or Fiction?

I then decided that I would do some data rather than gold mining. I went into my downloaded but unprocessed newspaper articles to refresh my memory. There, a few entries above *The People* article (and it had been sitting in my computer since 2014!) was an article from *The Nevada State Journal* of 16th August 1925 headed "Millionaire Maker Dies at Advanced Age of 92". The article is quite effusive about William's exploits. During his lifetime he was a foreman and superintendent of some 20 mines from Butte (Montana) to others in Nevada, Utah, California and South America (he is said to have spent 4 years there). He is described as at one time the right hand man of Marcus Daly who made his first millions by exploiting copper seams in the silver mines at Butte, to take advantage of growing demand for electric cables. It is said that William made millionaires of mine owners in four states.

As for his character, 'Bill' is described as a big Welshman "fearless, independent and fair, but always demanding a full day's work from his workers." And later in the article: "Good-natured, shrewd, strong, with an average man's body but the strength of iron". It then described an incident where he was stabbed in the stomach but held his wound in one hand while breaking his stabber's jaw with the other.



Virginia City 1867-7. US National Archives and Records Administration Ref: NAID 519492.

By searching various online sources (including mining history websites and US Geological Survey reports), I was able in March 2019 to put together something of a timeline of his life in the USA:

- 1860: Arrived at Virginia City, Nevada in February after a long trek (which passed over the current site of the city of Reno) in which he walked over snow-covered mountains and saved his frost-bitten leg with a poultice of bread and tea leaves; the world's largest deposit of gold and silver had been found there the previous year
- 1864: Listed as a resident in Aurora, Nevada (now a ghost town, some 100 miles from Virginia City); it is here that he is said to have known Mark Twain

- 1864: Married Janette Love, Virginia City
- 1870: Possible census entry Virginia City (spelt Schraum but other facts fit)
- 1878: Appointed as county assessor of Storey County, Nevada (the county of which Virginia City is the capital)
- 1879: Married (A)delia Higgins in Virginia City; with her there in 1880 census
- 1900: Anaconda, Montana - shown as superintendent of the High Ore Mine, of 223 workers; a US Geological Survey lists a Skyrme vein among the list of mining fissures
- 1925: San Francisco - died Saturday 15th August.

I have not yet found him in any US censuses after 1880. Also, previously I had not searched early enough in UK sources, since I did not appreciate how old he was when he died. His age at death of 92 and ages in the 1870 and 1880 censuses of 34 and 44 indicated that he was born around 1833-6. The Skyrmes from Pembrokeshire did not move to Swansea or Portsmouth until much later in the 19th century, so perhaps William emigrated directly from another part of Wales rather than Swansea as suggested by the article in *The People*.

So in March 2019 I was no nearer to solving the mystery of who William Skyrme was, until...

WEDSDAY MAY 27 1926

CARDIGAN

Several reports then ...

An American Fortune.—Inspector David Evans, Cardigan, has received the following communication from the Estates and Heirs Incorporated, 25, California-street, San Francisco, U.S.A. —“Would you be so kind as to inform us if any relatives of one William Skyrme, born in Wales on October 18th, 1835, are living in Cardigan or vicinity? There were also two sisters in the Skyrme family.

Part 3 – William Identified

In February 2022, almost exactly three years after the uploading of *The People* article, this article from the *Welsh Gazette* of 27 May 1926 appeared on the British Newspaper Archive website.

It even gives William’s birthdate - 18th October 1835. It goes on to mention sisters Sarah and Anne. Sarah married a John James and Anne married a Richard Sutton. It

says that enquiries have identified a Samuel Sutton, a farm servant at the Old Castle, Cardigan. It gives information about what has been found about the Sutton and James descendants concluding:

“The name Sutton is therefore peculiar to the district, and has probably become lost in recent years by marriage. There are good chances of Anne Sutton, who might have married a Davies, Jones, Williams or Evans, being still in the district.”

Knowing William’s birthdate and names of his sisters, I found him in my database where he had been recorded about seven years ago. He was baptised in Llangwm, Pembrokeshire on 25th October 1835, the son of William Skyrme of Llangwm and Elizabeth Jones from Burton. He is descended from mariners, ferrymen and watermen. In fact in 1849, aged 14, he became

a merchant seaman apprentice. He is described as “growing with a fair complexion and can write. Indentured to Hugh Taylor, Tower Hill London on vessel Thomas Kanion”. The next reference I found for him was as the father of Elizabeth, born in Lynn, Massachusetts in 1884 whose mother was Adelia Higgins. It’s just that I had not mined my database deep enough to connect my Californian William to the one in Massachusetts!

What the *Welsh Gazette* article misses is that William was one of eight children. As well as the two sisters mentioned (and I had already identified their spouses) he had three more sisters as well as two brothers. His younger brother Peter married Frances Mason and they had 8 children, some of whose descendants are living today. So there could have been many more heirs than originally conjectured.

So Have I Struck Gold?

Well, I’ve certainly mined one seam, of silver at least. I now know that William, the miner who made his fortune, was not from Swansea or Portsmouth, but Llangwm by the River Cleddau. But perhaps I won’t really strike gold until I find the end result. Did the heir hunters in California find William’s descendants? All of them or just the descendants of sisters Sarah and Anne? And how much was the final fortune?

So perhaps there will be a part 4. And perhaps one of the readers of this journal will have inherited a share of William’s fortune and already know the answers.

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