



John Atherton, October 22, 2012

Oral History Interview with John Atherton

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape- and video-recorded interview with John Atherton, a retired Emporia attorney, held October 22, 2012. The interview took place at the Howe House in Emporia, Kansas, and was conducted by Jim Hoy for a Kansas Humanities Council-supported grant to document the history and legacy of a two-story stone farmhouse built in 1867 by Richard Howe, an immigrant from Wales, who was a stone mason and carpenter. The house was deeded to the Lyon County Historical Society in the will of Sarah Genevieve Howe in 1995 and is open for public viewing.

Jim Hoy (JH): John, thanks for agreeing to do this. What is your ethnicity? Welsh, German?

John Atherton (JA): Welsh, both sides Welsh.

JH: Atherton is a Welsh name?

JA: No, it's English, I have a great grandfather that was an Englishman but he had the right mind to marry a Welsh girl.

JH: What was your mother's maiden name?

JA: Jones

JH: You've lived in this community all your years?

JA: Yes, my parents were born here and my grandparents came here right after the Civil War.

JH: So they were early settlers in Emporia and Lyon County. Did they settle in town or the country?

JA: My great grandfather Owen settled on a farm on Upper Dry Creek in about 1870, not too far from where you live now. He planted crops, built a cabin, then went back to Wales to get his family; he had four daughters and a wife. The eldest daughter and the wife decided they would come later. The three younger daughters were very eager to

come; they arrived in October of 1871. They lived in this cabin out on, I think it's the, I can't remember the name of the people who own it now. There were 100 acres there. That first winter they were short of food. He was a good shot; he stood in the doorway and shot prairie chickens. As a result my grandmother could not stand a prairie chicken. They lived all winter off prairie chickens. He died in 1875 from a sunstroke during harvest; he was a minister at the school, before Sardis Church was built. He preached at Sardis after it was built in 1872. He wasn't the sole pastor, he was kind of a fill in, and he had gone to school in Breckinshire in south Wales. He wanted land and wanted to farm. He left three daughters and a wife and the eldest daughter; they never did come. The mother tried to get the daughters to come back to Wales but the daughters did not want to come back. One of them married my grandfather in 1876 and the other one married Edward Lewis in 1878 and died in 1880, and the one that married my grandfather died in 1886 leaving two children, they lost two. The youngest daughter married my grandfather. She took care of the children and they had two little children, named Beatrice and my father Oliver, who was born in 1890. In 1895 my grandmother took the two younger children over to Wales to settle her mother's estate and the little girl Beatrice died over there and was buried there on top of her grandmother's coffin. My father grew up in Emporia and was a lawyer here from about 1914 to his death in 1933. I have out lived all my grandparents.

JH: Who all did you know in the Howe family?

JA: Well I knew Jane Howe, the mother of the three sisters, I remember her quite well. They were all from Bethany Church. Bethany Church was located at 2nd and Merchant Street on the northwest corner where there is now a warehouse. Bethany church came into existence in about 1868. The first church was built on that corner; the second church was built there replacing the first in about 1880. It was torn down in 1986. The Howe sisters and I actually had a lot to do with that. Bethany was the second Congregational church [in Emporia]; it had pretty much ceased to exist in the late '20s, early '30s.

JH: What was the first Congregational church?

JA: It was located at 8th and Mechanic.



Howe House, Emporia, KS

JH: So Sardis was a different Congregational church?

JA: Yeah. Sardis was a Congregational church [four miles south of Emporia], built about 1870. It was originally where Chamnis School is.

JH: What was your connection with the [Howe] girls and the Bethany church?

JA: We were the only survivors of any members, except there was one lady still a member, she was up in her 90's, her name was Jones, but I can't think of her first name. She had not been active in the church for many years but she was still a member on the list. The church had worried the Howe sisters for many years. I think Charlotte Wilson was the one I had originally known, and she was the eldest of the three girls. She had always been active in that church. Priscilla and Sarah Genevieve, I don't know where Priscilla was, she was probably teaching. Sarah Genevieve was teaching in Winfield; she was, had joined, I believe, the Episcopal Church there. But they still had a connection with Bethany. Of course there was no longer an active congregation. They needed some help; they wanted to do something for the church. What had been done was to lease the church to newly formed churches. That was done once or twice before I got involved in the '50s. Churches naturally want to expand and keep going. They didn't feel like they could do it in the old building. Finally it came to the point where we had to do something with the building. We got very serious about it when the building was broken into. Finally it came to the point where we boarded it up. Some kids broke in one time and did a lot of damage. It was in need of great repair. It was agreed that the monies would go to the First Congregational church; a large number of the membership at Bethany had gone to the First Congregational church.

JH: Did Mr. Howe help build any of these churches?

JA: I don't know; he might have. I'm sure he had something to do with it because he was a member. If he wasn't the contractor he was still alive and active. I know he built the first quarters of the courthouse in 1866. I would imagine he was the prime contractor.

JH: So you knew the mother and you knew the three sisters.

JA: Yes. Mrs. Howe was dead by this time; I think she died in 1954.

You're talking about Jane Howe?

JH: Yes. Did you know her early on?

JA: I knew her when I was a child.

JH: What was she like?

JA: I can remember she was a white haired and attractive little lady. She and my grandmother were friends, but there was quite an age discrepancy. I think there was about 20 years between her husband, Robert, and Jane. My grandmother was born in 1858 so she would have been about two years younger than Robert; I think he was born in 1856. I looked for it before I came. I can remember a Christmas card that came from Mrs. Howe, Jane, that she had sent to my grandmother and aunt. There was a picture; I think they had a picnic table out of stone maybe and she was sitting by the house and she is seated at the table. I know I haven't thrown it away. I just couldn't find it.

JH: If you find it, please let us know. What were the three girls like? What was Charlotte like?

JA: Charlotte I knew the best. Charlotte was the librarian at Lowther Junior High School South. She and my sister became very good friends. She became a very close friend of Barbara Jean Wilson and Barbara Jean Wilson was the daughter of Dr. Clyde Wilson. When Barbara Jean's mother died, Barbara Jean got Dr. Wilson and Charlotte together for marriage. So Charlotte became Mrs. Wilson. She was always very active in Bethany Church; she was secretary in the St. David's Day Society. She was quite active. She kept great minutes and things like that. She was really a lovely person, I enjoyed her greatly, and she was great with the students. She was the one that I knew the best. The younger two were gone from Emporia when I was growing up. I can remember coming down here [to the Howe House] with my grandmother and my aunt. This would have been in the early 1930's when I was quite small; that was probably my earliest memory of this place.

JH: Visiting the house in the early '30s?

JA: Yes. I didn't really get to know Priscilla or Sarah Genevieve until I came back to Emporia to practice law in 1955, and they had come

back in retirement. I got to know them, of course, through Bethany Church.

JH: So you came to visit here [the Howe House] with your mother, you say?

JA: With my grandmother. My mother went to work; she became the register of deeds and I spent quite a bit of time at grandmother's. I guess that's where I got my liking for history, local history in particular.

JH: When you visited, was it at a holiday time?

JA: I don't know. People in those days would just visit on some Sunday afternoon, would just go visiting. I can remember you never went visiting with anyone unless you had tea. I can remember several times you'd have to sit there while everyone talked. Kids were silent in those days; they were seen and not heard.

JH: Priscilla came back; did you have much contact with her? What was she like?

JA: Priscilla as I remember was a very easy going, very nice person. Somewhat slim. Similar to Charlotte.

JH: Did Priscilla live in the house with Sarah?

JA: Yes. Their mother was dead by that time. By the time I had come back she had died not too long before, I guess. Priscilla and Sarah Genevieve lived here, as I understand both in retirement in that time.

JH: What was Sarah Genevieve like during that time?

JA: Somewhat different. She knew what she wanted, very sure of herself. They had all this connection to Bethany Church and it bothered them greatly; they felt a duty since there was no one else around. They weren't going to take it over or anything, they just felt a duty to the old church, which I certainly appreciated. There were the old pews; the old walnut pews from the 1868 church were located in the basement of the church. We brought them down and stored them in the barn here. Then we took the pulpit set and put it in the basement. They worried about the pews. They wanted the courthouse at Cottonwood Falls to take them, and they thought that would be an ideal place for them. They were solid walnut.

JH: Were they made locally?

JA: Oh yeah they were made in the old furniture factory down on the [Cottonwood] river. That was the factory right across the river from Soden's Mill, it was the Emporia Furniture Factory, and they made furniture, they made coffins, they made all sorts of things. In fact I got my great grandfather's funeral bill and it was a walnut coffin, 25 dollars, and that was the funeral bill the whole thing. I remember when we had the sale at the Soden's estate. Peggy Soden had a couple of beautiful end tables that had been made in the furniture factory. They were lovely. They made rough stuff and pretty stuff there, very interesting.

JH: I know some of the Welsh were quite handy with woodwork. Were Welsh people working in that factory, do you know?

JA: I imagine there were some there, but I don't know of anybody. The pews later went to the First Congregational Church and were sold. Part of them, we used some scraps on some cupboards we had made; they were boards put together with square nails. They were a 5/4 board, planed down to about a solid inch, which is a lot of board to work with. Nowadays things are made out of 3/4 inch boards. Those boards were a full inch and quite heavy.

JH: Do you remember seeing the Howe women around town?

JA: Oh yes.

JH: What would they be doing?

JA: I saw them in my office quite a bit, when we were talking about what to do for the church, then I would see them at activities like St. David's Day. They were always there.

JH: Have you gone to most of the St. David's Day celebrations?

JA: Oh yeah. Most of my life. I gave it up [the presidency] in the late '90s, but I can remember my dad being president of it. Well my granddad was the first president of it. Originally St. David's Day was organized at Bethany for the purpose of raising money to pay the preacher. It was, my granddad J. A. was the first president. It was held in Bethany through the 1920s and I can remember it was moved to Second Presbyterian in 1938. I believe it was then held at the First Congregational Church right before the war in '41 and the opening of

the civic auditorium. Owen Samuel was the president that year and he wanted to have it in the civic auditorium. I think I was gone at the time; I don't remember doing it there.

JH: Did you participate? Were you apart of the choir or anything?

JA: I was when I came back in 1955 until the late '90s.

JH: Did any of the Howe sisters sing?

JA: I don't recall them singing in the choir.

JH: On St. David's Day?

JA: No, never saw them sing there. Actually by the time I got to singing in the choir, it was held over at the Second Presbyterian Church. That's where we sang. David Isaac was the pastor at the time.

JH: Is Second Presbyterian called Westminster?

JA: It became that around '57, '58.

JH: Did you do any other legal work for the Howe sisters?

JA: No. I think Don Krueger did that. I did do something for them about some land; I think it was out in New Mexico. That's all I can remember.

JH: Do you remember what that was?

JA: I think it was a mine of some sort.

JH: What other memories do you have of this house or the Howe girls?

JA: I remember when the addition was put on. I really had nothing to do with that but I do remember them saying that they had tried to get Trevor Lewis, an architect and a cousin of mine, to design it. He was too busy or something; he was busy at the time and it was a big contract. I think they got someone from Winfield. Someone Sarah Genevieve knew. I was in the house from time to time. I remember coming over here after Charlotte died in '79. Sarah Genevieve, Priscilla, and I visiting. I was over here from time to time in the barn.

JH: What all did they keep in the barn besides walnut pews?

JA: I can remember there was a corn sheller, and it seems to me there may have been a cider mill or something of that nature. There used

to be quite an orchard here I know.

JH: Do you remember where the outhouse was?

JA: It was way out this way. I really can't pinpoint it. I do remember a porch on this house though; there was a porch when I would come here. It was there for years. I don't know when it was torn down. I must have been gone. I was gone from Emporia from 1943 to about 1955.

JH: You mentioned earlier that the girls kind of felt a duty to Bethany Church; I think they felt that with this house too. Could you talk about that any?

JA: Yes, they felt, I think, I don't know if I should say this but I think Sarah Genevieve would have preferred to have it bulldozed down than to have anyone else living in it. I knew there was one boy that grew up in the neighborhood that wanted it quite badly. He didn't get it of course; they wanted the house to go for this purpose. I think it's great. In other words, almost a shrine to an earlier generation. That's the way they felt toward Bethany Church. They wanted that building to be a memorial or shrine to the members of Bethany in the years past, but that wasn't very practical. When it was bulldozed down some of the supports, the metal iron supports had deteriorated and it was just a matter of the masonry [holding it up], it was a good thing it was taken down when it was. That would have been in 1986. Charlotte was gone by that time and I guess Priscilla was gone by that time, too. It was hard for Sarah Genevieve, I know. It was something that had to be faced and she did.

JH: Did the girls attend church regularly?

JA: I really don't know. They didn't attend church at the First Congregational, I think Sarah Genevieve did tell me she joined the Episcopal church probably down in Winfield, but I don't know if she attended here or not.

JH: Did you go to the funerals of any of the girls?

JA: I remember going to Sarah Genevieve's and I think Priscilla's. I went to Charlotte's.

JH: Were they held in a church, a funeral home?

JA: It's strange; I've been to so many funerals I don't know. I do remember being at the cemetery for Sarah Genevieve's graveside

service. I think there was a group from the historical society there, too. She was buried up at Greenwood Cemetery, Upper Dry Creek.

CATHY HOY: Upper Dry Creek Cemetery was Greenwood?

JA: Yes, and Lower Dry Creek was Evergreen Cemetery. I don't know when they took those names, a little fancier. They are both originally Welsh cemeteries.

CATHY HOY: Did they talk about their grandfather?

JA: Yeah. They knew him. I think he died about 1910. He was 100 years older than I. Their grandmother died earlier. I think I saw one time she died around 1896. She was a really fine person, the grandmother. I can remember this story; they would look after the younger Welsh people in the community and took it upon themselves to see that they got along. I can remember my grandfather and my great aunt lost two babies in 1883 at the same time. They both died on Mrs. Howe's lap, so she was there helping neighbors. Of course they lived in this house at the time. I think at the time my grandparents were living. They had a place down where the old branch crossed over Logan Avenue and there is an addition there now. My grandfather was a butcher by trade; he would do his butchering there. He had his house there. They would have been neighbors. They always thought very highly of the Howes. Richard had a sister, Sarah Howe Owen; she had a daughter, Lucille Owen, who was a first cousin of the Howe sisters. She had a restaurant in Topeka on Kansas Avenue, east side of the street. Every time we went to Topeka, my grandmother and I, we always ate at Lucille's. They always had a big visit. There was a close family connection. They were close friends.

JH: The Welsh community was pretty strong, I guess, in this area.

JA: They looked after each other.

JH: What do you think the significance of the Howe house is to Emporia and Lyon County?

JA: I think it's great. A real attraction. It was beautifully preserved by the girls and taken care of by three generations I should say. It is certainly a living memorial to the first generation and I think it is a real asset to the community. I've been to Wales and I've seen a lot of Welsh farmhouses. While they all differ it depends on where you live

in Wales. A lot of grey stones. You don't see too much the color of this house, but this color is unique to our area and that's the way it was in Wales. The farmhouses in Wales, slate or rock roofs. We were over there and I got some roofing material from the house where my grandmother was born, slate on the house and rock on the barn. The rocks were long and thin, about two inches thick. They had a hole drilled in the end. They had a unique system of drilling it, and then they would hang those rocks on pegs. They have unique building methods. The whole thing was very interesting.

JH: They used what was available and that's what I guess Richard Howe did; he used what was available here.

JA: Right. They had a lot of slate in Wales and a lot of rock. Yet Wales is a small area, but you'll find very different types of buildings from one area to the next. Particularly the way barns are attached. Some places they are not attached. Like the houses by water, by the ocean, built completely different. They are built into the sides of the hill. A lot of hills and mountains in Wales.

JH: Do you have any family in Wales now?

JA: Oh yeah. When we were over there. My grandmother was an Owen. While there weren't any Owens there, there were a lot Watkins, Lewis, living in the same houses. In one of these houses where my great grandparents lived there was a chest, up on the third floor. The story was that when my great-great-great-grandfather was in the field, a robber came and demanded the family silver. My great-great-great-grandmother took the robber up to this chest on the third floor, opened it up and the guy was little. And he jumped in. When he did, she slammed it shut, blew the horn, the men came in from the field, and took him out of the chest and hanged him up in the backyard. I found that story out when I was visiting the house, it all came together. My grandmother used to say, "Oh they don't have crimes in Wales because they hang everybody." That's where she got it I'm sure.

JH: That's a great story. Thanks a lot. This is very interesting and you gave us some good information.