

GRIFFITHS, EDWIN STEPHEN (1868-1930), businessman and philanthopist

Name: Edwin Stephen Griffiths
Date of birth: 1868
Date of death: 1930
Parent: Rachel Griffiths (née Davies)
Parent: Gwilym Griffiths
Gender: Male
Occupation: businessman and philanthopist
Area of activity: Business and Industry; Philanthropy
Author: D. Hugh Matthews

Edwin Stephen Griffiths, the son of Gwilym and Rachel Griffiths (née Davies), was born in Pengam, Bedwelty, Monmouthshire, on 26 August 1869. He was educated in the local school and attended the Baptist chapel in the village. It is said that he had aspirations to become a Baptist minister and entertained hopes of entering the Baptist Academy in Pontypool (the forerunner of South Wales Baptist College in Cardiff). However, he left school at an early age to begin work in a local coal mine. Within a few years, the dust in the mine took its toll on his health, and he contracted silicosis. With money loaned to him, he emigrated in 1886 to live with an uncle in Scranton, Pennsylvania, with the intention of moving on to Denver, Colorado, when his health improved. The next years were spent completing his education while his health was being restored. In 1892 he moved to Cleveland, Ohio, where he contracted typhoid. There he remained and began a course in a local business school where he learned typing, shorthand and book-keeping. He also became active in the Welsh community in the suburb of Newburg, attending Trinity Baptist Church and being involved in local eisteddfodau.

His health restored, he displayed signs that he possessed business skills, and in the following years the foundations were laid for the wealth that he was to gather. Having been involved in several businesses, he formed his own company, Cleveland Machine and Manufacturing. As a successful businessman he joined the Free Masons in 1899, and rose quickly in the movement to become the Grand Master of the State of Ohio in 1912. He sold Cleveland Machine and Manufacturing in 1915 for a considerable sum and during the next years served on the boards of a number of machine and manufacturing companies.

In Cleveland he met Margaret Rusk whom he married on 31 December 1902. Although she was born in Cleveland, her forebears were said to have emigrated from Wales to America in Colonial times. She herself had attended the New England Conservatory of Music and was a music teacher, committed to things musically Welsh, and she was also an accomplished pianist and organist. When they married, Margaret Rusk had wealth of her own and knew how best to invest it; it was largely due to her financial expertise that the family fortune survived the Wall Street Crash of 1929.

In 1920, his health in decline once again, Edwin and Margaret Griffiths decided to set up a Trust for the support and comfort of family members in Wales, using the money that both had brought into the marriage. Two Welsh charities would also eventually benefit, viz. South Wales Baptist College, Cardiff, and the National Eisteddfod.

Edwin Stephen Griffiths returned to Wales only once, in 1921; but he never forgot his upbringing, and his interest in his church and in Welsh culture did not diminish. It was his love of singing and things Welsh that prompted him to fund the journey of the Cleveland Orpheus Male Voice Choir to compete in the National Eisteddfod held in Swansea in 1926. The venture cost him some 20,000 dollars and the choir won the first prize of £100 in the main competition for male voice choirs numbering 60 or over. Seventeen male voice choirs competed that year.

Edwin Stephen Griffiths died suddenly on 25 January 1930, and was laid to rest in Lake View Cemetary, Cleveland - his elderly father was still alive when he died. Margaret Griffiths' involvement with the Trust continued until her death in 1968. She negotiated small changes to the Trust, and as family members who benefited from the Trust died, other American charities were included; but South Wales Baptist College and the National Eisteddfod continue to be the main beneficiaries of the Trust.

An oil painting of Edwin Stephen Griffiths hangs in South Wales Baptist College, Cardiff.

Author

D. Hugh Matthews, (1936 - 2020)

Sources

Ninnau: The North American Welsh Newspaper, especially Vol. 31, No. 10 August 1, 2006

The records of the National Eisteddfod

South Wales Baptist College Records, including the Annual Report for the year ending 31 March 1953

The website of the Masonic Order

Additional Links

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