



*Rows of stacked shells ready to be sent to the “Front” during the First World War (1914-1918) at the old glassworks site called the “Sutton Bond”. This was later a silk works and the British Sidac Cellophane factory.*

## **Chapter 16: 1917 - The Race and Ice Cracking at Billy Wood's Pottery, Moss Brook. Our Nell's Jack and Arthur Mills.**

It was 1947, just after the Second World War. I was working as a maintenance joiner at British Sidac cellophane manufacturers, Lancots Lane in Sutton. Next to a low railway bridge, was the office building that was used by the old glassworks and the Sidac firm. It still stands to this present day, 1987. A similar brick building was used as a general store by the glassworks. In 1947, it was used by Sidac for many purposes. The ground floor was used for coke storage, for heating installations in the general office and for the building itself. The second floor, was used as a joiners' department. The top floor was the conversion department, where the printing machines were installed. These had been brought from the parent firm in Belgium and were worked by girls and older women. The workers were supervised by three to four men who set the print and supervised the machines. This large brick building has been demolished.

I was repairing the wooden floor in the conversion room, when I saw at the doorway, the small figure of a man standing there. He would be a little below average height, slimly built, neatly dressed and wearing a pair of highly polished clogs upon his feet. There was a familiar look about him, that I could not place at first. I studied his face. It was long. I would describe him as "lantern faced" with ruddy features. Behind his spectacles, were a pair of very sharp eyes. Over his left arm, hung several lengths of leather belts and in his right hand, was a bag containing a hammer, belt fasteners, and a couple of sharp knives. He walked towards me and nodded his head. I smiled at him and beckoned him to come over. "Hello, you seem familiar to me but I cannot place you as yet". I mentioned places that I had worked, but we drew a blank. Then he said "could it be skating?" "That's it" I said. It must be thirty years ago at Billy Wood's pottery at Moss Nook when the flash of water was frozen over. I was only a small boy near the end of the First World War in 1917. He told me his name. It was Arthur Mills, a figure skater from Haydock. On that Saturday afternoon, he had been approached to give a figure skating exhibition and to race against none other than Jack Hill from Billinge. Jack Hill was a champion skater of Carr Mill fame and was known as "Our Nell's Jack". Arthur then told me he would have been about 31 or 32 in 1917. Jack Hill would be about 58 years old, still of athletic build and a very fit man. He was very fast and a match for Arthur, whose strong point was figure skating. In the early part of the century, skating was a popular sport and pastime in the hard winters we experienced after the hot summers. In that year of 1917, my two older brothers came home and said that a poster had been pinned up in the window of Jim Douglas's chip shop in Junction Lane. It was alongside posters advertising other sporting fixtures. It said that a grand skating contest was to be held at Billy Wood's pottery between "Our Nell's Jack" of Billinge and the figure skater, Arthur Mills, of Haydock. After dinner that Saturday afternoon, we produced from a shelf in the back kitchen, three pairs of skates. One pair differed from the others. They were to be worn by me and were called the "dummy skates". They were for me to learn on.

All three of us set off that afternoon and what a sight that was to see. The flash was black with people winding in and out of each other on their skates. On the sides were braziers of hot coals, heating chestnuts and hot potatoes, cooked in their jackets. After a while, an official shouting through a trumpet, asked everyone to move off the ice. This was to allow Arthur Mills to give his exhibition of figure skating. Arthur skated onto the

centre of the flash. This was the very first time that I had set eyes on him. He was a very agile and skilful skater. When he had finished, he was clapped and applauded by all the spectators ringing the frozen flash. Then it was announced that in three quarters of an hour, the race would be on. The champion skater “our Nell’s Jack” versus Lancashire figure skating champion, Arthur Mills.

The time for the race arrived and all the skaters moved inward to form two lines, with a lane in-between them of about five or six yards. The two contestants could be seen with tight jerkins on and belted around the waist. At the starting point, we could hear shouting. The betting men were shouting the odds and it was announced through the trumpet, that Jack Hill would give Arthur Mills some yards start to make a race of it. The two contestants stood crouched, ready for the off. However, curiosity got the better of some spectators, who moved inwards to get a better view, concentrating the weight of spectators in the centre. A tremendous cracking noise was heard from one end to the other and self preservation took command as people fled to safety. It was pandemonium. People were falling over each other in frantic bids to get to the sides. The ice did not break, it held, but the interest of the people hadn’t. People took their skates off and made their way home to warmth and security including my two brothers and myself.

Very few must have seen the outcome of the race. It was thirty years later that I learned from Arthur Mills the fact that “our Nell’s Jack” had beaten him. Both of them had admitted that they had never skated faster than on that day. Fear and the loud cracking noise had lent them wings to reach the far point of the race at the finish.