



No. 256 March 2020

From the President

IMPORTANT NOTICE

In view of the current rising health crisis, the instructions of federal and state governments (likely soon to be more severe), and the decisions of bodies similar to our own, the Council of the Historical Society of South Australia has **cancelled the General Meetings for 3 April and 1 May (this includes the postponement of the Annual General Meeting).**

The Society will continue to stay in touch with the membership, by means of newsletters, emails, and other messages as appropriate. We shall advise on the June General Meeting in due course.

We look forward to a speedy return to normal life, with monthly meetings.

In the meantime, we wish the membership and readers a continuance of good health in this difficult time.

From the President

A gentle reminder that **subscriptions** to the Historical Society of South Australia were due in January. If you have not yet paid, please do so promptly with the form sent with the January newsletter.

A reminder that the January newsletter was accompanied by a form to allow you to nominate for the **Keain Medal** a book on South Australian history that was published in 2019. The deadline for submission has been extended to 17 April.

Regrettably the speaker scheduled for our March meeting withdrew because of illness, but we are pleased to report that Patricia Sumerling stepped in at short notice and gave a fine talk on Bert Edwards, 'King of the West End', the subject of her recently published biography (Wakefield Press 2019). Thank you, Patricia!

Contributing to SA's History



I am currently the custodian of a huge cache of photographs and documents that belonged to my late aunt. Among the treasures is this intriguing photograph, which carries no written explanation.

I myself am guilty of putting off indefinitely the labelling of photographs. Perhaps you are too?

Maybe during the comparative isolation that now faces all of us, we can set to and label all those old photographs - for the sake of posterity, family history, and general history? Just a thought.

EDITOR



"It is customary for unscrupulous midwives and nurses to sew the bodies of infants to some corner, near Adelaide, with a £1 fine to the grave-digger to bury them quietly out of the way." - *John Fisher*

THE DARK SIDE OF CEMETERIES

by Patricia Sumerling

'It is customary for unscrupulous midwives and nurses to send the bodies of infants to some cemeteries near Adelaide with a 5s. fee to the grave-digger to bury them quietly out of the way'. *Frearson's Weekly*, supplement, 18 February 1882.

I found this cartoon (opposite) long after completing my 1983 history honours thesis *Infanticide, Baby-farming and Abortion in South Australia, 1870-1910*. Not able to use it at the time, I passed it on to Peter Morton for his 1996 publication *After Light: A history of the City of Adelaide and its council 1878-1928*.

The gallows-humour cartoon reveals what options were open to women who were determined to dispose of their infants at birth, by demonstrating it need not be difficult or hazardous. This criminal act was not difficult when mothers had the support of experienced midwives who knew how to arrange for 'stillborn' infants to be buried without questions being asked. George Lane Mullins, MA, MD of Sydney, wrote 'in the case of illegitimate children the fact that a stillbirth has not to be registered, coupled with a desire for secrecy, is an inducement to a certain class of midwives to ensure that the child is stillborn'.¹ The *Observer* for 4 February 1882, suggested it was not uncommon for midwives to arrange burials of so-called 'still-births'.

The City Coroner knew it was not an uncommon thing for a midwife or nurse to send an infant to a cemetery by some person with a message that it was still-born. For a fee of five shillings no further questions were asked. A grave-digger was in the habit of receiving these bodies, in a cool sort of way,

simply on the word that it was 'still-born'.²

Under scrutiny was the Hindmarsh Cemetery where the grave-digger was in the habit of burying infants if told that they were still-born and took no further action in the matter.³ This case came to light after a male child who had been born in January 1882, died minutes later where there was no qualified doctor or midwife in attendance to give a death certificate. However, attending the birth was an unqualified midwife, a Mrs Ellis, who arranged for the burial of the infant.⁴

Mr Reed, the chairman of the Destitute Asylum, gave evidence to the Destitute Act Commission in April 1884 that:

'At the Hindmarsh cemetery, three stillborn children were buried there in two months by a woman whose certificate, the council had forbidden the gravedigger to accept. In searching the Hindmarsh certificates for stillborn infants all were from this woman, although many others are acting as midwives. Apart from burials certified, the gravedigger has had repeated applications to bury alleged stillborn children without any certificate, and which he tells me he has refused.'⁵

The registration of stillbirths did not come about until 1926 when, not only were stillbirths to be registered, thus making a noticeable difference to statistics, but 28 week old miscarriages also. But until it became law, this loophole was used by helpful midwives who passed off murdered newly-borns as 'stillbirths'.

From Patricia Sumerling, *Infanticide, Baby-farming and Abortion in South Australia, 1870-1910*, University of Adelaide BA History Honours Thesis, 1983.

¹ GL Mullins, 'Registration of still births' in *The Australasian Medical Gazette*, 15/7/1894, p256.

² *The Adelaide Observer*, 4/2/1882, p27.

³ State Records, Coroner's Report Book, 18/1/1882

⁴ State Records, Coroner's Report Book, 18/1/1882

⁵ SAPP - *Second and Final Report of Commission Appointed to Report on the Destitute Act, 1881, together with Minutes of Proceedings, Evidence, and Appendices, 1885*, p34 of Evidence

LANDGIRL

In researching a centenary history for Seymour College (formerly Presbyterian Girls College) at Glen Osmond, Geoffrey Bishop came across this account by Jean Wilkinson of her summer work on her family's property at Renmark during wartime. Jean E. Wilkinson and her sister Pearl H. G. Wilkinson were daughters of Mr. A. Wilkinson of Murtho Park, north-east of Renmark, and were boarders at PGC. Jean left school in 1938 and Pearl in 1939. Nancy, who is referred to in the article, was Jean's first cousin Nancy K. Wilkinson who left PGC at the end of 1942. The article was published in the 1943 edition of The Black Watch, the college's magazine.

I hardly know where to start, as I have done so many different things: bag sewing at harvest time, fruit picking, mustering and yarding sheep, boundary riding, cutting up noxious weeds, rabbiting, fumigating, chaffcutting, and acting as general handyman.

Last summer I helped my father and brother Bill reap a crop of self-sown wheat. The weather was very hot, and we drank gallons of water and cold tea. I found it quite easy to drink two pints of tea straight off, and still feel thirsty in

half an hour! I sewed up the bags of wheat, emptied the reaper, and while Bill was filling the bags and putting them in rows ready for me to sew, I fed the winnower. My hands soon became hard from using the pitchfork, so I didn't suffer from blisters, and the hot sun and warm north winds tanned my face, arms, and legs a good brown which protected me from sunburn for the rest of the summer. The work was hot and the hours long, but the poor horses felt the heat more than we did; they even lost their appetites. We gave them a drink before and after their feed, and I helped to take the team out, slip their bits, and put on their nosebags before we had our dinner. We had a spell for an hour or so, chiefly for the horses' sakes, and then continued the job till sundown, with a break at four for tea and cake.

Each evening I rode home on my pony over the hills, along the river, to look at a flock of ewes and lambs. The sheep were so fat that if one lay down with her feet uphill, she couldn't get up again, and I rescued several ewes in such a predicament.

In the New Year I picked fruit for my brother-in-law in Renmark, as I had done the previous year, and tried my hand at all the stages in the process of drying fruit; I picked fruit, helped to load the trolley with full tins, and drive it back to the dip. I filled the dipping baskets, and dipped three or four just to see how hard it was. I wheeled the hand-cart stacked with tins of dipped fruit, and tipped them on to the rack, and learnt how to spread the fruit so that it would dry evenly and well. I helped to load the trolley with empty tins, and throw them off three at a time as the horse trotted between the rows of unpicked vines. It was a noisy procedure, and no pains were taken to make it less so; everyone, including myself, enjoyed this job.

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When the fruit was dry we shook it off in the evening. I crawled about in the dusk, spreading the hessians under the rack and pinning them in place with nails, and dragging them out again covered with dried fruit. I racked out the heaps of fruit on a long hessian, and helped to cover it up at night to keep off the dew. In the morning I raked it out again to get an even colour in the sun. The most exciting part was seeing the golden-brown fruit packed tightly in the sweat boxes, which were then stacked up ready to be taken to the packing shed.

I spent seven weeks this year and six weeks last year on the fruit-picking job, and enjoyed it immensely. I learnt quite a lot about fruit growing before coming home.

Between doing housework I went outback and helped to inspect the flocks for blowfly strike, dragged bogged sheep out of muddy dams, and mustered sheep for crutching outback in the crutching shed. I swept the board, picked up the wool, and helped to yard the sheep, and got very dusty and dirty.

In April we started to "clean up" the rabbits with a Lyne-gas-a-dust hand fumigator. Bill rode around the paddocks and found the burrows that were open and working, and Jim (home on leave from New Guinea) and I came along behind in the cart with our shovels, fumigator, and tucker box. Shovelling in the holes and turning the fumigator was strenuous work, but we laughed and joked, and had lots of fun. Once Bill dismounted to shoot a rabbit, and at the report of the rifle his hack trotted off. Jim and I were some distance away, and at Bill's shout of distress Jim set off post haste in the cart, picked up Bill, and after a rough ride through the scrub eventually caught the runaway. By the time Jim returned to where I was

fumigating, the poor draught horse was looking definitely hot and weary.

I boiled the billy at mid-day, and wherever we happened to be we ate our dinner and enjoyed a spell, when we discussed the war news, aeroplanes, or the improvements we would put into the place after the war. At sundown we put the horses in the yard, fed them, and came home in the truck. Next morning we went out-back again, harnessed the horse to the cart, and continued the job of ridding our property of Mr. Bunny.

Shearing time is always a busy one, and for the first week I was housekeeper and cook, with Nancy's assistance, as Mother was ill in bed. The job of cooking for ten people kept me busy all day long, and I was glad when Mother was well enough to take over. I then became a musterer, and spent most of the day in the saddle or yarding sheep. Unfortunately we had a very cold spell, and the sheep suffered badly. The rain we needed (and still need) so much didn't come, and the sheep had to do without green grass, and withstand the bitterly cold winds, too.

The water in dams became less and less each day, and so we erected two windmills, fenced in the dams, and pumped the water into tanks and out into troughs to make it hold out longer. I helped Dad and Bill put up the mills and fix the piping and troughs. I came home each night so dusty and greasy that I was hardly recognizable. It was cold, too, working up on the mill-stand in a strong icy wind; we called it a lazy wind, as it didn't trouble to go around but went straight through us.

Now all the dams are dry, except one; we are carting water outback, and pulling scrub to feed the sheep. Even so, the sheep are daily losing condition, and

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the paddocks are becoming dryer and nearer to drifting.

I helped to muster and yard several flocks of ewes and hoggets, and draft off the fattest for the butcher. Yarding, drafting, and catching sheep isn't exactly pleasant when accompanied by blinding clouds of dust, but I enjoy my life as a land girl, for it is varied and interesting, and getting dirty doesn't worry me as long as there are soap and water available at the day's end, and a cool river to swim in during the summer.

JEAN E. WILKINSON

This is an extract from a poem from the same edition – it is called 'Peace' and was written by fellow student Cynthia Cane ('41) who was from Yorke Peninsula.

The whole poem, four stanzas, is quite passionate and well composed. The War featured strongly in the war-time editions of the college's magazine. This is stanza 3 (the final one talks of peace):

The earth sobs loud with the sound of strife,

Its trees grow gaunt and bare,

And 'WAR' is writ with blood on its face,

That was so lovely and fair;

No longer rise men to till the soil,

With dawn's first flush in the sky,

They fight with hate and pride and lust,

And afterwards – they die!

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