

The Rainberd Story

By JEAN SCHMAAL

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Old newspapers are fascinating things to read, and reading through century-old publications can reward a researcher with all manner of discoveries. The editors of some of our early newspapers were not averse to putting their thoughts into print and their flow of colourful, if at times flowery, language has left us a valuable legacy in the columns of the old press. Take the Rainberd tragedy, for example.

Kapunda, some 50 miles north-east of Adelaide, was put on the map in 1842 with the discovery of copper in the district, this coming at a time when South Australia was experiencing a severe financial depression. By 1845 copper-mining was firmly established and a substantial town was growing up around a freshwater spring about half-a-mile from the mine. The community, which was a farming one as well as a mining one, was a peaceful, law-abiding one. There were still aborigines living in the district, apparently fitting into a useful place in the area as shearers, which was all the more reason for the residents of Kapunda and its surroundings to be horrified and shocked, when on March 11, 1861, Mrs. Mary Rainberd and her two children Emma and Robert were brutally murdered.

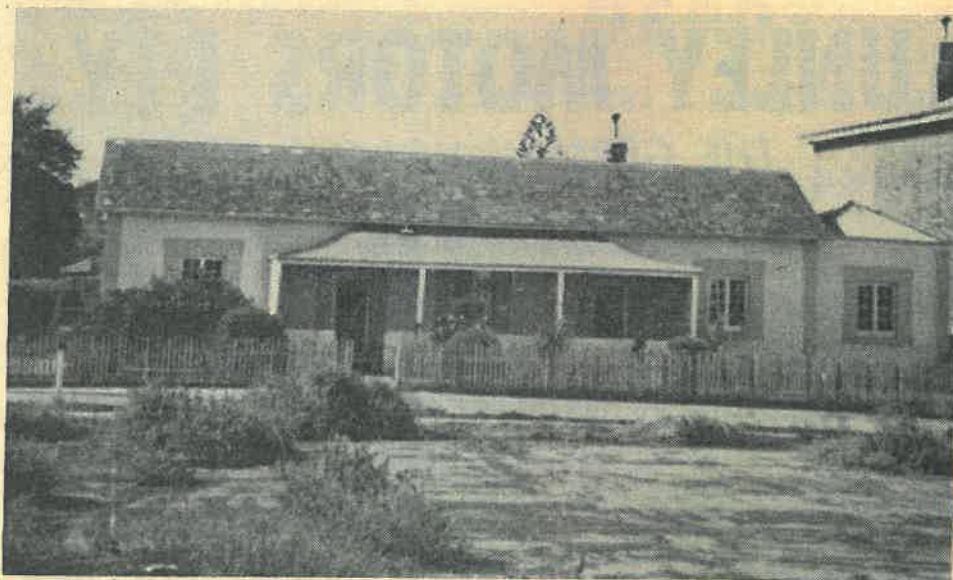
The Rainberds lived in a little hut about 10 miles N.-W. of Kapunda, where the father of the family followed the occupation of a wheelwright. Apparently running out of supplies, Rainberd had gone into the town to stock up, leaving his wife and family at home. On his return later in the day he found the home deserted, and a quick search having no results, he became alarmed and went for help. Search parties were quickly formed, but it was not until the evening of the following day that August Stief and William Bradshaw, two of the searchers, made a heart-

breaking and ghastly discovery. About 150 yards from the house, stuffed into wombat holes, were the bodies of the missing three—horribly mutilated through being bludgeoned to death. Prints of bare feet around the hole threw suspicion on a party of aborigines who had been in the neighbourhood the previous day.

The affair produced great consternation over the whole neighbourhood. The wives of shepherds and farmers accompanied their husbands to the fields and work rather than remain alone at home. The "Register" had this to say about the affair: "We are informed by a gentleman who knows Mr. Rainberd and his family that they were people greatly superior to the ordinary occupants of bush huts. The unfortunate mother is described to us as having been a woman of engaging demeanour and manners, and the children are said to have been fine interesting creatures, calculated to attract the favourable notice of even a casual passer-by as manifestly better than average specimens of colonial juvenility. One of them, the boy, was a lad of uncommon promise, and the more intelligent neighbours had already marked him as a child who in future years would make for himself an influential place in colonial history. But woman's gentleness and refinement, and childhood's most engaging forms, had no effect on the bloodthirsty wretches who brutally converted all this living and pleasing humanity into lifeless and almost shapeless carcases."

At the ensuing coroner's inquest, which was held immediately, the following verdict was returned: "That Mary Ann Rainberd, Emma Pickett Rainberd and Robert Rainberd were wilfully murdered by some person or persons unknown, and that strong suspicion is attached to the natives who have lately been seen

Former Police Station (Kapunda) occupied by Police at time of this story.



THE RAINBERD STORY . . .

in the neighbourhood." The foreman of the jury in giving his verdict to the Coroner commented at length on the great want and necessity of police protection for the Gilbert . . . the numerous settlers on the Gilbert were in great fear for the safety of their wives and families . . . it was too far to send either to Kapunda or Auburn when active assistance was required. He went on to say that the natives were in great fear of the police and that when they knew that officers were not very far off it had the effect of checking such horrible deeds as the one then before the community.

By this time police and every able-bodied man in the district were out searching for the men suspected of the outrage. It was subsequently found that they had scattered, but were tracked down. Constable G. Ayliffe, who at one stage had ridden 200 miles by horseback in a day and a half, arrested all the prisoners except Bobby and Jacky Pike on the 13th at Macaw Creek. John James, a splitter, arrested Bobby 16 miles from Rainberd's home. He was later brought in by Trooper Heggie.

So intense was the excitement and alarm around Hamilton that it was feared that the five captured suspects would have been lynched had they passed through that town.

A sorry tale was pieced together with the arrest of these 5 aborigines. On the Friday previous to the tragedy there had been a fight among the natives near Kapunda when a boy was knocked on the head. He later died from his injuries. The local natives had a burial ground not far from the Rainberd home,

and it was on their return from the burial that they called at the house and asked Mrs. Rainberd for a drink of water. On finding the unfortunate woman alone they took advantage of the circumstances, one of them committing rape upon her. It seems as if at first she made her escape from them, but that they followed her and dealt the mortal blow with the iron coupling of a wooden harrow. The children were despatched to stop their screaming.

A few days previously 15 of them were drunk at Anlaby Station, where they took possession of the kitchen, refusing to get out saying that the place belonged to them as well as to white men. At length Mr. Buchanan took a ferocious mastiff, first placing a muzzle on him, and holding him by a chain. He then told the men that if they did not clear out he would take the muzzle off. On this consideration they acted and speedily decamped. They set off with a 5-gallon keg of rum with them, one of the men saying it was stolen, but another saying he had got it at the public house where rum was being sold. Another story was that Bobby had been seen by a white man to kill a lubra a short while before, but, unfortunately, no information had been laid against him.

When these facts were made known the Editor was quick to make his point—"Who is it that violates the law expressly prohibiting the supply of natives with intoxicating drinks—violates it, not casually once or twice, but systematically and habitually. Who is it that furnishes the infuriating and maddening beverage to these poor creatures, harmless enough when sober, and sends them out with all the physical powers of men, while mentally they are as feeble as children and morally still less elevated, to commit

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outrages of the most atrocious kind on the weak and unprotected? The only reasonable clue to the origin of this dreadful occurrence is afforded by the reference to the drunken habits of some of the natives still wandering about in the neighbourhood of Kapunda, and the distinct statement that some of them, after earning a little money, spend it so as to become "mad drunk for days together." Surely none but men beside themselves with frenzy, be they white or black, would perpetuate so purposeless and cruel a deed A severe example should be made of all persons furnishing the blacks with liquor which alone has demoralised them and turned them into devils. In the south they are mostly peaceable, useful and trustworthy."

Eventually the five suspects were brought to Adelaide by rail "handcuffed and ironed in the custody of Sgt. Major Hall, who lodged them safely in the gaol." At their trial one of the prisoners, Jacky Pyke, turned Queen's evidence and he and Old Man Jack, who had been acquitted earlier, were discharged from custody. The Sheriff immediately called the attention of Police Commissioner Warburton, who was also Protector of Aborigines, to the fact that they had been discharged in the hope that action could be taken to prevent any retribution on the liberated men by the tribe to which they belonged.

The final chapter of this story of a senseless and motiveless crime was played out on June 6, 1861.



Sgt. Major Hall who brought the prisoners to town "handcuffed and ironed."

This time it was the editor of Kapunda's own newspaper "The Northern Star" who did not miss his cue. Likewise he did not mince words.

THE RAINBERD MURDERS

The cannibals who murdered Mrs. Rainberd and her two innocent children were choked yesterday morning outside Adelaide Gaol. This is what we have heard from the lips of Mr. Patrick Kingston, M.P., who saw them dancing upon nothing as the train conveyed His Highness to another reunion, the Burra and Clare election dinner. We do not think that, considering all the circumstances of this case, Tommy Reynolds has done justice to the Colony—to the district of Light in particular. The fellows should have hanged up here or they should have been placed at the rifle target for the Volunteers to shoot at, so that they would have had a lingering death. Lots of centres and no whites. We have been cheated. Tommy Reynolds must never stand for this district." (Note. Mr. Thomas Reynolds was Premier for South Australia 1860-1861).

The men who hanged were Pilti Miltinda (alias Bobby); Tankawortya (alias Jimmy Alick); Warretya (alias Gog-eye Jimmy); and Warretya (alias Kap Robert).

Before the whole wretched, senseless affair was over seven lives had been snuffed out. It was held in some quarters that the actual murderer had escaped justice by turning Queen's evidence, thus bringing about his companions' conviction. It is possible that Mrs. Rainberd and her two children were buried in the graveyard of the old St. Matthew's Church at Hamilton, though no headstone to mark their last resting place is to be seen.

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