

The Shooting of Trooper Spicer

by Alan Hall - Victorian Region

My family history tells of the life of an Irish orphan, my second great grand mother Frances Andrews who came to South Australia in 1846. Frances in later years came to the aid of a wounded Trooper constable in outback of South Australia. Frances, after arriving went to the Old Spot Hotel on the Main North Road Salisbury. The Little Para River often flooded making the Main North Road impassable for stock, wagons and travellers. Travellers often resort to refreshments there! Francis met William Humphreys and later married him.

The family journeyed to the Paney Pastoral Station in the Gawler Ranges far west of Whyalla 1852.¹ There two of their five children born at Paney died. A mound of stones marked their burial site. The graves has since been restored.

The Great Northern Railway had began in 1878 from Port August. By 1883 the track reached Farina some 600 km north of Adelaide. A remarkable progress when not even the Melbourne to Adelaide line had been completed.² The Farina rail head saw all goods to and from the far back northern stations passed through there.³

The Humphrey's daughter Sarah recanted "I, with my parents, left Yartoo station, in the Gawler Ranges. It was then owned by A. M. Wooldridge, who sent my father over to Government Gums (now Farina), to take charge of the Government wells and reserve, for which Mr. Wooldridge had the lease". Surveyors came on camels to survey Government Gums. Her husband William help cut the survey pegs to mark out allotments. The government Gazette in September 1878 stated that a site for a post office and telegraph station had been declared reserved at Farina.⁴

At Farina a bull was "hanging around and frightening the children". When William Humphreys attempted to intervene he was attacked by the bull "knocking him down twice, and then, throwing him in the air". Several hours later he died from the injuries.⁵ Thus Frances became widowed in 1879.

Four decades earlier a placard had been nailed to a tree in Adelaide heralding the formation of Australia's first police force:

NOTICE

Wanted for the Police Force about to be raised, twenty active young men.

Persons desirous of entering this service are requested to make application at this office.

T. Bewes Strangways,

Colonial Secretary, pro tem April 12, 1838.

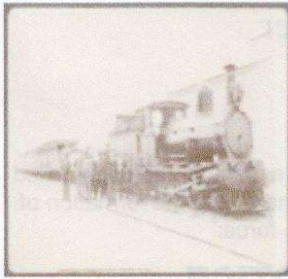


William Spicer joined the police in 1878. Three years later he was known to be at Wilmington and as about to be transferred. The residents took up a collection for a gold watch. Held in high respect Spicer was to be presented with the watch if his superior

officer gave permission.⁶ Two years past when Spicer came to notice of the electoral roll Returning Officer at Port Augusta. A notice of intention to strike off voters for various reasons listed "Trooper Spicer" said to have "left the district". Others voters named were entitled to contest their removal but perhaps those listed as "dead" may have difficulty in responding!⁷ Spicer later was stationed at Beltana from 1881 to 1882.⁸

Rob Olston listed the names of 58 Mounted and 1 Foot Constables posted to Farina between 1874 and 1951. Troopers Spicer and Browne were not listed nor was Kerin.^{9 10} Police had been ordered to practice both on foot and horse mounted with a new weapon, a 7" barrel .44R Smith & Wesson revolver-carbine.¹¹ An extra incentive may have been cash prizes and gold medals.¹² June 1884 saw troopers engaged in target practice in the police paddock. Browne's horse reared up and his revolver discharged.

Sarah, then aged 16, said "I also remember the time that Trooper Spicer was accidentally shot by Trooper Brown while at target practice in the police paddock at Farina".¹³



left: W class engine
and cattle train
- Farina c.1901

The train line had followed the overland telegraph line.^{14 15} Urgent messages were telegraphed from Farina to Pt Augusta Train

Control. An engine and break-van was hastily despatched. Sarah recanted that "my mother [Frances] attended the [paralysed] Spicer until he could be put on the train to Port Augusta...". It was understandable why Frances came to care for Spicer as she was well known in the district for tending to the sick and injured.

Newspapers nation wide carried reports of the incident.¹⁶ One paper printed that at 12 o'clock on Sunday the 29th of June [1884] the train had reached Quorn en route to Port Augusta. Trooper Brown was said to be "in a state of frenzy".¹⁷ That evening the train had reached its destination when the same night Trooper Spicer succumb to his injury at the Port Augusta Hospital.

"An inquest on the body of Police-Constable Spicer was held at the hospital today by Mr. Gooch, J.P., and resulted in a verdict that the deceased was accidentally shot. The funeral cortege left the police station at 3 o'clock. Fifteen mounted and foot police attended, in addition to Inspector Besley, Sub-Inspector Sullivan, and Sergeant Richards. The deceased was universally respected, and great sympathy is felt for Mounted-constable Browne, the unfortunate cause of Spicer's death, who appears to have been completely unmanned by the sad affair".¹⁸

The Port Augusta Council list a cemetery entry for Richard W. Spicer, aged 34, in the leased section of block 4 grave 1. Minster Rev. Dodd officiated at the burial on the 1st of July 1884. Spicer came to South Australia on the 6th of January 1877 by the ship Kirkham.¹⁹ By 1880 newspapers began to carry reports of a Trooper Spicer.²⁰ The South Australian Police Historical Society records indicate he was born 22nd of January 1850 at Chard in England and a clerk before joining. Another document, the death certificate, listed the informant as James

Elsie, a Police Constable of Port Augusta.²¹

Peter Philip Browne, the other trooper, was born 24th of August 1860 Longford, Ireland and a labourer prior to joining. He also served in the Northern Territory (as part of the South Australian Police) resigning on 31st of March 1895. Browne, according to a newspaper entry in 1934, had been severely injured when he fell from a horse at Diamantina not long after the shooting incident. A doctor and insurance salesman travelling together then came to his aid. To save his life the doctor resorted to using the only implements available, a butcher's knife and carpenter's saw, to amputate Browne's leg.²² He died later at the Wilgena Station near Tarcoola on the 17th of May 1904 aged 44.²³

In 1884 Frances aged 58 passed away Farina. Some of her descendants later served the community by becoming police officers including the late Maurice Stanford, my late brother Bill (William) Hall both of the SAPD and from the AFP myself.

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1. The South West Gawler Ranges, Yardea, Paney, Hiltara - self pub. John Starkey.
2. 1887 - <http://www.familyhistorysa.info/timeline.html>.
3. South Australian Chronicle 3 May 1934 page 5.
4. South Australian Chronicle and Weekly Mail, Adelaide, SA Saturday 21 September 1878 Page 2S.
5. South Australian Register Adelaide, SA 17 October 1879 page 6.
6. <http://www.slsa.sa.gov.au/manning/sa/police/police.htm>.
7. South Australian Government Gazette 20th December 1883 page 2241 Division and District of Newcastle.
8. Beltana - the town that will not die, Lutheran Publishing House Adelaide 1984 Graham Aird and Nic Klassen page 190.
9. Farina, From Gibbers to Ghost Town, Rob Olston Bundinyabba Publications Ballarat 4th Ed 2009 p. 230-231
10. op. cit. Graham Aird and Nic Klassen page 76.
11. Email Max Slee/Alan Hall 4 June 2013.
12. Service Arms of the South Australian Police, author Slee, Max, Publisher Luther Publishing House Adelaide 1988.
13. Browne spelt his name with an e, The name Brown where appearing is as originally printed.
14. <http://www.prr.org.au>.
15. Engine at Farina c 1900 photograph courtesy State Library of South Australia. SL.SA: B 70586.
16. Northern Argus, Clare, SA Friday 4 July 1884 page 6.
17. South Australian Register, Adelaide, SA Monday 30 June 1884 page 6.
18. ibid. Wednesday 2 July 1884 page 5.
19. ibid. 8 January 1877 page 4.
20. ibid. 22 December 1880 page 1S.
21. Death registration 1884/191 dated 2 July 1884.
22. Chronicle, Adelaide 23 August 1934 "More stories of early Police Troopers" by Norman A. Richardson page 8.
23. Six graves at Wilgena Station and none bear the name of Browne.