

The drowning at Looney's dam

This story was written in response to the piping of the open channel system which brought water to the farms and town storages of the Wimmera and Mallee for over 100 years. The channel system saw much water wasted by evaporation and in the 1990s it was finally decided to replace the channels with sealed pipes, with the inevitable result that many farm dams would disappear. To preserve memories of the social and cultural history surrounding the dams, contributions were actively sought from the community. The result was the publication in 2005 of *Dam Fine Yarns: Watery Tales from the Victorian Wimmera and Mallee*.

To the end of her life, my grandmother, Ellen (Nellie) Bawden, remembered the day her father was found drowned in a neighbouring dam.

The date was Sunday, 18th November, 1883, and the place, Sawpit Swamp, south-west of Murtoa, where her parents had selected. Nellie was five, sitting on the kitchen table as her mother combed her hair, when her older sisters rushed in with the news that their father's body – his hat still on his head – was floating in the dam, where they had gone for water!

My great-grandfather, Samuel Bown, migrated to Australia from the picturesque Derbyshire town of Bakewell, the scion of a family which research would suggest, went to England with William the Conqueror. Samuel worked as a boundary rider and shepherd at Greenvale Station at Wickliffe in the Western District, and married Catherine Long, an illiterate Irish orphan, who worked as a domestic at Greenvale. There is also evidence that Samuel worked for a period at nearby Narrapumelap Station. In the early 1870's Samuel and Catherine headed north-west with their six young children, after the Wimmera opened up for closer selection. Samuel took up 261 acres at Sawpit Swamp in the Parish of Longerenong, where their last three children – including Nellie, the youngest – were born.

"Looneys" dam or water-hole can still be found in a reserve, a few feet off what in 1883 was the "surveyed road" between Murtoa and Longerenong. It was described as being unfenced, 13-14 feet deep, with sloping sides. The earth that had been removed to form the dam had been placed about five yards from it, on either side. The dam was only a short distance from the Bown homestead, and at the time of Samuel's death, was frequented by three families.

An inquiry into Samuel's death was held at Murtoa before two local justices of the peace, the day after his body was found. The transcript of the inquiry from the Victorian Public Records Office, as well as a comprehensive report in Murtoa's *Dunmunkle Standard* newspaper, provides an interesting insight not only into the circumstances of Samuel's death, but his state of mind at the time, as well as the social milieu in which the family found itself. Evidence from family members given at the inquiry would suggest that Samuel frequently spent days away from home, sometimes drinking. There is also contradictory evidence from the inquiry that he had threatened to commit suicide, and that he had talked in the days leading up to his death of preparing a will. He was last seen alive on the afternoon of 8th November, 1883, when he was given a lift to Sawpit Swamp from Murtoa by a Longerenong farmer.

The inquiry returned a finding of death by drowning, but noted that the evidence was inconclusive as to how "the deceased got into the water": it was unclear if Samuel drowned when he went to the dam to have a drink and overbalanced on the steep sides, perhaps while suffering the effects of alcohol; or whether he threw himself in deliberately. The fact that his hat was on still on his head indicated that he had gone into the dam head first.

Two notes on the cover of the Public Records Office file reveal an interesting postscript. It would seem that further investigations were made by the police after the inquiry, which failed to find any evidence of foul play by any other person, and that it was the opinion of the officers concerned that Samuel had committed suicide. The presence of these notes would suggest that Samuel's family, if not the local authorities, suspected that there was more to his death than the inquiry revealed, and perhaps put pressure on the police to investigate further.

Samuel's death undoubtedly exacerbated the notoriety which had dogged his large family in the Murtoa district. Much of this might have been undeserved, the product of bias against a poor, ill-educated and rough and ready family in a largely conservative and prosperous community. Perhaps it was an Anglo – or Teutonic – bias against an unruly "Irish" influence, a perception never far below the surface of Victorian society and which manifested itself openly during the Kelly gang uprising of the same period. In all events it was a perception coloured, rightly or wrongly, by a reputation sullied by a publicly-reported involvement with the authorities – but that's a story yet to be written!

Catherine and her family struggled on at Sawpit Swamp after Samuel's death. It would seem that they were forced to sell much of their livestock and farming plant to meet his debts, and there is evidence that Catherine served as a mid-wife in the district. Less than 10 years after Samuel's death, however, they had moved from the Murtoa district, and settled into more or less respectable obscurity at Warracknabeal.

In many respects dams can be seen as a symbol of life, the repository of life-giving water which enabled agriculture and civilization to flourish in the harsh, empty spaces of the Wimmera and Mallee. Yet, in a paradox symptomatic of life itself, the converse was also the case. This yarn records such an instance, an example of the darker side of pioneering life where hardships and disappointments sometimes drove ordinary folk to other consolations. If we dig deep enough we can discover the untold stories of men, and women, whose unrealised dreams ended – by accident or intent – with a bottle or a gun, a rope and a sturdy branch, even the cold water of a lonely dam.

***Dam Fine Yarns: Watery Tales from the Victorian Wimmera and Mallee*, edited by Malcolm McKinnon, John Martin & Julie Cathcart, Horsham Regional Arts Association Inc., 2005. My story appeared, somewhat abbreviated, in Chapter 1:" Life and Death", p. 8.**