Historic family tragedy revisited

at the archives
Wayne Doubleday

ate last year, the CSU Regional Archives received a donation of a framed image of the Saxon family from the granddaughter of one of those depicted. It's an absorbing image, and not just because of its age, size or the details that were added by hand for the tragedies that occurred in that family and to others to whom they were connected, making a moving, albeit fascinating story.

The photograph depicts the children of Jonathan and Anne Saxon in 1862, namely Pamela, Alfred Edwin, Bianco, Emily, Frances Catherine Anne, Samuel, and Henrietta. Admittedly, they appear in a large family by today's standards, but they were not so out of place during their own time. Their ages range from Frances at approximately 30 years old down to Emily at 12 years of age.

The sad tale of this particular photograph is based upon the family story that the children had gathered on this day, not only to have their photograph taken, but to hear the reading of their parent's will.

Jonathan Attherton Saxon had died on August 25, 1862, at the age of 51 years, the cause being "blood poisoning." One report suggests he had been bitten by a spider. His children's grief at their father's untimely death would have been compounded by the fact that their mother, Anne, had passed away 17 days earlier on August 8, at the age of 58, from cancer.

Jonathan and Anne are both buried in a private cemetery just outside Forest Hill, on Cowells Road. The family had been in possession of a farm in the vicinity of the cemetery called Kyeamba Meadows. Within the same cemetery is a headstone belonging to one of their sons, Jonathan Attherton, who died at the age of only three years and three months, presumably from pneumonia, in 1860.

The opening paragraph of the Wagga Wagga Advertiser's report of the murder of Florence Cowell and the suicide of her aunt, Sarah West, in 1879, namely the murder of Florence Cowell by her aunt, Sarah West, and her subsequent suicide in Kyeamba Creek.

It appears that Sarah and 15-year-old Florence were in the house alone on a Monday morning, while the men were working on a neighboring farm. Thomas, Florence's younger brother, was sent back to the house about eight o'clock when he saw his aunt walking rapidly towards the creek.

Thomas continued into the house to find his sister dead in her bedroom. There had obviously been a struggle as the furniture in the room had been stowed about and conversation had been appearing earlier stated Florence's head was "one mass of fractures."

At the inquest, Sarah's husband reported that he had noticed a change in her manner in the past three years, that she had become "peevish" and jealous of the children. Sarah had apparently even threatened harm to the family on previous occasions, though nothing had come of this at the time.

The news spread quickly throughout the district of the "fearful tragedy" at the West house, "Shocking Murder and Suicide at Kyeamba Creek" and "Frightful Murder and Suicide of the Murderers" headlined the news reports. The local newspapers published the sensational story across multiple columns with as many details as they could possibly fit in, including nearly all the statements made by the witnesses at the inquest, as well as the doctor's report of Florence's terrible wounds.

Perhaps this story can be summed up best by the elegiac reporter for the Wagga Wagga Advertiser, who wrote:

We willingly close the narrative of this fearful occurrence, and it is possible, glories it even from our mind. But it will indeed be many days ere the Kyeamba (sic) Tragedy will be lost from the memories of those who may now peruse the details of this, the most awful instance of combined murder and suicide that has ever occurred in New South Wales."

Compiled by Jill Kelhagen

References: Image donated to CSU by Grace Fauber (RWH2000); Wagga Wagga Advertiser, January 22, 1873; Wagga Wagga City Council Rural Heritage Study 1992; Wagga Wagga Express, January 22, 1873; Wagga Wagga Advertiser, January 22, 1873.