

THE TOWN THAT WAS DROWNED

Some North Queensland Memories and Anecdotes

[By CLEM LACK]

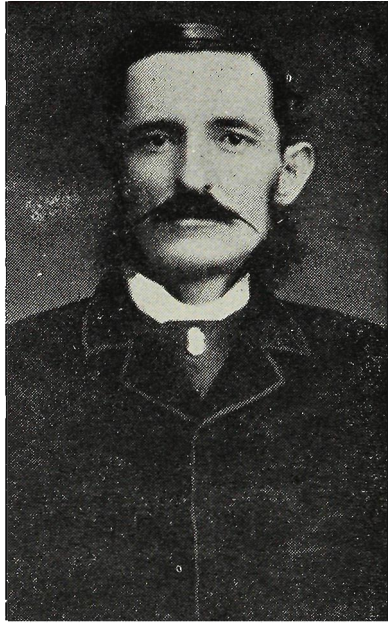
A celebrated personality of North Queensland in the 'eighties of last century was Tom Pickett, an inveterate wanderer, who was mine host of the old Post Office Hotel in Queen Street, Brisbane, in the 1890's. The hotel has been pulled down these many years.

Tom Pickett was described by his contemporaries as a genuine *Moonraker* from Wiltshire. Wiltshire men are noted for their "reach-me-down-a-star" tallness. Wiltshire—and Wiltshire men—are famous in English history—their folklore tells of their stout fighting men, from the days of the Roman invaders, on to the Saxons and the two-handed sword prowess of Cynric and Ceawlin, the wars with the Danes, and the later bloody civil wars of Stephen and Matilda and the great Civil War, or if you were a Royalist, the Great Rebellion, of the Puritans.

Then, as Tom Pickett was fond of boasting to the "lesser breeds" of other English counties, from the standpoint of the archaeologist, Wilts—or Wiltshire—is the Premier county in England. Stonehenge has been famed for ages throughout the civilised world. Still more remarkable are the less-known, much ruined megalithic circles and avenues of Avebury—"as much excelling Stonehenge as a cathedral doth a parish church"—while Silbury Hill, near by, is the largest tumulus, or historic mound, in Europe.

THE SACRED IBIS

Tom Pickett, in his own way, was quite a famous man. As well as being a jovial publican, and handy-like with his fists, acting as his own chucker-out when the larrikins of Brisbane-town got too rambunctious with "red-eye" rum, he could spin a yarn as good, if not better than the most noted of the bar raconteurs of the day—the celebrated Archie Meston, whose favourite yarn was that one day in the Too-woomba Club, he allowed a man to hit him in the abdomen with a cricket bat, and the only result was that the handle of the bat was broken! Archie was still telling that yarn in 1922, in the bar of old Lennons Hotel—over thirty years later. I was there!



ARCHIBALD MESTON

Archie was dubbed the Sacred Ibis by Boyd Morehead in the Queensland Parliament. That was about 1878 or 1879, when Archie was member for Rosewood, twenty-eight years old, and the youngest man in any Australian Parliament, at that time. He spiced his speeches with Attic salt, and was stuffed to the muzzle with ethnology, geology, and several other 'ologies. He was journalist, poet, bushman-explorer, and anthropologist, and was one of the most colourful and picturesque personalities in Queensland's history. He died in 1924.

TOM PICKETT'S WANDERINGS

Tom Pickett had come out to Australia in 1871 with the *Carlisle Castle* (Captain Cooper) and reached Queensland in 1872. In that year, he went prospecting on the Cooktown goldfield. Cooktown was then a collection of canvas tents. George Elphinstone Dalrymple's expedition party had just left for Cardwell. Shortly afterwards Pickett shipped to London in the *Great Britain*. He returned to Brisbane in the *Carlisle Castle*, voyaged to New Caledonia, with Captain Nightingale in the *James Patterson*, came back to Brisbane and then hopped off to San Francisco, which, twenty years

earlier, had become famous—or, rather infamous—as the stamping ground of the Sydney Ducks, or alternatively, the Sydney Coves—Australian adventurers, larrikins of the Sydney waterfront, and a sprinkling of “wild Colonial boys” and ex-convicts—who voyaged from Australia to the goldfields of California in the early 1850’s, and terrorised the waterfront at San Francisco, in an area christened “Sydney Valley” and also known as “Sydney Cove.”

The “Ducks” were, most of them, lawless, wild, and reckless characters, and a leader among them, John Jenkins, became in 1851 the first man from Australia to be hanged by a lynching mob. Others were strung up by “Judge Lynch” shortly afterwards, either being convicted for robbery or murder, or both. When gold was discovered in Australia, most of the “Ducks” drifted back to this country, accompanied by many Americans.

SMITHFIELD—RIVAL OF CAIRNS

Tom Pickett did not do much good on the goldfields, and was soon back in Queensland. He went north to Cairns, where he opened the Leichhardt hotel in the primitive days of crocodiles and aborigines. Pickett went up the Barron River with the champagne to Smithfield, a settlement founded late in 1876 at the navigation head of the Barron River, to serve as a link between Trinity Bay and the Hodgkinson goldfield. It was named after William Smith, a bushman and explorer, who blazed “Bill Smith’s Track” through the region, and speedily became a wild and lawless community, with Bill Smith’s hotel as the centre. Bill Smith was the uncrowned king of what has been described as “the wickedest town in Australia.”

A WILD, RIP-ROARING TOWN

In actual fact, it was no better—and no worse—than any other of the wild, rip-roaring mining towns that sprang up like mushrooms after rain in the colourful gold-mining days of North Queensland. Colourful legends, most of them exaggerated, preserve the brief and turbulent history of Smithfield—a typically lawless frontier town. But it is true that Bill Smith had his horse shod with hoofs of gold by a local blacksmith. The blacksmith was Edwin Crossland. The gold came from ingots from the Hodgkinson, which were beaten out on the forge to fashion the shoes. The story goes that the golden shoes were removed before sundown—for obvious reasons! But Bill Smith’s horse was not the first to be shod with gold shoes. At Beechworth, Victoria, in 1856, a miner celebrated winning his fortune by getting a local

blacksmith to make four gold shoes for his favourite horse. These were valued at \$250, but they were only on the horse for about a week, as the shoe proved to be too soft. They were removed and sold by public auction.

In March 1879, after continuously heavy rain, the flooded Barron River rose to unprecedented heights, and Smithfield, was swept away in an avalanche of waters.

“Divine Retribution!” said many.

But before that day a drama had been played out to its bitter end in the main street of Smithfield. Information reached Cairns that on Boxing Day 1877 Robert Craig had been shot and killed by William Smith, who shortly afterwards effectively cancelled himself out by putting a bullet through his chest.

BOXING DAY TRAGEDY

That fateful day of murder and suicide at Smithfield has passed into legend and folklore, and over the years, extravagantly embroidered accounts of what took place have gone the rounds. One colourful version is that Smith mounted his horse, shod with its golden horseshoes, flashing in the sun, galloped up the main street of Smithfield to Craig's store, yelled epithets to him and called him to “come out and fight”; that Craig walked out of the store with a revolver in his hand, and that shots were exchanged; that Craig was shot down in the middle of the street, and immediately afterwards Smith turned the gun on himself.

Actually, it did not happen that way at all.

Our Wild West and Wilder North were as colourful as anything that the annals of the American West can show, but neither Craig nor Smith were gun-slingers, and Craig was unarmed when he walked across the street to Smith's hotel, expecting that Smith was about to pay him a long-standing debt. There was a grim meaning to Smith's remark that he would “*settle*” with Craig, and Craig unsuspectingly walked out to his death in the bright sunshine of Boxing Day afternoon more than ninety years ago in the main street of what romantic chroniclers have described as “the wickedest town” in Australia.

Evidence given at the magisterial inquiry into the tragedy conducted by W. Mowbray, the police magistrate, shows what actually happened. The truth is colourful enough without fancy elaboration and decoration. The account, which appeared in the *Cairns Advertiser*, was republished in the *Queenslander* of 12 January 1878. The facts given below are taken from that account.

“OH, I AM DONE!”

The magisterial inquiry was conducted by W. Mowbray, P.M., at which James H. Norris, a police constable at Smithfield, gave evidence that about 3 p.m. on December 26, he heard five revolver shots, and he hurried down the street towards Craig's store. He saw Craig running quickly across the street, and saw him immediately afterwards lying in front of the door of his store. William Cochrane, a resident of Smithfield, and several other persons were near him. He then walked over to Smith's Beehive hotel, which was on the opposite side of the street from Craig's store, and saw William Smith lying on his back under the verandah. There were bloodstains on Smith's shirt. He stretched out his hand, and asked: "Will anybody hold me up?" The constable and another man then grasped Smith's hands and raised him to a sitting position. A few minutes afterwards, Smith appeared to become very weak, and exclaimed: "Oh, I am done!" Fifteen minutes later he died.

Norris examined Smith's body and found that a bullet had entered about two inches under his right breast. Shortly afterwards, James Ferrier, a packer, handed Norris a revolver, and said: "This is the revolver Smith shot Craig and himself with!" Smith had thrown the revolver away after shooting himself. Ferrier had found it lying on the ground opposite Smith. Five barrels had been discharged. Lying on the floor inside the dining room of Smith's hotel was a bullet which fitted the revolver.

PLANNED TO COMMIT SUICIDE

The constable said Smith was about forty-five or fifty years of age, and was married. He told the constable about ten days before the shooting that he planned to commit suicide while travelling through the bush. The constable had heard that Smith was in Craig's debt. Smith, he said, drank a great deal; did not get drunk, but became excited when he was under the influence of drink.

Ferrier, the packer, said that between two and three o'clock on Boxing Day, he was standing in Solomon's store, opposite Smith's hotel. He heard a noise inside the hotel, loud talking, and the explosion of two shots. He then saw Craig running out of the front door of Smith's hotel. He was holding his hand to his breast and was shouting: "Murder! I am done for!" He then saw Smith run out from the hotel close behind Craig and fire two shots at Craig from a revolver he held in his hand. Immediately afterwards, Smith pointed the revolver at his own breast and fired. He saw

Smith fall and throw the revolver down. He fell before he got across the street. He looked up at Ferrier and said: "Give me a drink of water, old fellow!" Someone gave him some water, but he could not drink it.

William Cochrane, who was Craig's brother-in-law, said he was standing behind the grocery counter in Craig's store when he heard two shots fired. He heard Craig cry "Murder!" twice. He ran from behind the counter into the street, and saw Craig, and Smith holding a revolver in his hand. Smith was standing under his own verandah. He ran past Craig towards Smith, but before he could reach the publican, he saw Smith point the muzzle of the revolver towards himself, pull the trigger, and fall to the ground.

"I AM DONE, BILL!"

Craig was then under his own verandah. He was staggering. Cochrane said he got hold of his brother-in-law, and led him inside the doorway of his store. Craig exclaimed: "I am done, Bill! I have it in me!" He died a few seconds afterwards, as Cochrane was laying him down on the floor of the store.

Cochrane said that Smith had walked into the store just before the shooting and asked Craig to come over to the hotel and he would "settle" with him. He owed an account to Craig, and witness understood Smith to mean that he was going to pay Craig.

Craig was thirty-four years of age. He was a native of Glasgow, Scotland. His family lived in Brisbane. Craig and Smith appeared to be good friends. Smith was not sober before he came into the store. Craig's wife and children had gone to Brisbane about three weeks previously. He was one of the earliest merchants in Cairns. Amongst the hundreds of packers travelling between Cairns and the Hodgkinson goldfield, the name of Craig was a household word. Craig had recently added to his extensive operations the export of cedar produced in the Cairns district.

FIRST CARGO OF CEDAR

A strange coincidence was that on the day of the tragedy the *Lucy and Adelaide* schooner arrived for the first cargo of cedar and must have reached her destination up the Barron River somewhere about the time that the murder and suicide occurred.

A correspondent, writing in the *Brisbane Courier* in July 1879, recalled that in the first days of Cairns, Smithfield was used as a depot for stores intended for the Hodgkinson goldfield. It was here that the carriers who had just returned

from the diggings pastured and rested their horses, while they either loaded up, or visited the port to arrange for freight. When he visited Smithfield, nothing but the ashes of the smith's fires, and the dilapidated remnant of the crude forge, in which they had glowed in better times, remained to show that the place had once aspired to the dignity of a township. "*That place*" said his companion, pointing to the framework of an abandoned shanty on the roadside, "*cost a little pile. Now you can have it for a sovereign!*"

Just outside Smithfield, the river Barron first crossed the old track. The stream was navigable by small craft from the point at which it flowed into the sea at Cairns, up to within a short distance of the Smithfield ford. In the golden days of the Hodgkinson, W. B. Ingham carried cargo and passengers in the *Louisa*, a little stern-wheeled steamer, the same ship, which after being altered, and re-christened the *Vonra*, carried him and his unfortunate party to meet their doom at the hands of the treacherous natives of Brooker Island. Ingham had lost heavily in the cedar trade and other speculations. Before his last ill-fated journey, he had succeeded to a considerable fortune, amounting to some £20,000.

SMITHFIELD CHRISTENED WITH CHAMPAGNE

At the beginning of Smithfield's history, Tom Pickett had gone up the Barron River with a cargo of champagne to christen Smithfield. With him in the festive party were Bill Smith, the founder of Smithfield, Howard St. George and Darcy the overlander. Pickett was in Cairns when the diggers forcibly prevented Chinese from landing from the steamer *Victoria*. A brawny digger threw Police Sub-Inspector Douglas into the sea.

Legend has it that one night Tom Pickett was sitting on a bank guarding some stores that had been landed from the *Victoria*. Chappell, an old mining friend of his, ambled down towards him wrapped in a bearskin rug, and Tom, who must have been imbibing too freely, mistook him for a bunyip! He was just going to empty his eight-chambered Colt into the-er-bunyip when Chappell yelled out frantically "D-don't shoot, Tom. It-t-'s Me-e-e!"

CROCODILE TOOK A HAND IN THE GAME!

Another time, Chamberlain and Fred Warner, the surveyors, and Pickett were playing a game of euchre in a tent on the beach at Cairns, their "table" being two packing-cases. Pickett was sitting with his back to the door.

Hearing a noise behind him, he looked round and saw the

fine open countenance of a big crocodile that had sauntered up to see what was trumps and take a hand in the game. The other two sighted the saltwater visitor at the same time. Pickett turned a back somersault over Warner, who executed a circus flip-flap over Chamberlain, who carried off in his flight to greener pastures the end of the tent on his head.

All three covered the hundred yards to the Leichhardt Hotel in eleven seconds, leaving the crocodile to take up the deal and go alone!

At least, that's the story that was handed down the years, but, of course, Tom Pickett was always a good yarn-spinner.

Another story, which has a ring of truth in it, relates that there used to be a lot of crocodiles in the Proserpine River, in the early days, round about the turn of the century. A young fellow strolled up the main street of Proserpine one afternoon with a young crocodile about two feet six inches long, dragging behind him on the end of a dog-chain. He slouched up to the pub, and tied the saurian up to a verandah post, while he went in for a few noggins of beer—for you see, it was pay day at the local mill. He had a game or two of euchre with his mates, and when the pubs closed, at eleven o'clock, in those days, he came out, untied his pet, and staggered away with the gait of a drunken sailor, to his tent across the river.