

# Historical Happenings



Casterton Community Museum

## The Mysterious Deaths of Four Children

by Noel Norris

Many Casterton old-timers will remember Solomon Norris who lived in a small cottage on the Mount Gambier Road. Solomon was an outstanding athlete as a sprinter, hurdler and footballer. He also sheared with the blades and was called upon many times for his water divining skills. At the time of his death at the age of 97 he was Casterton's oldest resident. What may not be generally known is the dreadful tragedy which over three days left four of his elder siblings dead. Solomon's father James was a splitter and in 1861 was working at an out station called Brankup near Mosquito Plains for Mr Adam Smith. James' wife Margaret was caring for the children Susan, Emma, Charles and Sophia aged between 2 and 7 years. She also had James, a baby at the breast.

During the week that James was working at Brankup each of the children became ill. Emma was very sick and was not sleeping. James went for the Doctor in the early morning and upon returning with Dr Gunning found that three year old Emma had died during his absence. Over the next three days Susan, Charles and Sophia all died.

A Magisterial investigation was ordered and an inquest was held before Mr Joseph Carter JP on the body of one of the children – Emma Norris. James Norris gave evidence that Emma Norris was his child and gave an account of finding his children grievously ill over a period of three days. Margaret Norris said "I am the wife of the last witness, James. The deceased was my child. She took sick on Monday night last. My husband went for the Doctor early the following morning but she died before he returned. Cross examined by Mr Smith, both James and Margaret said they had no knowledge of what caused the deaths of the children.

They stated that there was no poison about the house and the children were healthy on the Sunday night prior to them taking ill. They were however in the habit of gathering mushrooms and other things in the bush. However, they did not leave the house on Monday although the eldest girl, Sophia aged seven, said she had been eating mushrooms and also stated the other children had been eating mushrooms.

Dr Alexander Gunning stated: "I am a legally qualified medical practitioner. Norris came for me on Tuesday morning and said that one of his children was very ill. As we were leaving to go to Brankup he said he



### NEXT MEETING:

#### August AGM

Wednesday, 20th August:

2.00 pm at the Albion Hotel

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### To nominate for a position on the executive:

President, Secretary, Treasurer, Vice President, Archivist - please request the nomination form from Ros by email or by post. The forms should be returned to the Secretary by Friday, 15<sup>th</sup> August. [roscov48@bigpond.com](mailto:roscov48@bigpond.com) tel 5581 2875 or complete at the AGM.

### Historic homestead visit

September/October: visit to Murndal near Hamilton, a property established by the Anglo-Irish Samuel Winter, early 1850s. Members (and partners) are invited to register their interest, date to be confirmed. It is up to the owners as to the best date that suits them - it will be Wednesday, 17<sup>th</sup> September, or Wed, 15<sup>th</sup> October or a weekend date close to either. We will meet at Murndal around 10.00 am, bring a picnic lunch if wished. Advise Ros or Dawn by phone or email (above) if you would like to attend- we need to ascertain exact number of visitors. We hope to arrange to visit several other historic properties in coming months as these are the most popular of activities.



**Clean-up at the Old Cemetery**

**On Monday 18<sup>th</sup> at 10am if you are available.** It had to be postponed due to wet weather and the ground conditions. October is the date for the unveiling of the names of the unmarked graves.

**KENT'S CORNER:**

Copies available at the VIC of Volume 2: **Roamin' Round the Town** the Visitor Information Centre: cost is **\$25.**

Henty Street /Tyers Street corner /McKinlays  
Glenelg Inn 1873



thought the child may be dying. On my arrival I found the child dead and the other children very ill. They were vomiting and seemed quite prostrate. The eldest girl, Sophia, also seemed in a state of collapse. They were all jaundiced, very feeble and with rapid pulses. I believe these deaths to have been caused by poison”.

At this stage of the proceedings Dr Gunning was requested by the Magistrate to hold a post mortem examination on the body of the deceased Emma and Sophia Norris and was ordered to make the stomach contents available to be sent to Adelaide for analysis.

There was further evidence given by William Roper who stated he was a timber splitter and stated he knew nothing of the cause of the death of the children and he had not seen them eating mushrooms. He did however state that on returning to his tent the night the children were taken ill he found that matches which he used to light his candle were partly wasted and one box totally burnt. There was no poison about that he knew of and he did not ask the children what they had been eating.

Another witness was Elizabeth Hope, the wife of Thomas Hope, who lived near the Norris family. She stated that “on the Monday the children were taken ill. She had visited Mrs Norris and bathed the children in warm water”. She stated: “Emma Norris did not vomit nor drink during the time that she was there but she was convulsing. I remained with Mrs Norris during the night and left at about five o’clock in the morning. When I went back to the Norris’ Emma had died. The other three children were very ill and were throwing up a dark fluid like curdled blood. They often cried out for drink and were always sick after drinking. I have always noted the parents’ kindness to their children. They were very attentive to them during their illness and showed great sorrow. I do not know of any poison being about the house and the children had appeared quite well on Sunday”. She did say that she had often seen them gathering mushrooms.

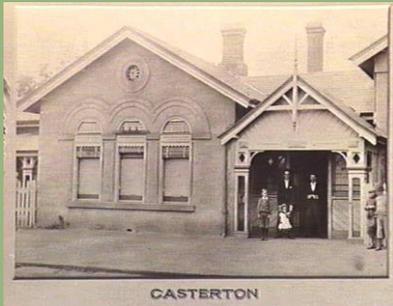
The following appeared in the “Adelaide Observer” on August 17<sup>th</sup>, 1861: “The adjourned inquests on the bodies of Emma and Sophia Norris (two of the four children who died suddenly as previously reported), was resumed on Saturday last, the 3<sup>rd</sup> instant at the Court House, Naracoorte by the respective Coroners, Messrs. Scott and Carter and the Jurors were assembled upon the former inquiries. The results of Mr Parkinson’s analysis of the stomachs of two of the four children was read out by the gentleman but it threw no more additional light upon the question other than no mineral poison could be detected. Mr Parkinson appeared to be of the opinion that the deaths were caused by vegetable poison by eating either roots or mushrooms.

In both cases the Jurors were unanimous in their verdicts that the deaths were caused in their opinion by poison but there was no evidence on the nature of the poison. The four children were buried at Adam Smith’s private cemetery, Hynam.

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**Casterton Community Museum**  
post office  
1897



**Casterton Historical Society**  
**50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, 2014**

In 2014 CDHS celebrates fifty years  
CDHS is located at the  
**Casterton Visitor Information Centre**  
e-mail: [castertonhistorical@hotmail.com](mailto:castertonhistorical@hotmail.com)

**PO Box 48, Casterton**  
**3311**  
Phone: 5580

**To visit the Casterton Community Museum:**  
call **David Coventry** on **5581 2475** or email at [davidccoventry@yahoo.com.au](mailto:davidccoventry@yahoo.com.au)

To contribute to this newsletter, please contact Ros at the Visitor Information Centre on 5581 2070  
e-mail: [roscov48@bigpond.com](mailto:roscov48@bigpond.com)  
tel 5581 2875

**CASTERTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY MINUTES 1966**

**16<sup>th</sup> June 1966**

The president Mr. GORMAN played a tape recording of the Historical Societies visit to Mrs. Ann JONES on the occasion of her 97<sup>th</sup> birthday held at the home of her daughter Mrs. KNAPSEY. Mrs. JONES spoke of the early days of Sandford district.

**20<sup>th</sup> July 1966**

Talk by Mrs. Anne GAZZARD

A most interesting talk was given by Mrs. GAZZARD, followed by Mrs. RANKIN, on Casterton's early traders and old photos were handed around.

Mrs. GAZZARD stated that the RICHARDSON'S were the oldest family in CASTERTON and the first building the GLENELG INN.

PEDENS started in 1863. J W PEACHEY sold cider.

Other past traders were RAPKINS, GOODY HARRIS, CAWKERS, GILLS, JEFFREYS, and KIMS.

The hospital was opened in 1906.

Mrs. RANKIN spoke of her grandfather John Craig STEWART who was a partner of Mr. J ANDERSON at Sandford and later went into a blacksmith business which became STEWART and SMITH.

Mrs. RANKINS natural Grandmother, Esther CROSGROVE came out in early 1850 from IRELAND and she married E M MCDONALD at the Glenelg Inn before any churches were built by REV RUSSELL.

The names of SMITHS, MCBEAN, MCCAFFREY and LOVELLS as large traders.

**17<sup>th</sup> August 1966**

A letter of sympathy be sent to Mrs. Elina JEFFREYS on the death of her sister, Mrs. Jack LEAKE

Mr. GORMAN gave a most interesting talk on Casterton's second postmaster Mr. J J BARRY who was in Casterton until 1890 when he received promotion to Melbourne. The first postmaster was Mr. L F MARCHANT.

Mr. J J BARRY joined the PMG in 1860 and came to Casterton in 1876.

He was a life long friend of Mr. ROWAN, father of Frank Hamilton ROWAN, a firm of solicitors in Casterton, daughter is Brenda MITCHELL of "MOREDUN HILL".

Mr. J J BARRY was very active in town affairs being chairman of the Casterton Racing Club and Mechanics Institute and Athletic Sports meetings. Vice President of the Horticulture Society, registrar of Births and Deaths, he married Miss FITZGERALD from Harrow and when living in Melbourne called his house in Spring Rd Malvern "Kowree". Following the talk on Mr. J J BARRY. Mr. GORMAN showed the illustrated address presented to him when he left in 1890 and interesting program dated 1880.

(notes: I went to school with Brenda, she married Bill MITCHELL of "MOREDUN HILL".)

**21<sup>st</sup> September, 1966**

Mr. KIM said that his father had come from China to this district in 1884 and worked at Runnymede. (1966 Cr H D MITCHELLS) father gave Mr. KIM a horse and cart to begin a vegetable garden at "Runnymede". He later had a garden in Casterton and built up a thriving greengrocers business which is now carried on by his son Mr. Fee KIM. (notes: Homestead now owned by J A T LAIDLAW (note this is correct at time 21/9/1966, J A T LAIDLAW now deceased and property now owned by J A T LAIDLAW'S son Timothy LAIDLAW)

**CDHS WEBSITE: we are the Web, visit us at**

<http://www.swvic.org/castertonhistoricalsociety.htm>

The Kelpie Parade float: the Casterton and District Historical Society were assisted hugely by Elders Co. and Dave Thomas. However we were remiss in forgetting to mention the other generous contributors – Gary and Trish Williams of Party Animals, who supplied our beautiful costumes at no charge. Many thanks go to them as well. Some of the participants attended the evening's entertainment at the Albion Hotel, a rollicking old-time dinner-theatre show presented by Gary and Trish. We all very much enjoyed the evening.