
JURISDICTION : CORONER'S COURT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA
ACT : CORONERS ACT 1996
CORONER : SARAH HELEN LINTON, DEPUTY STATE CORONER
HEARD : 28 JUNE 2023
DELIVERED : 23 AUGUST 2023
FILE NO/S : CORC 734 of 2021
DECEASED : PARTRIDGE, ADELL SHERYLEE
FILE NO/S : CORC 733 of 2021
DECEASED : LOCKYER, VERONICA PHILOMENA

Catchwords:

Nil

Legislation:

Nil

Counsel Appearing:

Mr W Stops assisted the Coroner.

Case(s) referred to in decision(s):

Nil

Coroners Act 1996
(Section 26(1))

RECORD OF INVESTIGATION INTO DEATH

*I, Sarah Helen Linton, Deputy State Coroner, having investigated the disappearance of **Veronica Philomena LOCKYER** and **Adell Sherylee PARTRIDGE** with an inquest held at the **Perth Coroner’s Court, Court 85, CLC Building, 501 Hay Street, Perth** on **28 June 2023**, find that:*

- 1. the death of **Veronica Philomena LOCKYER** has been established beyond all reasonable doubt and that the identity of the deceased person was **Veronica Philomena LOCKYER** and that her death occurred **on an unknown date and at an unknown place and due to an unascertained cause**; and*

- 2. the death of **Adell Sherylee PARTRIDGE** has been established beyond all reasonable doubt and that the identity of the deceased person was **Adell Sherylee PARTRIDGE** and that her death occurred **on an unknown date and at an unknown place and due to an unascertained cause**;*

in the following circumstances:

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INTRODUCTION

1. Veronica Lockyer and her daughter Adell Partridge were reported missing to police in July 2018. The report was made by Donna Partridge, who is the daughter of Veronica and older sister of Adell. Donna, who was raised by her father, advised the police that she had grown up believing her mother and sister were with her mother's family. However, she had recently become aware (through contact with her mother's family) that her mother and sister had not been seen or heard from for approximately twenty years.¹
2. A police investigation commenced and eventually established that the last confirmed record of Veronica was from a visit she made on 25 October 1998 to the South Hedland Centrelink office. Adell, who was only an infant at the time, was last confirmed to have been alive on 1 November 1998 at the Hedland Health Campus, when she was brought in by her father, together with Donna. Veronica was not present. There was evidence Adell also received a vaccination in Merredin later that month, although it was a computer generated record so it could not be confirmed. That was the last known record relating to baby Adell.
3. No documentation or records has been uncovered to demonstrate Veronica or Adell had contact with any agency or person since the end of November 1998 and there have been no confirmed sightings of either of them since that date. Veronica has not been in contact with any of her other children, or her extended family, which was out of character for her. The last person who gave an account of seeing Veronica and Adell alive was Veronica's partner (and the father of both Adell and Donna), Craig Partridge. He told police he had not seen them since around November/December 1998.²
4. On 11 February 2021, a report was signed by a police officer from the Homicide Squad for the attention of the State Coroner. In the report, Veronica and baby Adell were identified as long term missing persons. The author of the report indicated that all evidence pointed to both individuals being deceased, with no clear indication as to how or when they died, other than it was not before 25 October 1998 for Veronica and 1 November 1998 for Adell, and the deaths probably occurred around that time.³
5. On the basis of the information provided by the WA Police, I determined as the Acting State Coroner at that time, that pursuant to s 23 of the *Coroners Act 1996* (WA), there was reasonable cause to suspect that Veronica and baby Adell had died and that their deaths were reportable deaths under the Act. I therefore made a direction that a coroner hold an inquest into the circumstances of the suspected deaths.⁴
6. I held an inquest at the Perth Coroner's Court on 28 June 2023. The inquest consisted of the tendering of documentary evidence compiled through the police investigation conducted into Veronica and Adell's disappearance, as well as hearing evidence from:

¹ Exhibit 1, Tab 2.

² Exhibit 1, Tab 2.

³ Exhibit 1, Tab 2.

⁴ Section 23 *Coroners Act* Direction of Deputy State Coroner Vicker dated 19 March 2019.

- Detective Sergeant Scott Ralph - the author of the Homicide Squad Investigation Report;
- Craig Partridge - the partner of Veronica and father of Adell, and the last person known to see either of them alive;
- Ian Cooper – Veronica’s oldest son;
- Adrian Clinch – another of Veronica’s sons; and
- Donna Partridge – one of Veronica’s daughters and Adell’s older sister.

BACKGROUND

7. Veronica was born in Port Hedland on 28 October 1965 and was a proud member of the Kariyarra people from North Western Australia. Veronica grew up on her country in the Pilbara as part of a large extended family. She moved between the Tjarrewarra Aboriginal community, also known as Twelve Mile, and the Aboriginal communities of Warralong and Strelley, located east of South Hedland. Veronica was known to be passionate about her culture and was seen as a role model within her community. As a young adult, Veronica had travelled extensively within the Pilbara, teaching the Kariyarra language in order to keep her culture alive with the younger generation.⁵
8. Veronica was the loving mother of six children. She gave birth to her first child, Ian Cooper Jnr, in 1983 while in a relationship with Ian’s father, Ian Cooper Snr. Around 1985, after the end of that relationship, Veronica met Jon Clinch and went on to have three children with him: Amarina Clinch, Adrian Clinch and Terryl Clinch. That relationship also eventually came to an end, and in the mid 1990’s, Veronica commenced a new relationship with Craig Partridge. As noted above, Craig is the father of Donna Partridge and Adell. Donna was born on 25 March 1996 and Adell was born two years later on 22 April 1998. Adell was Veronica’s youngest child.⁶
9. Veronica was described by her children as a loving and passionate mother who would do anything for her family. Adell was described as a healthy baby who was dearly loved by her mother and anyone who met her. Adell was only seven months old when she was last known to be alive, and her mother was 33 years old.⁷ If alive today, Veronica would be a middle-aged woman in her mid-fifties and Adell would be a young woman of about 25 years of age.

VERONICA AND CRAIG’S RELATIONSHIP

10. Veronica and Craig were still in a relationship at the time of Veronica and Adell’s disappearance. They had met through a relative of Veronica’s in about 1994 in Port Hedland. In the time they were together, the couple led a transient lifestyle, moving between various addresses in the Pilbara, including Marble Bar, Port Hedland, Three Mile Aboriginal Community and Twelve Mile Aboriginal Community.⁸

⁵ Exhibit 1, Tab 2.

⁶ Exhibit 1, Tab 2.

⁷ Exhibit 1, Tab 2 and Tab 3.

⁸ Exhibit 1, Tab 2.

11. There was evidence before me that established the relationship between Veronica and Craig was marred by domestic violence.
12. In August 1996, Veronica had been transferred on forms as an involuntary patient from Port Hedland Hospital and admitted to Graylands Hospital for psychiatric treatment. She was admitted due to experiencing paranoid delusions and self-harm ideation. Her differential diagnosis was schizophreniform psychosis and depressive disorder with psychotic symptoms. It was suspected by doctors that she was a victim of domestic violence, with a report that Craig had recently thrown a television at her and it had hit her in the face, but Veronica denied any physical violence by Craig and would only admit that they quarrelled. Over time, Veronica slowly improved and her psychotic symptoms resolved. She received some treatment for a painful jaw and a possible sexually transmitted infection and was eventually discharged back to Porth Hedland on 13 September 1996.⁹
13. All of Veronica's children except Donna (who was the youngest at the time) were placed in the care of Veronica's sister and her mother when she went to hospital, and it seems they generally remained living with extended family from that time, apart from brief periods living with Veronica and Craig.¹⁰
14. In the times that they did live with Veronica and Craig, Veronica's sons Ian Cooper Jnr and Adrian Clinch both witnessed Craig being violent towards their mother, as well as to the children.¹¹
15. Adrian gave evidence that the last time he could remember seeing his mother was when Veronica and Craig came to stay out in the Twelve Mile Community Reserve, just out of Port Hedland. At the time, they only had Donna, and Adell had not yet been born. Adrian remembered there was some conflict amongst the family. Veronica had a fight with her first cousin, Auntie Christine, due to Craig, and Veronica eventually decided she needed to move somewhere else out of town. She moved over the other side of the train line, near the river, although Adrian does not recall that they stayed there for long.¹²
16. Adrian was only nine years old but he has a very good memory of that time and he was old enough to see and understand what his mother was going through. Adrian recalls that Veronica was drinking heavily because she was "[c]ontinually putting up with being abused. Flogged."¹³ Most of the physical violence occurred when no other adults were around, only the children Adrian, Amarina and Donna. Adrian recalled Terryl was not there as there had been an incident when Craig allegedly assaulted Terryl so he was not allowed to visit Veronica and Craig. The incident involving Terryl had apparently been witnessed by other family members, who had seen Craig belting Terryl before throwing him through a wall.¹⁴

⁹ Medical Records.

¹⁰ Exhibit 1, Tab 2.

¹¹ T 63 – 71.

¹² T 68

¹³ T 67.

¹⁴ T 68 - 69.

17. Although Terryl was not allowed to go, Adrian had agreed to go to the camp as he had felt worried for his mother, as at the time Veronica had two black eyes. He said he had a gut feeling that they should go with her, so he encouraged his sister Amarina to go with him and spend time with Veronica and Donna. Adrian remembered the first night was okay, with the group sitting around the campfire toasting marshmallows. However, on the second night, an argument developed between his mother and Craig because Veronica snapped at Craig for burning Donna with a piece of wood from the fire. Adrian recalled that it was a totally new experience for him and he was scared that Craig would turn on him as well and give him a belting. Accordingly, he asked to go back home the next day. Adrian told one of his uncles, Terry Lockyer, what had happened, which resulted in Veronica's family taking some action to punish Craig for his behaviour towards Veronica and the children. Adrian said he was aware that around this time Veronica wanted to leave Craig and come back to her family, but Craig told them all that Veronica was mentally ill again.¹⁵
18. Consistent with Adrian's recollection, there are records to indicate that in late 1997, Craig was subject to a serious assault at the Twelve Mile Community by members of Veronica's family. The police investigation found evidence to suggest the assault was done as 'payback' for the manner in which Craig had treated Veronica and the children. It was believed that this event was the catalyst for Veronica and Craig to then leave the Pilbara, removing Veronica from the support of her family.¹⁶ Adrian recalled that Veronica and Craig went at this time to Marble Bar.
19. Ian gave evidence he had lived with his mother in Marble Bar in 1997 but it was "a pretty rough time"¹⁷ due to her relationship with Craig. Ian always felt Veronica wanted the best for him, but it was difficult for him to be there as Craig was "very physically violent"¹⁸ towards all of them, to the point that Ian could no longer stay living with him and he hitchhiked from Marble Bar to Geraldton. Ian last saw his mother when he was 15 or 16 years old, at a time he estimated to be between 1997 and 1998. He was living in Geraldton at the time and he received a call from Veronica 'out of the blue' one night telling him that she would be coming through Geraldton on a bus and wanted to see him. He went to the bus station in Geraldton to wait for her, but she never arrived. Ian eventually went home without seeing her. That was the last time he ever heard from his mother. He didn't know about Adell at the time, only Donna, and based on the other evidence, it seems likely this all occurred in late 1997.¹⁹
20. Adrian recalled he saw his mother for the last time when she came to say goodbye as they were leaving the Pilbara. He said Craig had "burnt all his bridges"²⁰ by that time and there was nowhere they could live in that region where there would not be repercussions if he was violent towards Veronica and her children. He also thought Craig was angry about the earlier beating he had received. Adrian remembers seeing his mother for the last time and he could see in her eyes that she didn't want to go, but she

¹⁵ T 67 - 68.

¹⁶ Exhibit 1, Tab 2.

¹⁷ T 64.

¹⁸ T 65.

¹⁹ T 63 - 65.

²⁰ T 69.

felt controlled by Craig. Adrian said that Veronica asked him if he and Amarina would like to go with them, but Adrian had no trust in Craig, having witnessed his violent behaviour towards all of the children and particularly Veronica. His Auntie was present and she spoke up and told Veronica she would not let her take Adrian and Amarina with her while she was still with Craig. Adrian's Auntie asked Veronica why she put up with Craig's violence and said she should leave him, but Veronica left with Craig and Adrian never saw her again.²¹

21. Adrian recalled that about five years after Veronica left, his Auntie (who is now sadly deceased) became concerned that she had not heard from Veronica. She began to ask family in Perth if they had seen her. Some said they had seen her and some said they hadn't, but no one could be precise about when or where. At a later stage, Adrian is aware his Auntie went to the South Hedland Police Station to see if anyone could help her locate Veronica, but nothing came of it. Adrian is aware his Auntie never found Veronica and she never contacted her family in South Hedland again and never came back. Adrian pointed out that Veronica never even came home for family funerals, including that of his Auntie and grandmother, Veronica's mother. The extended family became very concerned when Veronica did not return home for her mother's funeral, but they did not know where to look for her.²²
22. Adrian gave evidence that some of the family had concerns that there was something suspicious about Veronica's disappearance, but others thought perhaps she had gone either interstate or to another country. However, Adrian noted that Veronica had no family interstate, with almost all of her family still living in the Pilbara, and the farthest they were aware that she had ever travelled was to Perth. Therefore, it was very unlikely she would have left the State.²³
23. Ian gave evidence he wasn't aware that Veronica was missing, and was not even aware of Adell's existence, until the police went public on the media about their search for Veronica and Adell. He has not heard anything from family or friends that would help shed any light on what happened to Veronica and Adell. Ian gave evidence he did come to Perth with his younger brother to try and search various houses looking for Veronica and Adell, based upon rumours as to whether they might be staying, but they got nowhere with their searching.²⁴
24. Although they left the Pilbara together, Craig eventually returned to his family home in Burracoppin with Donna but without Veronica. During this time, Veronica resided at several addresses in the Perth area, including some women's refuges.²⁵
25. On 14 April 1998, Veronica filed an application in the Family Court of Western Australia seeking an order that she have custody of Donna, who was two years' old at the time. In a supporting affidavit, which was sworn on 9 April 1998, Veronica included the following evidence:²⁶

²¹ T 69 - 70.

²² T 70.

²³ T 71.

²⁴ T 65.

²⁵ Exhibit 1, Tab 2.

²⁶ Exhibit 1, Tab 2.

- She had been in a de facto relationship with Craig for five to six years but they had separated permanently on 2 April 1998;
 - Craig had threatened that if she went to the Aboriginal Legal Service he would “get (her) put down like a dog;”²⁷
 - She had been renting a caravan in Kelmscott after being “kicked out of the community”;
 - After an argument, Craig “threatened to sell (their) baby daughter”;
 - She had been subject to regular domestic violence at the hands of Craig. In particular, on 21 July 1997, Craig had knocked her three front teeth out after he punched her in the mouth, as she caught him with another woman;
 - When she was pregnant, Craig headbutted her and tried to break her neck, and when she tried to have him charged with assault, he got in touch with a social worker and she found herself in Graylands Hospital for about 2 weeks.
- 26.** Other documents submitted by Craig and Veronica to government agencies, including Department of Housing applications, supported her contention they were estranged and no longer a couple.²⁸
- 27.** On 20 April 1998 the Family Court made orders such that Veronica have custody of Donna until further order, Craig forthwith deliver her into Veronica’s care and that a warrant issue to, inter alia, the WA Police to give effect to those orders.
- 28.** On 22 April 1998, Veronica gave birth to Adell at King Edward Memorial Hospital in Subiaco. Records indicate Craig was the father.²⁹
- 29.** On 23 April 1998, Donna was seized from Craig pursuant to a Family Court order. However, Donna was subsequently returned to Craig when alternate accommodation could not be found and with the consideration that Veronica had only just given birth and was believed to still be in hospital.³⁰ On discharge from hospital, Veronica provided the address of a women’s refuge in East Perth.
- 30.** On 7 May 1998, Craig filed an affidavit, which included the following evidence:
- On 23 April 1998, Donna was removed from his care in Merredin and he was told by Police that Veronica was at King Edward Memorial Hospital and had given birth;
 - On 24 April 1998, Craig saw Veronica and the new baby. Donna was with Veronica;
 - On that day Veronica told Craig that she wanted to get back with him and meet his parents;
 - On 25 April 1998, Craig, Veronica and their two children travelled to Merredin and thereafter lived with his sister;

²⁷ Exhibit 1, Tab 2, p. 3.

²⁸ Exhibit 1, Tab 2.

²⁹ Exhibit 1, Tab 2.

³⁰ Exhibit 1, Tab 2.

- On 30 April 1998, Craig took Donna to the Police, Family and Childrens' Services and subsequently to his mother;
 - Veronica and Adell were then living with his sister in Merredin.
31. On 8 May 1998, the parties attended at the Family Court and signed a Minute of Consent. The Court made orders by consent in the following terms:
- Veronica have custody of Donna.
 - Craig be restrained from removing Donna from the care of Veronica except for the purpose of agreed access.
 - Craig have reasonable access to Donna as agreed between the parties.
32. The Court proceedings were otherwise dismissed.
33. It appears shortly after, Veronica and Craig reconciled, and they then lived together for a period of time at the home of Craig's sister, Cherylee Partridge, in Merredin. In early June 1998, Craig secured a Department of Housing home in Council Avenue, Merredin, which he then shared with Veronica and their two young daughters.³¹
34. On 12 August 1998, Craig attended the Merredin Department of Communities' office and stated that Veronica had been violent towards Donna. He said if the Department of Communities staff didn't do something about it, he would take the matter into his own hands.³²
35. On 13 August 1998, Veronica presented at the Merredin Police Station requesting police assistance to leave Craig. Veronica stated she would contact police when she needed assistance and she left the station. When Veronica failed to contact the police, a welfare check was conducted. The Merredin Police Occurrence Book indicates no welfare concerns were identified, although the details of the welfare check are not recorded.³³
36. On 17 August 1998, Department of Communities notes reflect that a Merredin Mental Health Case Officer visited the family at home and noted everything was "normal,"³⁴ and the family sought assistance on how to relocate to the Pilbara.

LAST KNOWN SIGHTINGS

37. On 25 October 1998, Veronica was seen by a social worker at the South Hedland Centrelink Office. This is the last known recorded sighting of Veronica.³⁵

³¹ Exhibit 1, Tab 2.

³² Exhibit 1, Tab 2.

³³ Exhibit 1, Tab 2.

³⁴ Exhibit 1, Tab 2, p. 4.

³⁵ Exhibit 1, Tab 2.

38. On 1 November 1998, Craig attended Hedland Health Campus with Adell. He also had Donna with him. Veronica was not present. This is the last known record of the family in Hedland.³⁶
39. On 24 November 1998, Adell is recorded as having attended the Merredin Community Health Centre for an immunisation injection. Adell was seven months old at that time. This is the last known record of any contact between Adell and any government or external agency. It is an electronically generated record, so it cannot be verified, but there is nothing to suggest it is incorrect.³⁷
40. On 27 and 28 December 1998, records indicate Craig presented to Kalgoorlie Regional Hospital with Donna, who had an abdominal complaint. The records do not include any reference to Donna or Adell.³⁸
41. On 11 January 1999, a little over two months after the last sightings of Veronica and Adell, Craig was located with Donna in Kalgoorlie. Craig was dishevelled and in a distressed psychological state, threatening to kill himself, so he was taken by police to Kalgoorlie Hospital for treatment. On admission, Craig was recorded by medical staff as saying:³⁹
- He was separated from his partner, who had left him for another man, and had left him with their daughter;
 - He believed his partner was in a women's refuge in Perth;
 - He was hearing voices in his head telling him to harm himself and his daughters;
 - The voices in his head, which were up to four voices, were ganging up on him and were hard to resist.
42. Craig was transferred to Graylands Hospital for psychiatric treatment as a voluntary patient. While being cared for at Graylands Hospital, Craig told doctors he had been hearing voices for about eight months, since Veronica struck him in the head with a tyre lever. He said he had broken up with Veronica just before Christmas and Veronica had taken Adell with her and left Donna with him. Craig told doctors that prior to his hospital admission, he had been living in an Aboriginal Hostel on a sole parent pension. His diagnosis at that time was Major Depression with Psychotic Features and he was discharged on 28 January 1999 after his mental state improved with medication.⁴⁰
43. Donna had been placed into the care of his sister Cherylee and Craig's mother, Robyn Partridge, until Craig was discharged from hospital in late January 1999. On his release from Graylands Hospital, Craig returned to Merredin, where he initially resided at his family home in Burracoppin before obtaining his own Department of Housing home in Merredin, where he lived with Donna.⁴¹

³⁶ Exhibit 1, Tab 2.

³⁷ Exhibit 1, Tab 2.

³⁸ Exhibit 1, Tab 2.

³⁹ Exhibit 1, Tab 2.

⁴⁰ Medical records.

⁴¹ Exhibit 1, Tab 2.

44. Craig had a further psychiatric admission in July 1999 after his mental health deteriorated again. Craig was still caring for Donna at the time of the admission, with the support of his family, although some issues were raised about whether he would be able to resume ongoing care of Donna. He threatened to kill himself if he wasn't able to keep caring for Donna. Craig had another voluntary psychiatric admission in August 2000, at which time he was given a new diagnosis of Schizophrenia possibly associated with Marijuana Abuse. He talked about only living for his older daughter, Donna, and made mention that Veronica and Adell lived in Port Hedland but claimed Veronica would not allow him access to Adell. Craig eventually discharged himself on 11 August 2000. The local Merredin community mental health service was advised and his anti-psychotic medications were sent to his home address.⁴²
45. Craig had a final psychiatric admission in June 2001, again with a diagnosis of Schizophrenia and Substance Abuse. He was admitted on forms after being aggressive and threatening a mental health worker. He had ceased his medication six months before and he complained they over-sedated him. He settled quickly once back on his medication and was then discharged. There was no mention of Veronica or Adell during this admission.⁴³

MISSING PERSON REPORT

46. The first report that Veronica and Adell were missing was made by Donna to police officers at the Kwinana Police Station on 5 July 2018, approximately 20 years after they were last seen. Donna had been only a small child when her mother and baby sister disappeared, and she was now a young woman.⁴⁴
47. Donna told the police that she had been raised by her father, Craig, and his new wife until she was 14 years of age. She had not had any contact with her mother's family while she was growing up and had held the belief that Veronica had been residing with them in the Pilbara. This belief came from conversations with her father when she was a child. He told her that she had been abandoned by her mother, who was living with her family in the Pilbara. When Donna finally re-connected with her mother's family in 2018, it became apparent that her mother was not with them and that it had been two decades since the family had seen or heard from Veronica and/or Adell.⁴⁵
48. Donna gave eloquent evidence at the inquest about the trauma she experienced growing up without her mother and in the care of Craig. He kept her segregated from the memory of her mother and little sister Adell. He would not tell her anything about her mother and when she asked him where Veronica and Adell were, he would tell her that Veronica went back up to Port Hedland and didn't want Donna. This understandably caused Donna immense grief and hurt for many years, living under the false belief that her mother had abandoned her. She would also ask him about Veronica's family in Port Hedland, and he told her that they were rough people and she was promised in an arranged marriage, to discourage her from contacting them. Donna gave evidence that

⁴² Medical Records.

⁴³ Medical Records.

⁴⁴ Exhibit 1, Tab 2.

⁴⁵ Exhibit 1, Tab 2.

Craig was physically violent towards her, and would also be cruel to animals, drowning kittens and cats and a puppy in her presence. When Donna finally got up the courage to try to find Veronica in 2018, after having her own children and wanted to give them an opportunity to meet their grandmother, she found out very quickly that Donna and Adell were missing. She immediately went to the police to make the missing persons reports. She also made contact with Veronica's family, and met her other siblings for the first time in her memory.⁴⁶

49. Veronica's family had assumed that she had left her old life behind and this was the reason for her lack of contact. They did not suspect she had come to any harm. Later information revealed at least one of Veronica's older children had tried to find her in the past, without success.⁴⁷ Donna had been informed by Communities' staff that a cousin in South Hedland wanted to make contact with her, and when this occurred she also had contact with her three siblings, Adrian, Amarina and Terryl Clinch. They asked Donna about how her mother was faring, assuming she was living with Donna, and it then became apparent to all of them that they had been living under the false assumption Veronica and Adell were alive and well and living with other family, when in fact no one had seen either of them for many years.⁴⁸
50. Donna said after meeting her brothers and sister, she gave Craig a chance to explain why he didn't tell her she had siblings. He replied, "they're not your real siblings."⁴⁹ It is clear that Donna has forged a deep and meaningful relationship with her siblings, despite Craig's response, and it has been the one silver lining in this sad tale of loss. Donna gave evidence that Craig stripped her of everything: her language, her culture, her siblings and her mother. However, she has now had the opportunity to start forging some of these important connections.⁵⁰
51. As to her mother, sadly Donna has no memory of Veronica, and could not provide any more details than what she told the police at the time of making her report. Donna has asked Craig many times what happened to her mother, but he has always told her the same story, that she went back to Port Hedland with her sister Adell.⁵¹

INITIAL POLICE INVESTIGATION

52. The missing person report was provided to the WA Police Missing Persons Unit.⁵² Officers from the Missing Persons Unit conducted a series of checks and requests with government and external agencies, which are often referred to as 'proof of life' checks. Some of the agencies contacted included:⁵³

- Registrar of Births, Deaths and Marriages,

⁴⁶ T 72.

⁴⁷ Exhibit 1, Tab 2.

⁴⁸ Exhibit 1, Tab 5.1.

⁴⁹ T 73.

⁵⁰ T 73.

⁵¹ T 73 - 74.

⁵² Exhibit 1, Tab 2.

⁵³ Exhibit 1, Tab 2.

- Centrelink,
 - Department of Housing,
 - Medicare, and
 - National and State Law Enforcement Agencies.
53. The Missing Persons Unit were unable to locate any record of Veronica or Adell post August 1998. Prior to her disappearance, Veronica had relied heavily on support from a number of these government agencies, including Centrelink, government health services and Department of Housing, so her lack of contact was unusual and out of character. However, none of the government agencies had identified that Veronica had gone missing.⁵⁴
54. The Missing Persons Unit investigators also established that Veronica had been in a violent family and domestic relationship with Craig and had been contemplating leaving him prior to her disappearance. Both Veronica and Craig also had a history of mental health issues around the relevant time.⁵⁵
55. The limited information available raised the investigators suspicions that Veronica and/or Adell may have been the victim of foul play and there was a need to explore the possibility of Craig's involvement in their disappearance, given the known nature of the domestic relationship. As a result of these inquiries, the case was transferred to Homicide Squad.⁵⁶

HOMICIDE SQUAD INVESTIGATION

56. The Homicide Squad took carriage of the investigation (named Operation Tellurium) in November 2018.⁵⁷ The investigation initially focussed on:⁵⁸
- Interrogation of records from the various agencies Veronica and Adell were in regular contact with at the time of their disappearance;
 - Canvassing of any relevant witnesses across Western Australia;
 - A substantial media strategy; and
 - Investigation/Elimination of Craig's possible involvement.
57. The initial inquiries revealed that Veronica and Adell had survived past August 1998, and were recorded as being involved with the Department of Transport and Health agencies as late as October/November 1998. However, the trail after that time then went cold. The last months of 1998 therefore became an important time in the investigation.⁵⁹

⁵⁴ Exhibit 1, Tab 2.

⁵⁵ Exhibit 1, Tab 2.

⁵⁶ Exhibit 1, Tab 2.

⁵⁷ Exhibit 1, Tab 2.

⁵⁸ Exhibit 1, Tab 2.

⁵⁹ T 51; Exhibit 1, Tab 2.

Witnesses

- 58.** In total, 120 witnesses were identified and attempts were made to interview them. Many were family members of Veronica and Craig, immediate or distant. A number of government employees were also relevant witnesses. Unfortunately, due to the lengthy lapse of time between Veronica and Adell's disappearance and the missing person report, some important witnesses were deceased and others had difficulties with their memory of events.⁶⁰
- 59.** Although many of the witnesses were able to provide some background information on the intermittent movement of the small family, little information was able to be obtained about the movements of the family in the crucial time period of late 1998. It was apparent that there was significant confusion amongst family members as to where Veronica was believed to have been living.⁶¹
- 60.** One of Veronica's older sons, Terryl Clinch, told police he recalled being present when Craig had violently assaulted his mother on several occasions when he was a child, as well as being violently assaulted by Craig himself. He was present when Craig was assaulted by family members at Twelve Mile Community and was aware that after the assault Craig and Veronica had left Hedland, taking Donna with them. Terryl recalled that Veronica and Craig returned to Hedland briefly after Adell was born, with both Donna and Adell present with them, before they left again for the last time. Terryl did not recall the specific circumstances about the last time they left. After Veronica left, Terryl, Amarina and Adrian were raised by Erica Lockyer, Veronica's sister. Terryl told the police that when he was older, he had travelled to Perth, Merredin, Queensland and Tasmania looking for his mother, but had never found her.⁶²
- 61.** Donna told the police that she had suffered physical and psychological abuse from her father during her childhood. As a result, Donna left home at 14 years of age. Her only knowledge of her mother and sister's whereabouts while growing up came from her father, who told her that she had been abandoned by her mother and she was led to believe Veronica and Adell still lived in Hedland with Veronica's family.⁶³
- 62.** Craig's sister, Cherylee Partridge, told police Craig had been a violent person growing up, and on one occasion had allegedly tried to set the family home on fire whilst his younger brother was in the house. Cherylee had observed that Craig had appeared to be extremely controlling towards Veronica when they stayed briefly with Cherylee in Merredin in April/May 1998. When Craig wasn't present, Veronica would confide in Cherylee about the constant physical abuse she received from Craig. Cherylee could not provide any information about Veronica or Adell's movements in November/December 1998.⁶⁴
- 63.** The police investigation had initially believed Veronica had not been seen since August 1998 when she had gone to the police for help leaving Craig. This elevated their interest

⁶⁰ Exhibit 1, Tab 2.

⁶¹ Exhibit 1, Tab 2.

⁶² Exhibit 1, Tab 2.

⁶³ Exhibit 1, Tab 2.

⁶⁴ Exhibit 1, Tab 2.

in Craig and had prompted the shift from a missing person investigation to a homicide investigation. However, after it became apparent that Veronica had been seen in the later months of 1998, the suspicion surrounding Craig was downgraded somewhat. However, he was still someone who needed to be interviewed by police, particularly given the allegations of domestic violence, the statements he had made to doctors on his admission to hospital in January 1999, and the fact Craig appeared to have told other people Veronica was with her family, which was not true. Craig was approached by police and requested to participate in an interview. He agreed to be interviewed.⁶⁵

64. The interview was conducted by Homicide Squad detectives on 18 January 2019. Police inquiries had established that Craig had been admitted to Graylands Hospital on four occasions, starting with the first admission in January 1999. Given his extensive mental health history, Craig was deemed to be a vulnerable person and was permitted to have his wife, Lynda Partridge, present as an interview friend during the audio-visually recorded interview. During the interview, which was conducted on a voluntary basis, Craig provided the following information:⁶⁶

- He went to Hedland after the birth of Adell with Veronica, Adell and Donna (as recalled by Terry);
- Whilst in Hedland, they had spent time with Veronica's family, including Veronica's sister, Erica;
- Whilst in Hedland, they had also attended the Hedland Hospital with Donna as Donna had 'gastro';
- They left Hedland as Veronica wanted to return to Perth;
- When they arrived in Perth, they stayed at a refuge for two or three weeks, before returning to Burracoppin/Merredin, where they stayed with Craig's parents;
- Whilst staying in Merredin, they travelled to Perth in November or December 1998 as a family to do some food shopping. On the way, they stopped at their old Homeswest house in Burracoppin and Veronica filled up a suitcase with clothes and other items.
- They then drove to the Woolworths at the Centrepoint Shopping Centre in Midland to do some shopping and were planning to return to Merredin the same day. After doing their shopping and whilst in the Centrepoint carpark, Veronica and Craig had an argument and she accused him of 'eyeing off a woman' and 'sleeping around'. He believed she had delusional postnatal depression after having Adell but she wouldn't take her medication. Following the argument, Craig got Veronica's suitcase out of the boot of the car and Veronica left in a taxi with Adell;
- Craig has not seen Veronica or Adell since that time;
- Craig stated that he had received information from the Australian Tax Office (ATO) indicating that Veronica had completed a tax return up until 2008. The relevant documentation was provided to the investigators;
- Craig also said he had asked a woman at Kwinana Department of Communities to look for Veronica and Adell in 2015 and she said she would try her best, but obtained no information;

⁶⁵ Exhibit 1, Tab 2.

⁶⁶ Exhibit 1, Tab 2 and EROI.

- Craig was asked about immunisations for the children. He said Veronica didn't want Donna to get immunised but he wasn't sure about Adell.
65. The information provided by Craig during his interview was corroborated by some of the records obtained during the investigation, as well as some witness accounts. It did not shed any light on what had happened to Veronica and Adell.⁶⁷
66. The ATO documents provided by Craig to the investigators were not tax returns. They were records from the Child Support Agency and appeared to be autogenerated documents. The police did not consider the documents to provide any evidence that Veronica had been alive after the end of 1998.⁶⁸
67. The account given by Craig about his last interaction with Veronica could not be confirmed nor discredited. No further information or evidence was obtained to either implicate or eliminate Craig from any involvement in Veronica and Adell's disappearance.⁶⁹
68. No other person was identified in the investigation as potentially having any involvement in Veronica and Adell's disappearance.

Government Agencies

69. Both Missing Persons Unit and the Homicide Squad made a range of requests to government and external agencies for records relating to Veronica and Adell to try to ascertain their whereabouts.
70. The interactions between the family and Department of Communities (Communities) was well documented until August 1998. After 1998, there is no further record of Veronica and Adell being involved with Communities' staff, although they were involved with Craig and Donna after Craig was taken to Kalgoorlie Hospital in January 1999. While Craig was in hospital, Communities arranged for Donna to be transferred to Merredin to be cared for by members of Craig's family. There is no mention of Veronica and Adell during this time.⁷⁰
71. The last contact between Centrelink staff and Veronica was when she was seen by a social worker at the South Hedland Centrelink office on 25 October 1998. During this visit, Veronica changed her address with the agency to the Twelve Mile Community. The identity of the social worker she spoke to is unknown. Centrelink records reveal that a \$351 debt was raised for Veronica on 30 September 1998 due to payment of an allowance she was not entitled to receive at the time, and information about this debt was posted to her, but it was returned from the South Hedland Post Office on 6 November 1998 as it was unclaimed. There was no further contact with Veronica. On 19 February 1999, following review of her case, Veronica's Centrelink payments were suspended with a note 'Whereabouts Unknown' attached to her file. On 30 June 1999, a

⁶⁷ Exhibit 1, Tab 2.

⁶⁸ Exhibit 1, Tab 2.

⁶⁹ Exhibit 1, Tab 2.

⁷⁰ Exhibit 1, Tab 2.

note was placed on her record asking Veronica to contact Erica Lockyer at Tjaka Warren Community if she was seen by Centrelink staff.⁷¹

72. Erica is Veronica's sister and she had been caring for three of Veronica's children since she left Hedland. There is information that in 2001 Erica presented to Communities and said she had been caring for the children for three years and had not had any contact with Veronica in those three years. She was reportedly encouraged to report her sister missing, but this did not eventuate.⁷²
73. Inquiries with various banks revealed that Veronica had a Commonwealth Bank account that was closed in 2006 due to inactivity. It had a positive balance of \$2,799.49 at that time. Records are destroyed after a seven year period of inactivity, so no more information is available about the account.⁷³
74. Department of Housing records indicate Veronica and Craig were living together, and heavily dependent on the agency for their housing, up until 1998. During 1998, Veronica and Craig were submitting requests for housing separately, consistent with reports they had separated. There is no record of Veronica contacting the Department of housing past 1998, and her last address listed was a women's refuge in Perth. Craig continued to have separate housing provided by the Department of Housing after that time.⁷⁴
75. There is evidence that indicates Veronica may have attended the South Hedland Department of Transport office on 28 October 1998, but the details of who assisted Veronica, and for what purpose, are unavailable.⁷⁵
76. Veronica is last recorded on the Medicare database as attending a medical appointment in Merredin in June 1998. Adell does not appear to have been registered with Medicare as she does not appear on the database.⁷⁶
77. No information was provided to suggest that Veronica, or Adell, had been in contact with any State or Federal law enforcement agencies outside Western Australia, and there is no WA Police record for either after the end of 1998, other than the missing person investigation.⁷⁷

Public Awareness

78. Homicide Squad also implemented an extensive public awareness strategy in consultation with the Police Media and Missing Persons Unit. Numerous media releases called on members of the public to provide any information through Crime Stoppers in order to generate lines of inquiry. In addition, Homicide Squad officers attended the

⁷¹ Exhibit 1, Tab 2.

⁷² Exhibit 1, Tab 4.

⁷³ Exhibit 1, Tab 2.

⁷⁴ Exhibit 1, Tab 2.

⁷⁵ Exhibit 1, Tab 2.

⁷⁶ Exhibit 1, Tab 2.

⁷⁷ T 54; Exhibit 1, Tab 2.

Merredin/Burracoppin area (the last known location of Veronica and Adell) with a Police Mobile Facility to call on information from members of the public in the area.⁷⁸

79. Donna also assisted the police with their public awareness campaign, including as recently as July 2019, when she participated in Missing Person's Week broadcasts calling for public assistance into the disappearance of her mother and her sister.⁷⁹
80. Information provided by members of the public was recorded and actioned accordingly, but ultimately did not progress the investigation.⁸⁰

Unidentified Remains

81. Forensic Anthropologist Dr Alannah Buck has been consulted by police to ascertain whether any unidentified remains have been located in Western Australia that would be consistent with belonging to either Veronica or Adell. Dr Buck advised there are currently no unidentified remains held that may be linked to this case.⁸¹

Police Review

82. In August 2019, WA Police officers conducted a separate review of all evidence obtained during the Homicide Squad investigation. The review was conducted by a Senior Criminal Investigator and Senior Forensic Investigator in consultation with the Senior Investigating Officer from Homicide Squad. Noting the Homicide Squad investigation was still 'live, the aim of the review was to aid decision-making with respect to the future direction of the investigation.⁸²
83. The review team found there were 193 Actions recorded on the ViPER case management system conducted within the five Key Investigation Strategies (*The5KIS*). As noted above, 120 witnesses had been identified. In August 2019, the primary outstanding investigative strategies related to witnesses, noting the lapse of time had made witness contact difficult.⁸³
84. The review team determined the investigation had reached a stage where a Concluding Review was required. It was determined that the Homicide Squad had conducted an extensive investigation with limited investigative leads. All investigative strategies had failed to produce any real evidence. The WA Police have not been able to establish the whereabouts of Veronica or Adell. Given Veronica's history of heavy reliance on government assistance, the cessation of use of all government services in late 1998 pointed to the conclusion they were both deceased, which led to a recommendation to prepare a comprehensive report and refer the case to the State Coroner.⁸⁴

⁷⁸ Exhibit 1, Tab 2.

⁷⁹ Exhibit 1, Tab 2.

⁸⁰ T 55; Exhibit 1, Tab 2.

⁸¹ T 56; Exhibit 1, Tab 2.

⁸² Exhibit 1, Tab 2 and Tab 3.

⁸³ Exhibit 1, Tab 3.

⁸⁴ Exhibit 1, Tab 3.

85. Detective Sergeant Scott Ralph and Detective Senior Sergeant Adrian Richards provided a report to the State Coroner on 11 February 2021 outlining the outcome of the detailed investigation.⁸⁵

NEW EVIDENCE AT THE INQUEST

86. I have already set out above the new evidence provided by Veronica's sons Ian and Adrian and her daughter Donna.
87. In addition, Craig Partridge was called to give evidence at the inquest and notified that there was potential for an adverse comment or finding to be made against him arising out of the evidence, so he was entitled to be represented if he wished. Craig attended the inquest, in compliance with his summons, and did not seek to be represented nor to exercise his right to silence. He answered all questions put to him, although at times he indicated he did not have a clear recollection. Much of Craig's evidence was consistent with the information he had told police in his interview, although there were some discrepancies.
88. In relation to Veronica and Adell's disappearance, Craig's evidence at the inquest was that he had split up with Veronica at the time of Adell's birth. He claimed they had broken up as Veronica had been hitting Donna, so he took her away to live with his family in Merredin. Craig caught the train to Perth after Adell was born and visited Veronica and Adell at King Edward Memorial Hospital the day after her birth. Donna was with Veronica by this time, as she had been removed from his care by Legal Aid at the instruction of the Court. Veronica indicated she wanted them to get back together and he reluctantly agreed.⁸⁶
89. After Veronica and Adell left the hospital, they returned to Merredin to live together as a family. They obtained a Homeswest house and were trying to make a go of their relationship. Craig believed Veronica was experiencing postnatal depression, like she had after the birth of Donna. She wouldn't shower much or eat much and just wanted to lie down and do nothing, saying she felt sick all the time. Craig said he had tried to talk to Veronica about it, and encouraged her to take her medication, but she didn't want to talk about it and refused to take her medication.⁸⁷
90. Craig recalled going to see a social worker to express concern that Veronica was hitting Donna and a mental health worker came to visit them. The mental health worker also encouraged Veronica to take her medication, without success.⁸⁸
91. Given the evidence of Veronica going to see the police in August 1998, Craig was asked if he recalled being visited by police around this time. Craig gave evidence he did not recall a police officer coming to see them. Craig was asked about allegations that he was violent towards Veronica. He said there had been only three times when he had been violent towards Veronica: once in Port Hedland, once in Warralong and once in

⁸⁵ Exhibit 1, Tab 2.

⁸⁶ T 9 - 12.

⁸⁷ T 14 - 17.

⁸⁸ T 14 - 17.

Burracoppin. On the last occasion, which was after Adell was born and before August 1998, Craig said he and Veronica became involved in a physical fight. His mother had then become involved and struck him with a stick to end the fight. After that time, Veronica wouldn't let him touch Adell anymore. Craig said Veronica would let him help care for Donna but she would not let him look after Adell in any way.⁸⁹

92. Craig claimed there was no further physical violence between the two of them after that time, but they did have verbal arguments because Veronica was accusing him of being unfaithful, which he denied. They went up to visit Veronica's family with Donna and Adell sometime around Veronica's birthday, which was on 28 October. It is clear Veronica was in South Hedland around this time, as she visited the Centrelink Office in South Hedland.⁹⁰
93. Craig was asked about taking Donna to hospital for stomach issues in November 1998. He had a recollection Donna had a sore back and he, Veronica, Donna and Adell all went to the hospital together, although he wasn't certain they all went together. He was able to say that Veronica always had Adell with her, so if Adell was seen at the hospital and then later had her vaccination, then he believed Veronica would have taken her to the clinic and was still around.⁹¹
94. Craig recalled they had been getting on reasonably well on the visit to South Hedland, but when the family returned to Merredin, the Department of Housing had shut up their home as the staff believed the family had abandoned it. Craig said they began to look for a new home, but were unsuccessful, and had to come to Perth, where they lived on the streets and in their car. They then returned to Merredin to live with some of Craig's family. It was in this context that they took the trip to Perth to go shopping, which was the last time Craig says he saw Veronica and Adell alive. Craig gave evidence he believed this car trip was in late November.⁹²
95. Craig's evidence at the inquest omitted the reference to going to their old Homeswest house on the journey. He gave evidence that they had packed some bags at his mother's house, including a baby backpack and a bag. He also said Veronica had told him she wanted to leave, and they were heading to Perth to find accommodation, rather than the previous suggestion it was just a day trip to go shopping.⁹³
96. In terms of the argument at the Midland Centrepoint Shopping Centre, unlike in his interview, Craig's evidence at the inquest was not that they went shopping in the Woolworths then argued as they were returning to the car. Craig gave evidence that they had a verbal argument in the car about his parents, in particular his mum, and the fact that Veronica didn't think Craig's mum liked her. Craig told her that it was an issue between the two women and they should work it out, not him. Veronica then told him to "pull in there."⁹⁴ He didn't know what for, so he asked her why? She responded, "I want

⁸⁹ T 18 - 21.

⁹⁰ T 21 - 28.

⁹¹ T 23 - 26.

⁹² T 25 - 28, 36.

⁹³ T 30.

⁹⁴ T 31.

to get out.”⁹⁵ Craig said he pulled over and parked in a parking bay at the Centrepont Shopping Centre and Veronica got out of the car and grabbed Adell. She asked Craig to get Adell’s pram out of the car, which he did, and she put Adell in the pram and gave her a bottle and Adell went to sleep. Veronica then began arguing with Craig again. Craig gave evidence he said to Veronica, “Get off my back.”⁹⁶ He then said, “If you don’t stop, I’m going to leave you.”⁹⁷ He claims Veronica then “started on”⁹⁸ Donna and he told her to leave Donna alone because she hadn’t done anything. He claims he tried to grab Donna and Veronica told him that he couldn’t take Donna with him and Donna was staying with her. Craig said Veronica then pulled Donna out of the car and called her a ‘dog’. Craig said to her, “You’re not talking to Donna like that all the time,”⁹⁹ then he picked up Donna and left.¹⁰⁰

- 97.** Craig gave evidence that he believed Veronica and Adell were going to go to a women’s refuge in East Perth, because she mentioned it during their argument. He said he didn’t see Veronica and Adell leave. Instead, he drove across the car park to a service station and got some petrol and an ice cream for Donna and he then drove to Perth, without looking back or going to check on Veronica and Adell. He gave evidence that Veronica had said she was going to catch a taxi, but he did not see her leave in one.¹⁰¹ This differs from Craig’s previous account of seeing Veronica take Adell and put her in a taxi and leave.
- 98.** After leaving Veronica and Adell in Midland, Craig said he went with Donna to City Stay Apartments in Perth, where they stayed for four or five days. He did not have a mobile phone or any way of contacting Veronica. As for Veronica, she could have called his mother, but had no other way of directly contacting him.¹⁰²
- 99.** Craig gave evidence that he did try to locate Veronica and Adell sometime after he was released from Graylands Hospital in late January 1999. He said he did not recall when he began to become unwell, but has no memory of Christmas 1998 or being hospitalised in Kalgoorlie. He also did not remember telling doctors he had been worried he might hurt someone. Craig said he only remembered getting out of hospital and then trying to look for Veronica and Adell. Craig said he went to “the welfares”¹⁰³ in Merredin, by which I assume he means either the Centrelink, Department of Communities and/or Department of Housing offices. He said he asked the agencies help to find them, but he “got nowhere”¹⁰⁴ in terms of locating Veronica and Adell.¹⁰⁵
- 100.** Craig said in evidence that he did get told by staff from the Child Support Agency and he recalls he was told they had got in contact with Veronica and that based on their records, she was in Nimbin, New South Wales. Craig indicated he was surprised at this

⁹⁵ T 31.

⁹⁶ T 33.

⁹⁷ T 33.

⁹⁸ T 33.

⁹⁹ T 33.

¹⁰⁰ T 31 – 33.

¹⁰¹ T 34 – 36.

¹⁰² T 37.

¹⁰³ T 38.

¹⁰⁴ T 39.

¹⁰⁵ T 38 - 39.

information as Veronica did not know anyone in Nimbin. He gave the paperwork he had received relevant to this information to police.¹⁰⁶

- 101.** Craig was asked about Veronica’s mental state around the time she disappeared. He gave evidence she was “depressed”¹⁰⁷ and “not feeling too good.”¹⁰⁸ He said he believed she was not too bad as a mother towards Adell, but he was worried about both of them and offered to take them to Royal Perth Hospital to get help for her mental health issues, but Veronica said she didn’t want to go to hospital. He was asked whether he had any concerns about leaving Veronica and Adell alone in those circumstances. Craig agreed that he did, but said, “She just told me to bugger off,”¹⁰⁹ so he did.
- 102.** Craig was asked whether it was possible he had reconnected with Veronica and Adell after that date in late November 1998, given his memory issues around this time. He initially said he didn’t know, but then said he did not see them again after that day in the Midland shopping centre carpark.¹¹⁰
- 103.** Craig was expressly asked whether he was physically violent towards Veronica the last day he saw her, and he said he was not. He was also asked if he did anything to hurt Veronica or Adell, which he denied. Craig said he did not have any involvement in Veronica and Adell disappearing and he did not cause either Veronica or Adell’s death.¹¹¹ Craig also told the Court he had never heard anything to suggest anyone else had hurt Veronica or Adell and he didn’t know whether Veronica could have hurt Adell or herself.¹¹²
- 104.** Craig said he had looked and looked for Veronica but he had never seen or heard from her again.¹¹³ Craig said he didn’t know whether Veronica and Adell are still alive and he did not know what had happened to them since the last time he saw them.¹¹⁴ Craig did agree that if Veronica was alive, he would have expected she would have tried to contact her family and him.¹¹⁵
- 105.** Det Sgt Ralph also gave evidence at the inquest to speak to his report. Det Sgt Ralph noted that although there appears to have been some enquiries made by family to government agencies, including to police, in relation to Veronica and Adell’s disappearance over the years, the first formal notification to the police was approximately 20 years since they were last seen. The lapse of time made it difficult for police to conduct a full investigation, as many key witnesses who may have been able to provide relevant information had unfortunately passed away and could not be interviewed. Other barriers to the investigation arising from the lapse of time were the impact that the lapse of time had on people’s memories and recollections of events and the fact that the hard copy records of the government agencies with whom Veronica and

¹⁰⁶ T 39 - 40.

¹⁰⁷ T 40.

¹⁰⁸ T 40.

¹⁰⁹ T 41.

¹¹⁰ T 41 – 42.

¹¹¹ T 43.

¹¹² T 43.

¹¹³ T 44.

¹¹⁴ T 42.

¹¹⁵ T 42 – 43.

her family had been interacting had been destroyed when records were computerised. Not all of the information was carried over when reformatted, which meant that a lot of the detail of the interactions, which might have provided clarity for the investigators, was missing. These issues meant that it was hard for the investigators to gain a good understanding of what happened to Veronica and Adell and whether there might be a suspect involved in their disappearance.¹¹⁶

- 106.** Det Sgt Ralph indicated that the Homicide Squad had started the investigation as a homicide investigation with Craig as a person of interest due to the early information that Veronica may have disappeared in August 1998. However, he said the police investigation had “transitioned away very promptly when we found further footprints of Veronica after that August period”¹¹⁷ and it had transitioned back into more of a missing persons investigation, as they could not confirm that an offence had occurred to a level sufficient to maintain a homicide investigation.
- 107.** Det Sgt Ralph was one of the police officers who interviewed Craig and he confirmed it was a voluntary interview and Craig’s explanation of his last interactions with Veronica and Adell did corroborate some of the information the police had obtained from the agencies involved. However, none of the information helped to provide any further avenues for the police to explore. Det Sgt Ralph was in court during Craig’s evidence, and he noted there were some inconsistencies in his account, but the interaction that Craig described with Veronica in the carpark was largely consistent with the account he gave in his interview.¹¹⁸ All of the evidence obtained still points to Craig being the last person to have seen Veronica and Adell alive.

ARE VERONICA AND ADELL DECEASED?

- 108.** The WA Police investigation into the disappearance of Veronica and her infant daughter Adell was challenging due to the delay in the missing person report, as well as the transient lifestyle led by Craig and Veronica prior to Veronica’s disappearance, which made establishing a timeline leading up to the disappearance of Veronica and Adell more difficult. Enquiries only took them to October/November 1998, when Veronica and Adell had their last contacts with government agencies.¹¹⁹
- 109.** The police have exhausted all current investigative avenues in their attempt to locate Veronica and/or Adell, without establishing their whereabouts or what happened to them from December 1998.¹²⁰
- 110.** Many of Veronica and Adell’s relatives attended the inquest. Others were unfortunately unable to come to Perth to attend in person, but it is clear they had been kept informed and were actively interested in what took place. They are clearly disappointed at the lack of answers to what happened to Veronica and Adell, but none of them suggested there might be grounds for believing either Veronica or Adell are still alive.

¹¹⁶ T 49 – 50.

¹¹⁷ T 51.

¹¹⁸ T 52.

¹¹⁹ Exhibit 1, Tab 2.

¹²⁰ Exhibit 1, Tab 2.

111. I am satisfied beyond reasonable doubt on the evidence before me that Veronica and Adell are deceased. As to when they died, I am unable to reach a date of death with any precision, other than it was not before 25 October 1998 for Veronica and 24 November 1998 for Adell.

CAUSE AND MANNER OF DEATH

112. The limited evidence before me does not enable me to reach any conclusions as to their cause of death or manner of death.

113. The last person who is known to have seen them alive was Veronica's partner, and Adell's father, Craig, who told police he saw them alive and well in either November or December 1998 before Veronica left in a taxi, taking Adell with her. He could not be more precise about the date.¹²¹

114. Over the years, Craig had told Donna varying stories about why he was no longer with her mother and where she might be living. Craig had told Donna that he packed up and left South Hedland one night in secret in order to get away from Veronica as she was being abusive towards Donna, and he then went to Merredin. However, it is apparent this is not true as there is evidence Craig, Veronica and Donna left South Hedland together and then lived together in Merredin. Craig also told Donna he had tried to track Veronica down for child support payments and was told she was living in Queensland. Craig also told Donna many times that he did not believe Adell was his child, although Donna does not believe this is true. Donna told police that she had suggested as a child going up to South Hedland to look for her mother, but she was put off doing so by her father and his new wife.¹²²

115. The investigators noted that there was evidence that Craig and Veronica were involved in a volatile and often violent relationship in 1998. Donna has also provided evidence about Craig's propensity for violence and other types of antisocial behaviour.¹²³

116. Given his known propensity for violence and his conflicting accounts, as well as the fact that he was found in a seriously disturbed mental state around the time Veronica and Adell disappeared, Craig obviously remains a person of interest in the investigation. However, the Homicide Squad investigators involved in this matter have advised the Court that no criminality has been established in relation to the disappearance of Veronica and Adell and no charges have been laid against any person in relation to their suspected deaths.¹²⁴

¹²¹ Exhibit 1, Tab 2.

¹²² Exhibit 1, Tab 5.1.

¹²³ Exhibit 1, Tab 5.1.

¹²⁴ Exhibit 1, Tab 2.

CONCLUSION

- 117.** The evidence at the inquest supports the conclusion that both Veronica and Adell are deceased. Accordingly, I am satisfied beyond reasonable doubt that both Veronica and Adell are deceased. I am also satisfied that they died on an unknown date between 24 November 1998 and 11 January 1999, which is the period between the last immunisation Adell received and the day of Craig's psychiatric admission to hospital in January 1999, when Donna was solely in his care and there was no sign of Veronica and Adell.
- 118.** No additional information was obtained during the inquest that might assist me to determine to the requisite standard how they died, nor whether another person was involved in their deaths. Accordingly, the cause of death for both Veronica and Adell must be left as unascertained, and I make an open finding in relation to the manner of death for both Veronica and Adell.
- 119.** Craig Partridge remains the last person known to have seen Veronica and Adell alive, and there are certainly some questions around his recollection of events and his behaviour after their disappearance. The police certainly considered Craig a suspect at an early stage in the investigation, but given the timeframe and lack of witnesses, their level of suspicion lowered. Nevertheless, Craig has not been excluded by police as a person of interest in Veronica and Adell's disappearance and the police remain open to all possibilities.¹²⁵ However, there is no evidence that could properly lead to any formal adverse conclusions being reached against Craig arising from this inquest. He has cooperated with the inquiry and there is currently no evidence that contradicts his account that he last saw Veronica and Adell alive and well sometime before the end of 1998.
- 120.** Veronica's children, who are also the siblings of Adell, have been devastated by the disappearance of their mother and sister. They grew up believing that Veronica and Adell were alive and well, just living their lives somewhere else, so to find out so many years later that no one has seen them for twenty years has been a cruel blow. Donna has been reunited with her other siblings, and together they are now desperately searching for answers. Given the violence they witnessed as children, it was apparent they suspect that both Veronica and Adell were the victims of foul play and they were hoping the inquest would unearth evidence to prove their suspicion. Regrettably, I am unable to provide them with anything more at this time than a formal confirmation that their mother and little sister are deceased. Anything else is mere supposition, based upon the limited evidence that is currently available.
- 121.** However, there remains hope that the ongoing police investigation will unearth more evidence that will explain what happened to Veronica and Adell so many years ago, and give Donna and her siblings the closure they are seeking. A beloved mother and little girl have died and, despite the passage of time, it is important to find out what happened to them and whether anyone was responsible. I know that Veronica and Adell's family will not give up their quest for answers and Det Sgt Ralph made it clear at the inquest that the WA Police will continue to do everything they can to investigate Veronica and

¹²⁵ T 59 - 60.

Donna's deaths and "if further information comes they won't stop until it's exhausted."¹²⁶

S H Linton
Deputy State Coroner
23 August 2023

¹²⁶ T 60.