



Coroner's Court of Western Australia

RECORD OF INVESTIGATION INTO DEATH

*I, Evelyn Felicia VICKER, Coroner, having investigated the disappearance of **Wilfred Arthur BARRETT** with an inquest held at the **Coroner's Court, Court 83, Central Law Courts, 501 Hay Street, Perth, on 19 February 2020**, find the death of **Wilfred Alfred BARRETT** has been established beyond all reasonable doubt, and the identity of the deceased person was **Wilfred Arthur BARRETT** and that death occurred during May 1984 **somewhere in the vicinity of Mount Monger** in the following circumstances:*

Counsel Appearing:

Senior Constable Craig Robertson assisting the Coroner.

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INTRODUCTION

Wilfred Arthur Barrett (Mr Barrett), better known as Wilf to his family and Bill or Billy to the people in Mount Monger was last known to be alive on 30 April 1984. Over the following few days it was noticed by those resident in the area he was no longer about. A set of footprints had been observed before the fact of his disappearance was fully appreciated. Once it was confirmed Mr Barrett was missing from his usual haunts an alarm was raised and those who knew him searched for him without success. No trace of Mr Barrett was ever located again.

The inquest into the disappearance of Mr Barrett was held in Perth. Originally it had been listed for Kalgoorlie for the convenience of witnesses who had been involved in the search in 1984, but due to a change in circumstances the matter was rescheduled to be heard in Perth on the same date for which it had been scheduled in Kalgoorlie. The documentary evidence comprised the brief of evidence, Exhibit 1 (Tabs 1-17) and the Public Notice of Inquest dated 10 January 2020 as Exhibit 2. Oral evidence was heard from Brendan Jones (Mr Jones) one of the stockmen who had been involved in the search for Mr Barrett, Senior Constable Purver (Mr Purver) who spoke to a report he had compiled from the Missing Person file, Brett William Deadman (Mr Deadman), a retired police officer who was also involved in the search for Mr Barrett, and the combined evidence of two of Mr Barrett's nieces, one the daughter of an older, and the other the daughter of a younger, brother, Ms Shirley Gradussov (Ms Gradussov) and Mrs Sandra Sutton-Matiffs (Mrs Sutton-Matiffs) respectively who provided background information for the Barrett family.

Long Term Missing Persons Project (LTMP)

In 2017 it was confirmed there were a considerable number of files relating to the long term disappearance of people who had been in Western Australia at the time of their reported disappearance. Some of these had occurred at a

time when there was limited or no jurisdiction for a coroner to investigate the circumstances of a suspected death.

Section 23(1) of the *Coroners Act 1996 WA* (the Act) allows the State Coroner to direct an investigation into a suspected death in certain circumstances without a body, for the purposes of allowing a coroner, under section 23(2), to establish beyond all reasonable doubt that death has occurred. The investigation must be by way of inquest and will attempt to clarify how the death occurred and the cause of the death. This effectively brings the suspected death into the ambit of s 25 of the Act and allows registration of the death under the *Births, Deaths and Marriages Registration Act 1998*.

The reported number of LTMP made it unrealistic for the Office of the State Coroner (OSC) to absorb those matters into the already long outstanding inquest list in a timely manner. A plan was proposed for a project to clear the backlog of LTMP files once it had been determined these matters fitted the circumstances set out in s 23(1) of the Act. That is, the State Coroner or delegate had reasonable cause to suspect the person had died and the death was a reportable death (s3 of the Act).

In 2018 approval was given for a coroner to work exclusively on the LTMP cases, on a part-time basis for twelve months, as a separate listing from the OSC general inquest list. This followed a pilot project of four inquests conducted in 2018.

In 2019 a coroner was appointed for that project with the support of an in-house Coronial Investigation Squad (CIS) police officer as Counsel Assisting (CA).

Work on the files indicated a number of disappearances related to specific areas of Western Australia, such as the Kimberley around Kununurra or Broome, and Albany. For these matters it was decided that, while there is always a preference for inquests to be held in the communities to which they

relate, especially for Indigenous communities where there is an emphasis on oral history, resources would not be effectively utilised for all matters to be heard in the place of disappearance. Instead matters, where the disappearance occurred in places other than the Perth metropolitan area, were considered from the perspective of the best availability for relevant witnesses.

In the case of Mr Barrett there was a relevant witness in Kalgoorlie and it was intended the matter be held in Kalgoorlie due to a wish to hear from people who had been present at the time in person. However, Mr Jones was in Perth at the time it was intended to hear the matter in Kalgoorlie and the court returned to Perth the evening before the inquest in order to take evidence from Mr Jones in Perth. This was fortuitous for the family who were then able to attend court in person to hear his evidence.

The anticipated outcome of the LTMP project was that by June 2020 the majority of reported LTMP matters would be resolved and that future missing person files would be dealt with in the normal course of the OSC's usual business.

THE DECEASED

Police record Mr Barrett as having been born on 17 August 1902 in Devon UK. Mr Barrett's nieces believe he was actually born in Aldershot, Hampshire, rather than Devon, but did not dispute his date of birth.¹ It was initially believed by the family Mr Barrett was 83 at the time of his disappearance, rather than 81.

The family moved to Australia before World War I and lived in Busselton. Mr Barrett was the fourth child of what were ultimately 16 children born to

¹ Transcript 19/2/2020 page 52

his mother, however, she died when he was 12 while giving birth to twins who also died.²

The children had a very hard life with the older children caring for the younger ones, including one of the older brothers young wife eventually bringing up the 5 youngest children as her own, despite the hardship this involved.³ Mr Barrett went to Fremantle as a young man where he worked as a wharfer. He never married or had any children although Ms Gradussov recalled him as being a generous man.⁴ Ms Gradussov explained her father, Colin, and Mr Barrett were very close as brothers and she recalled Mr Barrett coming to visit her family once they had all moved from Busselton to Kalgoorlie.⁵ She recalled that when Mr Barrett visited Kalgoorlie from Fremantle he and her father went out “*specing*” together.⁶

Once Mr Barrett retired in the mid 1960s he returned to Kalgoorlie and then went out to prospect in the bush as a lifestyle choice. He settled in the old Mount Monger town site. Both his nieces recall Mr Barrett as being very quiet although Ms Gradussov’s father used to say that when it was just the two of them he talked quite a lot. Ms Sutton-Mattocks explained her father had always referred to Mr Barrett as a recluse or a hermit, but he was perfectly pleasant and a very generous, kind man, as was the whole family.

Initially Mr Barrett would go into Kalgoorlie from wherever he was prospecting to collect his pension and when he was in Kalgoorlie would visit his relatives, but as his brothers died or moved away he tended to come into Kalgoorlie less and less and remained in the bush. As far as his nieces knew he was very wary of doctors and would not seek medical treatment unless it was forced

² Transcript 19.2.2020 page 46

³ Transcript 19.2.2020 page 56

⁴ Transcript 19.2.2020 page 41

⁵ Transcript 19.2.2020 pages 40, 47 and 63

⁶ Transcript 19.2.2020 page 48

upon him by circumstances. By the time of his disappearance Mr Barrett mainly stayed in Mount Monger although he still had extended family in Kalgoorlie.

Shortly before Mr Barrett's disappearance in April 1984 it was noted by those who lived on Mount Monger Station, close to where Mr Barrett squatted in an old miner's hut, that he was becoming more and more confused and disorientated. The papers reflect occasions he had turned up at various locations in a confused state.

One of the station farmhands John Maughan (Mr Maughan) had been a teenager at the time of Mr Barrett's disappearance and could recall him as "*bush happy*" or having been in the bush for too long and being rather erratic.⁷ Mr Maughan recalled Mr Barrett as keeping tins of cat food in his Gloucester bag.⁸

Peter Jarvis (Mr Jarvis), Mine Manager and living on the site of Rosemary Mine⁹ recalled an occasion when Mr Barrett had turned up at his mine site in a very confused and disorientated state. He didn't know where he was and Mr Jarvis returned him home.¹⁰

On another occasion, just a few weeks prior to his final disappearance, another station hand on Mount Monger had located Mr Barrett wandering in circles, naked apart from his precious Gloucester bag¹¹ not knowing where he was. Mr Barrett was returned to his homet at Mount Monger and then taken to hospital in Kalgoorlie because he was in such a deconditioned and fragile state. Mr Barrett's two nieces both recalled that occasion with Mr Barrett

⁷ Transcript 19.2.2020 page 30 Exhibit 3

⁸ Transcript 19.2.2020 page 32 Exhibit 4

⁹ Transcript 19.2.2020 page 30`

¹⁰ Transcript 19.2.2020 page 31

¹¹ Transcript 19.2.2020 page 11

ending up in Kalgoorlie Hospital, but they did not believe he was in hospital for very long before he discharged himself because he didn't like being in hospital. One of their mothers had commented that she hoped Mr Barrett "*would not do that again*" as she did not believe he would survive another incident of exposure.¹²

Although Mr Barrett had been returned to his hut near the Mount Monger townsite he was in a very fragile and questionable state of health in late April 1984.

Mr Jones, then leading hand on Mount Monger Station, recalled that as the small group of older retired men who squatted in the old mining huts on Mount Monger became older and frailer they went into Kalgoorlie less and less. By April 1984 the old men would usually contact the wife of one of the Mount Monger senior station hands with a handwritten shopping list for their supplies from Sheeds General Store (Sheeds) in Kalgoorlie. The pension cheques for this group of men would be sent to Sheeds and Sheeds would cash the pension cheques, buy the supplies out of the money received and then return the supplies to the old men out at Mount Monger in a taxi arranged by the senior station hand's wife. This would include an order for alcohol. Mr Jones recalled the taxi driver would go around to the various camps and drop off the orders and the bankbooks. The taxi driver would show the group their bank books and then they would send their bank books back to Sheeds for the next pension.

Mr Jones could not recall any of the group going into Kalgoorlie themselves towards the end of their lives. In his view they were running away from society, but they would still obtain their fortnightly order by the above method.¹³ This certainly accords with the nieces' memories they gradually

¹² Transcript 19.2.2020 page 63

¹³ Transcript 19.2.2020 page 19

saw less and less of Mr Barrett in Kalgoorlie and just assumed he was living his hermit existence.

Mr Jones confirmed that by the 30 April 1984 Mr Barrett was in a very frail and deconditioned state due to his prior wander in the bush and any repeat disappearance into the bush would make it very unlikely he would survive for very long.¹⁴

DISAPPEARANCE

Mr Jones is currently one of the owners of Mount Monger station. He explained his family had been associated with Mount Monger station since 1892. Back in 1984 when Mr Barrett went missing Mr Jones had been one of the leading hands on the station after returning from university in about 1981. He had a good recall of Mr Barrett as one of the old recluses who lived in the old miner's huts, effectively squatting in the bush. Mr Jones described the Mount Monger townsite as having been relatively busy during the 1920s to the 1940s after which it became deserted until the 1980s. By the 1980s he said the townsite was becoming more active with the location of a big mine and the now productive Mount Monger Station.

Mr Jones recalled Mr Barrett as always carrying a Gloucester bag everywhere and wheeling around an old wheelbarrow full of rocks. He said by the time of his disappearance Mr Barrett suffered quite extensively from dementia and although he thought he was prospecting most of the rocks he had collected were not valuable. Mr Jones pointed out the old men in the townsite had been there forever, and did not particularly want to join normal life. On the whole the station owners and mine managers would leave the old men alone

¹⁴ Transcript 19.2.2020 page 18

unless they caused a problem. It was accepted that generally they were there because they did not wish to be part of normal society.¹⁵

The station and mine owners/managers were certainly cognisant of the old folk resident in the area and would look out for them without actually intruding on their lifestyle. Mr Jones was fairly confident the date of the 30 April 1984, given as the day Mr Barrett had last been seen alive, was probably fairly accurate and derived after it had been noted he had not been seen around the townsite for a few days. He explained when someone noted someone was missing there would generally be a few questions asked and people would put together what they knew about the event. He was satisfied it would be accurate that Mr Barrett was last seen on 30 April, despite not being reported to the police as missing until the 5 May 1984.¹⁶

Mr Jones recalled Mr Jarvis asking if he had seen “Bill”. He remembered he had seen tracks which he believed could belong to Mr Barrett down on the Mulga Road leading to Mulga Dam. Mr Jones described the area as being red dirt and scrub which was mainly saltbush. He said if a person was collapsed on the ground in that area it would be very difficult to see them despite a thorough search. He explained scavenger birds would probably be around for about a week and identify the possible position of a collapsed or deceased person, however after a week if there was a body there would be nothing left but bones. As an example Mr Jones stated Mount Monger station lost between 1500 to 2000 sheep every year but never found any remains whatsoever despite that number of apparent deaths. In 1984 there were a large number of wedge tail eagles around and unless people discovered a body rapidly it would be unlikely anything would be left.¹⁷

¹⁵ Transcript 19.2.2020 page 21

¹⁶ Transcript 19.2.2020 pages 14-15

¹⁷ Transcript 19.2.2020 page 10

Once they had worked out when Mr Barrett had last been seen Mr Jones returned to where he had seen the tracks and searched the area with some of the other station hands while Mr Jarvis reported Mr Barrett's disappearance to the police. Mr Jones, in particular, and Mr Jarvis to some extent were then involved with the police in searching for Mr Barrett in the area around his residence. Initially they concentrated on the area where tracks had been seen and the areas to which the tracks might lead.

INVESTIGATION

Approximately 9:50 am on 7 May 1984 Constable John Davies of Kalgoorlie Police received a telephone message from Mr Jarvis of the Mount Monger goldmine, Mount Monger. Mr Jarvis was reporting the disappearance of Mr Barrett and the fact the local community had been unable to locate him. Mr Jarvis explained Mr Barrett had been fairly vague in recent times and had wandered off before.¹⁸ Mr Jarvis advised Constable Davies the old men from the Mount Monger townsite obtained their pension from Sheeds in Kalgoorlie.

Constable Davies attended at Sheeds Store and spoke to a Mr Bowden who said the last time Mr Barrett had collected his pension cheque was 19 April 1984 and he had not been "seen" since that date. I am of the view reference to "seeing someone" to pick up their pension cheque explains Mr Jones' reference to the taxi service as provided. When Constable Davies discovered Mr Barrett had not had contact with Sheeds since 19 April 1984 he visited Varden Street where a niece-in-law was known to reside and was Mr Barrett's contact in Kalgoorlie. Ms Barrett explained she had not seen him for a while either. Constable Davies then made enquiries at the hospital and the Little Sisters of the Poor but did not locate any indication Mr Barrett was at either of those facilities.

¹⁸ Exhibit 1 Tab 5

As a result of Constable Davies' enquiries around town Sergeant Morrow agreed it was necessary the police attend at Mount Monger to investigate Mr Barrett's disappearance. Constable Davies stated that on 7 May 1984 he and Police Aide Walker drove to Mount Monger station where they were met by leading hand Jones. Mr Jones then showed them around the townsite and took them to meet Roger Schollay, a person who lived approximately 50 yards from Mr Barrett and confirmed he had not seen Mr Barrett since the 30 April 1984.

Mr Jones then took the police to meet Mr Jarvis and between them they explained to the police that Mr Barrett frequently went on walks in the bush to collect rocks, but usually only stayed out for a few hours. The police described Mr Barrett as "very senile" and as on his "last legs". They understood the general feeling was that Mr Barrett had walked off into the bush to his death. Mr Jarvis explained he had not reported the disappearance any earlier because there was always the possibility that Mr Barrett had gone into Kalgoorlie to do some shopping.

Mr Jones showed the police where he had seen the tracks which he believed to have belonged to Mr Barrett some days earlier. By 7 May 1984 the police believed it was unrealistic to search the area because the ground was too boggy and not safe for searchers. Mr Jones suggested to police that he and other station hands go out on motorcycles the next day to search for Mr Barrett. The police returned to Kalgoorlie Police Station. Mr Jones advised the court that he and Mr Maughan along with another station hand had all gone out on motorcycles on 8 May 1984 to search the area for Mr Barrett. It was very difficult due to the boggy terrain and continued rain. They had been unsuccessful in discovering either Mr Barrett or any clue as to where he might be.¹⁹

¹⁹ Exhibit 1 Tab 8

On 9 May 1984 Constables Lang and Deadman returned to Mount Monger Station and in the company of Mr Jones and Mr Maughan again searched the area where Mr Jones had located tracks earlier. The search was carried out on motorcycles with Mr Deadman advising the court he had been requested to assist in the search because the difficult conditions required a competent motorcycle rider which he was.²⁰ Mr Dedman described spending four days with the station hands searching all the areas to which they thought it possible Mr Barrett may have wandered. He explained it was very difficult land to search, but he believed that with the resources available which did not include an aeroplane, the search had been as thorough as possible with the combined input of local knowledge through the station hands and police expertise. He believed they had particularly searched the area around the Mulga Road to the Mulga Dam as that was where Mr Jones had originally located footprints he believed belonged to Mr Barrett. Unfortunately they were completely unsuccessful in finding any trace of Mr Barrett amongst the scrub saltbush.²¹

Sgt Morrow reported to the regional office that police officers Deadman, Willers and Harris had all combed the area with Mr Jones and Mr Maughan on motorcycles. He stated *“Area where searches were carried was littered with disused mineshafts, covered in saltbush and rock. Owing to the time lapse and the weather, tracks or any indication of where missing person was likely to be could not be determined. Because of the lack of any indication what area or direction the missing person may have gone, no further search was made. Station hands and prospectors in the area advised they would keep a lookout for the missing person as they went about their normal business.”*²²

Mr Jones stated that even today, all new people to the area are advised to look out for a Gloucester bag. It was Mr Jones’ belief that wherever Mr Barrett had

²⁰ Transcript 19.2.2020 page 36

²¹ Transcript 19.2.2020 pages 37-38

²² Exhibit 1 Tab 8

ended up he would have had his Gloucester bag with him. He thinks it likely the Gloucester bag would have survived scavengers, although Mr Barrett's body may not. In the years since Mr Barrett's disappearance Mr Jones has not found the Gloucester bag or any remains of Mr Barrett despite there now being extensive mustering from the air, and Mr Jones spending a lot of time covering the ground around Mount Monger in low-flying aircraft. Mr Jones believes the mental fragility of Mr Barrett at the time of his disappearance, coupled with his physical fragility as a result of his previous experience, meant it was very likely he had wandered into the bush, collapsed, and died before anybody realised he was missing. He fully expects his remains to maybe one day be discovered due to the discovery of his Gloucester bag.²³

At the conclusion of the four days intense search Mr Barrett's next of kin Ms Barret of Varden Street, was advised there was no outcome as a result of the searches.

HAS DEATH BEEN ESTABLISHED?

I am satisfied beyond all reasonable doubt Mr Barrett is deceased and was deceased in the timeframe following his last sighting on 30 April 1984.

Mr Barrett was 81 years of age at the time he disappeared and in the months leading up to that disappearance had been found wandering and in a very confused and disorientated state at least twice, needing to be returned to his home and his safety ensured. On the last of those occasions he had been so frail and deconditioned that he was taken to hospital, although he discharged himself as soon as he could. We do not appear to have any medical records relating to that event, but I have no reason to doubt it on the evidence of both his nieces, Mr Jarvis, and Mr Jones.

²³ Transcript 19.2.2020 page 17

By 1984 Mr Barrett had few of his contemporary family left with whom he appeared to have been able to communicate quite well. He was a recluse and very much wrapped up in his own world. Mr Jones recounted how Mr Barrett probably thought he was prospecting, although by that stage he was merely collecting rocks. He was harmless and did not cause anyone any problems and the station/mine owners and managers were content to watch out for him from a distance, as they did with the other old men, because that was just the way it was.²⁴

I am quite satisfied, despite Mr Barrett's wish to return to his reclusive lifestyle following his near death experience approximately 8 weeks before his disappearance, he was in no condition to survive another similar experience. I am satisfied Mr Barrett was probably living in an earlier time, happier with his world than he was with reality. I am sure Mr Jones was right when he commented that as far as he was concerned Mr Barrett "got his wish" by which he meant Mr Barrett died peacefully by himself in the bush which is what he would have wanted to do.²⁵

It is perfectly possible Mr Barrett fell down a mineshaft in the course of his "prospecting" or that he simply died as a result of exhaustion and disorientation when out "prospecting". I note his very frail state and Mr Jones' comments that by the time they started searching for him in earnest there would probably be nothing left but his Gloucester bag. Had Mr Barrett been alive and on his feet I am quite sure he would have been located by people on motor cycles. He was by then probably already deceased or certainly not visible.

I am satisfied beyond all reasonable doubt that by the time the station hands in particular searched for Mr Barrett on 8 May 1984 he was already deceased.

²⁴ Transcript 19.2.2020 pages 13-14

²⁵ Transcript 19.2.2020 page 13

MANNER AND CAUSE OF DEATH

While I am satisfied Mr Barrett died sometime in the first few days of May 1984, I am unable to determine whether he died of natural causes and was thereafter undiscovered in the scrub or whether he accidentally fell over or down a mineshaft and was unable to regain his feet and so died of exposure. While his death may not have been what he intended at the time I would agree with Mr Jones' observation that Mr Barrett would have wanted nothing better than to die in the bush doing what he was happiest doing whether that be actual prospecting or believing he was prospecting.

I am unable to determine whether Mr Barrett died of natural causes or accidentally however I am satisfied he was deceased by the 8 May 1984 and that his remains were undiscovered due to the nature of the environment.

I make an Open Finding as to the death of Mr Barrett.

CONCLUSION

It is apparent from the evidence Mr Barret wished to live the life of a recluse, and was perfectly happy in that lifestyle. On the occasion he had been taken to hospital as a result of unexpected exposure due to his lessening cognitive function he could not wait to discharge himself. He was obviously returned to his home because that is what he wanted and where he was happiest.

It is obvious his nephews and nieces regarded their "Uncle Wilf" with some affection despite being thought to be somewhat eccentric. His nieces explained that to be due to his very difficult childhood, as had been the case for all their parents. Indeed the stories provided about the life of Mr Barrett and his

siblings when they were young are heart rending, but these people survived, and a number of them survived very well.

There is no indication Mr Barrett was unhappy with his life and I believe to have achieved the age of 81, doing exactly what he wanted, was probably a pretty good outcome for this quiet, gentle unassuming man squatting on the Mount Monger townsite doing exactly what he had always enjoyed.

E F VICKER
CORONER
3 June 2020