



Western

Australia

RECORD OF INVESTIGATION INTO DEATH

Ref: 21 /18

I, Sarah Helen Linton, Coroner, having investigated the disappearance of **Patricia (Tricia) Alicia REVELL** with an inquest held at the **Perth Coroner's Court, Court 51, CLC Building, 501 Hay Street, Perth** on **29 May 2018** find that the death of **Patricia (Tricia) Alicia REVELL** has been established beyond all reasonable doubt and that the identity of the deceased person was **Patricia (Tricia) Alicia REVELL** and that death occurred on **20 July 1978** at **House 520, Zanthus, approximately 200 kms east of Kalgoorlie**, as a result of an **unascertained cause** in the following circumstances:

Counsel Appearing:

Sgt L Housiaux assisting the Coroner.

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MISSING PERSON REPORT

1. In July 1978 Patricia Alicia Revell, who was generally known by her family as Tricia, was living with her parents at Zanthus, a remote outpost on the Trans-Australian rail about 200 kilometres east of Kalgoorlie. Tricia's father, Bruce Thomas, was employed as a fettler (a person who does repair work on railway tracks) by Australian National Railways. As part of his employment Mr Thomas was provided with house number 520 at Zanthus, which belonged to Australian National Railways. There were four families in total who lived at the outpost.¹
2. On the evening of 20 July 1978 Bruce Thomas went to a neighbours' house two doors away to socialise with his neighbours. Tricia's mother, Melva Revell, stayed home with Tricia, who was 2 years 10 months' old, and her 10 month old sister Tanya Thomas.
3. Ms Revell put the two children to bed in their bedroom between 6.30 and 7.00 pm. The children slept together end to end in a single bed, with Tanya closest to the window of the room and Tricia nearer to the door. The bedroom door was left open.²
4. At about 8.00 pm Ms Revell left the home to go to the neighbours' house and see what Mr Thomas was doing, as he had been gone longer than expected. Both children were asleep when she left.³
5. The house at 520 had an open fire and the fire had been lit that night. Ms Revell had been burning wood chips and an old railway sleeper for fuel. Ms Revell said the fire had burnt down to almost all coals when she left the house, and she pushed an old metal plate attached to one of the railways sleepers down under the coals. She could not move it as it was too hot.⁴
6. At about 8.30 pm Ms Revell went back home to check on the children and to check on the open fire, which was still burning. All appeared to be fine. The children were asleep in bed and she noted the metal plate was still under the embers of the fire. She returned to the neighbours' house.⁵
7. A short time later the power at the neighbours' house began to fluctuate and when members of the group went outside to investigate they discovered that house 520 was on fire. Tricia's parents ran to their house and Ms Revell climbed into the house through a window and managed to find the baby, Tanya Thomas. She passed the baby, who was badly affected by smoke and had to be given mouth to mouth resuscitation, out to her father.⁶
8. Ms Revell stayed inside the house looking for Tricia but the house was filled with thick black smoke at the time, which made searching very difficult. Ms Revell searched by feel on and under the beds and on the floor. While she

¹ T 2.

² Exhibit 1, Tab 4.

³ Exhibit 1, Tab 4.

⁴ Exhibit 1, Tab 4.

⁵ Exhibit 1, Tab 4.

⁶ Exhibit 1, Tab 4.

was doing so the bed started smouldering and caught fire and Ms Revell's hair was singed by intensity of the heat. Ms Revell left the bedroom and went to other parts of the house to continue to search for Tricia but eventually the intensity of the heat and smoke forced her outside. Tricia's father had also been attempting to find Tricia and began smashing down walls of the house but all attempts to find Tricia were unsuccessful.⁷

9. Ms Revell tended to her baby Tanya outside, who had to be resuscitated again and was found to have burns to most of her body, which required medical treatment.⁸
10. Other locals came to help and tried to put out the fire but there was no effective firefighting equipment as the mains power had tripped out, which stopped the town water pump from operating. It was believed the power outage was due to the house fire.⁹
11. The local people did what they could with fire extinguishers and whatever water was available but the fire was intense and the house at 520, which was made of wood, asbestos and iron, quickly burnt to the ground. The fire was eventually extinguished but it was too late for anything from the house to be saved.¹⁰
12. Extensive efforts were made to look for Tricia on the night of the fire in the house and then in the days after in the surrounding area. No sign of her has ever been found.
13. At the conclusion of the police investigation into the fire in 1978 a report was provided to his Honour, Coroner Gething, in Kalgoorlie. At the time there was some question as to the jurisdiction of a coroner to hold an inquest into the circumstances of Tricia's disappearance and suspected death under the relevant coronial legislation as no body was found.
14. Coroner Gething eventually conducted an inquest into cause of the fire under the relevant coronial legislation at the time, but not into Patricia's suspected death. On 13 September 1978 Coroner Gething found the cause of the fire was not determined, although his Honour commented that it was probably due to a piece of burning railway sleeper falling from the fireplace in the lounge room. There were no suspicious circumstances and Coroner Gething concluded that the fire appeared to have been accidental.¹¹ No finding was made in relation to Patricia's suspected death.
15. In 1996 all previous coronial legislation in Western Australia was repealed and a new act, the *Coroners Act 1996* (WA), came into effect. Section 23 of the *Coroners Act 1996* provides that where the State Coroner has determined there is reasonable cause to suspect that a person has died and has directed the suspected death should be investigated, then a coroner must hold an inquest into the circumstances of the suspected death.

⁷ Exhibit 1, Tab 4.

⁸ Exhibit 1, Tab 4.

⁹ Exhibit 1, Tab 2.

¹⁰ Exhibit 1, Tab 2.

¹¹ Exhibit 1, Tab 19.

16. On 1 July 2005 the then State Coroner wrote to a lawyer who had previously been acting on behalf of Ms Revell and advised that on the information available to him contained in the original coronial file he would be prepared to invoke the provisions of s 23 of the Act and hold an inquest, much of which would be determined on the paperwork contained in the original investigation file. No response was received to this correspondence, nor to further correspondence sent by the Court on 18 January 2006. It does not appear that this information was communicated to Tricia's family.
17. On 17 May 2017 this Court was provided with a police report from the Missing Persons Unit of the WA Police in relation to Tricia's suspected death. The then Office in Charge of the Missing Persons Unit, Detective Sergeant Perejmibida was subsequently asked by the Court to contact Tricia's family and ask them if they would still like to have an inquest into the disappearance of their daughter.
18. Detective Sergeant Perejmibida's enquiries established that Ms Revell, who now lives interstate, has always sought answers to what happened to her daughter on that fateful night and she continued to support an inquest being held into Tricia's suspected death.
19. Ms Revell also advised that after the fire she went to the scene and collected some bones she believed might be those of Tricia and she had kept them in a small container ever since. She had also kept more debris from the scene, including ashes and possible bones, inside a 44 gallon drum. With Ms Revell's permission steps were taken by the Court to convey the drum to Western Australia for possible testing to see if Patricia's remains could be identified, which would change the matter from a suspected death to a reportable death.¹²
20. Regrettably, it became apparent at the early stages of the process that the drum's contents included asbestos. This precluded any further testing being conducted for health and safety reasons. However, photographs of the bones kept by Ms Revell were viewed by a forensic anthropologist, Dr Buck, who expressed the opinion that the bones were not of human origin.¹³
21. On the basis of the information provided, the State Coroner determined that pursuant to s 23 of the *Coroners Act 1996* (WA) there was reasonable cause to suspect that Tricia died in the house fire in 1978 and that the suspected death should be investigated. Following that direction it is a requirement that a coroner must hold an inquest into the circumstances of the suspected death.
22. I held an inquest at the Perth Coroner's Court on 29 May 2018. The documentary evidence comprised the report of the original police investigation into the fire and Tricia's disappearance, with related documents.¹⁴ Detective Sergeant Perejmibida also gave oral evidence at the inquest.

¹² T 9 – 11.

¹³ T 9 – 11.

¹⁴ Exhibit 1.

HAS DEATH BEEN ESTABLISHED?

23. I have already outlined the primary circumstances surrounding Tricia's disappearance above.
24. In the days after, Aboriginal trackers were brought in to Zanthus from a nearby mission to help search the bush and surrounding area in case Tricia had managed to escape from the house. Tricia was only very young and would have been affected by smoke, so she would not have been expected to go far if she had made her way out of the house. No sign of Tricia was found and there was no evidence to indicate a child had wandered from the house into the bush area.¹⁵
25. Two police officers from Kalgoorlie Police Station, Constable Bennison and Senior Constable Hobbs, attended the scene and found a quantity of bones in the lounge room, the children's bedroom and a door leading from the lounge into the kitchen.¹⁶
26. On 22 July 1978 the bones were conveyed to Perth for examination. First Dr Hilton and then Professor Allbrook of the Department of Anatomy and Human Biology at the University of Western Australia examined the bones. Neither expert was to identify any of the bones as being Tricia's. Most of the bones were positively identified as not human. It was known that there were pet cats inside the house that night.¹⁷ Professor Allbrook concluded the bones examined by him were from various animals. The only bone fragments that Dr Hilton felt could have been human bones were considered too small to be those of Tricia.¹⁸
27. On 23 July 1978 police officers returned to the scene and conducted another search of the house and discovered more bones in the same areas. These bones were also conveyed to Perth and again were examined and found not to be human in origin. Another search of the area surrounding the house and adjacent bushland was also made but no trace of Tricia was found. If she had escaped the fire she would not have been able to travel far or survive alone given her tender age and the fact she would most likely have been affected by smoke inhalation.¹⁹
28. Dr Hilton, who had examined the bones, was provided with information by police on 24 July 1979 in relation to the intensity of the fire, which was believed to burn for 18 hours and was still smouldering days later. It was noted the solid concrete support blocks were found to have turned to powder three days later. Based on the information provided and his examination of the bones located, Dr Hilton expressed the opinion that Tricia's body may have been completely consumed in the fire.²⁰

¹⁵ T 13; Exhibit 1.

¹⁶ Exhibit 1, Tab 26.

¹⁷ T 5; Exhibit 1, Tab 4.

¹⁸ Exhibit 1, Tab 26.

¹⁹ Exhibit 1, Tab 26.

²⁰ Exhibit 1, Tab 26.

29. Some more bones, in particular some teeth, were found by Tricia's family and taken for examination in November 1978. The bone fragments were found to be of animal origin and the teeth appeared to have been naturally shed, and by a child older than three years of age, ruling them out as belonging to Tricia.²¹
30. The expert opinion was that Tricia's remains could have been consumed entirely given the ferocity of the fire, so the fact that her bones have not been found does not change the opinion of the police investigators that Tricia died in the fire that night.²²
31. As I noted earlier, Coroner Gething did not make a finding as to how the fire started, although he made a comment on the probability that it began as a result of a railway sleeper falling from the fireplace in the lounge room. I note there was an alternative theory mentioned in the police report. The alternate theory was that a stereo left on in the lounge room under the lounge room window had malfunctioned and started the fire.²³
32. Ms Revell attended the inquest with her son and she raised with Sergeant Housiaux her belief that the stereo was the more likely source of the fire. Ms Revell indicated her belief was supported by what she witnessed that fateful night, as when she first approached the house she looked through the front lounge room window and that part of the house was on fire in the vicinity of the stereo. Ms Revell could also see through the flames to the fireplace and it was not on fire, although there was smoke in that area.²⁴
33. Similarly to Coroner Gething, I am unable to make a final determination as to how the fire started. However, I have the benefit of additional evidence from Ms Revell that supports the conclusion that the fire started in a location other than the fireplace, so I am satisfied it is less likely that the fire was caused by a railway sleeper falling from the fireplace. Whether or not the fire was caused by a malfunctioning stereo cannot be determined, although this is a possibility raised on the evidence.
34. At the conclusion of the inquest I indicated that I was satisfied beyond reasonable doubt that Tricia died in the fire on 20 July 1978 and her remains were incinerated.²⁵

DATE, PLACE, CAUSE AND MANNER OF DEATH

35. The evidence establishes that Tricia died on 20 July 1978 at her home at House 520 in the Zanthus railway outpost.
36. There is no doubt she died as a result of the effects of fire, although I cannot say whether she died from smoke inhalation before her remains were incinerated or from thermal injury from the fire. In the circumstances, I will leave the cause of death as unascertained.

²¹ Exhibit 1, Tab 27.

²² Exhibit 1.

²³ Exhibit 1, Tab 10.

²⁴ T 15.

²⁵ T 17.

37. Although the exact cause of the fire was undetermined, the evidence supports the conclusion that the fire was not deliberately lit. Accordingly, I find that the death occurred as a result of accident.

CONCLUSION

38. It is almost exactly forty years since Tricia Revell died in a house fire in a remote outpost in Kalgoorlie. Sadly, due to the ferocity of the fire none of her remains were ever found, although her parents went to great lengths to try to find some little part of her that could be identified.

39. It was apparent from the evidence on the file, and from the contact between police and this Court, that despite the length of time that has elapsed Tricia's mother is still haunted by the events of that night and the loss of her daughter in such tragic circumstances. Ms Revell provided the Court with a photograph of Tricia and her baby sister, taken not long before her death, which I have included below so that there is a true record of who Tricia was and to show how much she was loved and is still loved.

40. It is regrettable that it has taken four decades for a formal record to Tricia's family to mark her death, but I hope that this finding gives Tricia's family what little closure can be provided in the circumstances.



S H Linton
Coroner
11 June 2018