

Fouracre Murder



On Tuesday August 20, 1907 the West Australian featured this story:

A telegram from Waroona published in the "West Australian" yesterday stated that the remains of Miss Leah Fouracre, of Peppermint Grove farm, near Waroona, had been found among the burning debris of her solitary

bush home. It was supposed that she had found the house on fire and perished in an attempt to rescue some of her most cherished belongings. This in the absence of any suspicious circumstances was regarded locally as the only natural conclusion that could be drawn from the circumstances as the deceased, who lived alone the bush was kindly, generous disposition, and could never have made an enemy. The fact, however, that she lived by herself in an isolated part of the bush, on a road often used by tramps and runaway sailors, caused P.C. Campbell, of Pinjarra, to thoroughly inquire into the mysterious burning of the house.

Activity: Historical Storytelling

From the story students make inferences about what Mandurah was like in the early twentieth century and examine how things have changed over time.

The story is based on newspaper articles from the West Australian in 1907 and a journal article published by the Royal Western Australian Historical Society in 1967.

Hire the Fouracre Loan Kit containing script cards, visual display and objects. Alternatively, book a visit to the museum to take part in the story. Read the script below.

Murder at Peppermint Grove

Introduction

- Most people associate Mandurah with fun times, fishing and lazing in the sun, ***but***, it also has a darker past.
- In 1967, historian Alexandra Hasluck went in search of information about the Peppermint Grove ruins, she was told a story of "... a sinister Oriental, stolen jewellery and money never recovered".

This is the story of Peppermint Grove or Fouracres as it is sometimes known. Fouracres was a house built in 1856 by John Fouracre. He ran a wayside inn and brought up his family of four girls and 1 boy.

A wayside inn was a place on the road for travellers to stop and stay the night, before continuing their journey. Many travellers, riding or driving up the coast road from Bunbury stayed there the night. The house was situated on the estuary side of the Old Coast Rd. On the Clifton Lake side they kept a stockyard and barns for travellers to keep horses. The Bunbury Mail Coach kept teams of horses there so that they could swap the horses for each leg of the journey.

It had a well with excellent clear water and served good home cooked meals made from home grown produce, fresh milk and cream.

The inn prospered and was popular until the train line went through to Bunbury. After that the property became increasingly isolated except for family members, neighbours and a small number of runaway sailors and Afghan or Indian Hawkers passing through.

John Fouracre remarried and moved to another property, as did his son, Robert and three of his daughters. Leah stayed to manage the property for her father. She rarely left the property and raised poultry, butter and eggs and a few cattle which her brother sold for her.

This story takes place in August 1907. In 1907 – coast road was a sandy track with patches of limestone – Mandurah's population was less than 100 people – there were few houses around estuary – people walked or used horses for transport - the occasional car was seen.

To tell this story:

- **I need you to help tell the story by playing the main characters.**
- **This is like doing a play. We don't need to act it out, but we do need to add character and drama to our voices.**
- **Along the way you will be asked what you would do if you were a policeman. Your answer will help the story to proceed.**

Sunday 18th August

Police Constable Mann: I was sitting down to tea when there was a knock on the door.

Micheal Lyons (farmer/brother-in-law): Sorry to disturb you Constable. There's been accident at Peppermint Grove Farm. The house is on fire and there's no sign of Leah Fouracre.

Constable Mann: I best go and have a look straight away. Do you mind accompanying me? Put your horse in the yard, Mr Lyons, while I get the car ready.

With a whirl of the crank handle they set off on the sandy road across country towards Lake Clifton. A 24 km trip by car was not much quicker than riding a horse. However, a horse would not be able to make the return trip in the same day.

As they approached Peppermint Grove, they were met by George Sutton, a farmer from Mandurah and Robert Pahl.

George Sutton: G'day Constable ... Mr Lyons. I guess you know about the fire then. Robert and I managed to lever a few roof beams out of the way so we could get inside. I'm afraid Leah must have been caught in the fire. Pretty grisly sight.

Constable Mann: That's not good news. I was hoping Leah may have been out riding. We'll have to get identification on the body. Looks like we have some work to do.

George Sutton: Can I give you a hand?

Constable Mann: Not much you can do George. Thanks anyway.

George Sutton: I'll leave you to it then, I'll be at Hampden and then on to Harvey over the next few days.

You arrive at the house and you can see that the roof has caved in and there is a smouldering ruin left. You know there is a burnt body inside. Your job is to investigate the scene and work out what has happened. What would you do first? Remember there are no fire hoses and it is too hot to get into the house.

Answer: *Look around the house.*

✘ It was too hot to look through the ruins very thoroughly.

Answer: *Look around the property.*

✓ A big collie dog kept pestering PC Mann to follow it down the track that lead towards the kitchen garden and horse paddock.

He followed it and this is what he found:

1. A man's hat on the ground of the kitchen garden path.
2. Next to the hat was a bag of barley, some loose green barley and a light rope.
3. A spade and shovel was nearby.

Constable Mann rounded up the horses. He discovered that Leah's young filly was missing.

How do you think that he knew that a horse was missing?

Answer: *Not many people – everyone knew each other. Leah may have talked to him about training the horse.*

Yes in those days people were more likely to know how many horses their neighbours had. In those days horses in the paddock were like cars in the garage.

The PC was putting 2 and 2 together. What might the missing horse suggest?

Answer: *Someone was there and took a horse*

✓ When things had cooled down, Constable Mann returned to the house and gathered up the smouldering remains of the body and put them into a sack. He found it hard not to notice the steel corset ribs sticking to the body. Corsets were the fashion of the time, worn under clothes and pulled tight to create a small waist (this was a detail that provided identification - you may need to know it later). It started to rain.

Constable Mann: There's not much more we can do tonight. I'll need to make my way to Pinjarra to see the coroner.

Sunday 19th August

The next day he returned to Peppermint Grove with Leah's brother, Robert and his business partner, Mr Wass. Robert's help was going to be invaluable because he knows what Leah had in her house.

As they picked through the remains of Leah's bedroom, this is what they found:

1. Several empty powder horns
2. A large quantity of discharged cartridges
3. An axe-head

Constable Mann: Mr Fouracre, something's not right. I can't think why there would be an axe head in Leah's room.

Robert Fouracre: You're right Constable. Leah always kept the axe in a trunk by the backdoor. I'd expect to see her hunting rifle. Everyone knows she would sleep with it beside her bed.

Constable Mann: Right, well that could be important. I wouldn't expect it to have melted in the fire if the axe head survived. I'm going down to the yard to look more closely at some things down near the kitchen garden.

The big Collie Dog was still sitting by the hat. It had been joined by a tabby cat.

Constable Mann: Strange.

Constable Mann looked carefully through the things that were lying around. When he moved the barley he got blood on his hands. There was also a small amount of blood on the ground nearby.

What might he have been thinking now?

He picked up the hat and returned to the house where Robert Fouracre was still looking for traces of Leah's gun and anything else of value.

Constable Mann: Do you recognise this hat?

Robert Fouracre: Sure do, it's Leah's. I picked it up for her a few years back when I sold some stock for her. She always wore a man's hat. She said it sits better when out riding.

Constable Mann: I'm afraid to say I think we've had some trouble here Robert. I'm heading for Pinjarra. We need a detective up here at once. Something happened out there on the kitchen path. I don't like it.

He drove the long trip to Pinjarra, which was the main police station of the area. He went through everything that he had discovered at Peppermint Grove Farm over the last two days.

To which, Detective Condon said:

Detective Condon (Pinjarra): With runaway soldiers and hawkers on that road, a woman on her own could be a target. Constable Mann, I'll telegram Inspector McKenna, in Fremantle and let him know what you found.

It was now very late Monday night and Constable Mann returned to Waroona.

Tuesday 20th August

By this time the newspapers had got wind of what had happened at the Fouracre property. The *West Australian* featured this article:

Woman's Mysterious Death

Murder and Arson Suspected

End of Remarkable Career

A Lonely Life in the Bush

The Detectives Investigating

An arrest in Bunbury

The *West Australian* also provided some background detail on who Leah Fouracre was and what a remarkable woman she was.

Meanwhile, a Detective from the Crime Investigation Department (CID) in Perth, Detective Connell, had received the telegram from Pinjarra and had left Perth on the 5am train to Waroona.

Why didn't he catch a train to Mandurah?

Answer: There isn't a train to Mandurah.

✓ **That's right. It's taken 100 years to get a train to Mandurah!!**

Detective Connell (CID): Good morning Constable Mann, hope you're ready to travel to Peppermint Grove. Looks like we've got a case on our hands. A Fouracre horse, some jewellery and a Martini-Henry rifle turned up at a Bunbury pawnbrokers last night.

Could be more than a house fire we're investigating. They're holding a bloke down there. The shop owner reported him because he said he was a police officer. It aroused the shop owners suspicion because he knows most of the police down there.

The police also confiscated a brown leather bag, seven boxes of cartridges and a knife in a sheath which had blood on it.

What would you be thinking at this point? What would you do?

Detective Connell: We've got to get someone who knows Leah to identify some of the things at the pawnbroker.

They set off on the 24km trip through sand and swamps and arrived at Peppermint Grove Farm 3.5 hours later.

Do you know how fast that is (roughly)? That's about 8km/hr. Walking distance is 7.5km/hr. Why did it take so long?

When they got there Detective Connell said:

Detective Connell (CID): Let's see what we can find. Remember look for what is there and also what is not there.

They used a sieve to work through the ashes looking for gold and silver fragments.

What might they be looking for?

Detective Connell and Constable Mann went back down to where the hat was. After careful and slow work, they found a discharged ball cartridge which was the same size used by Leah's, Martini-Henri Sporting Rifle.

What would you do next? How could you find out more information?

✓ **Witnesses**

Detective Connell: Right we have to find out who's been near this place in the last few days.

Who do we know about so far?

Answer: *George Sutton, Michael Lyons, Richard Pavey*

What sort of questions would you ask?

Answer: *When was the last time you saw Leah?
Did you see anyone suspicious?*

The police conducted interviews and started to find one thing in common.

George Sutton - witness

When was the last time you saw Leah Fouracre?

12 August. I arrived at nightfall and there was a fellow called Augustin there. It was a bit strange between the two of them.

What do you mean?

They were talking funny, as if they were joking, but it seemed serious too. They were talking about breaking horses. Leah said, "*Somebody* is going to get his neck broken tomorrow," and when I asked *who*, she said, "The lackey is going to ride Prince".

Later when I was talking to Augustin in the kitchen, Leah walked by carrying a bucket. He asked why she had not got him to carry it for her, and she replied, "There's not much fear of you hurting yourself."

I didn't like the look he gave her after that.

When I had to leave for Hampden I asked Leah what he was doing in the area. She didn't know, but she said she'd tell me when I came back through.

Did you ever see him again?

On my way back from Harvey I saw him riding Leah's filly and leading Prince. It would have been about 29km out of Harvey.

What day was that?

August 17

Did it strike you as unusual that he would be riding her horse?

Not really, Prince was a bit lame and he said he was taking him to the vet. It was a possibility.

Did he say anything else to you?

He said, "Tell Leah I'll be back in the middle of the following week." And I said, "Tell who?" and he replied, "Miss Fouracre." I asked him when he "*ought*" to be back and he told me, the following afternoon.

12 August

Joseph Hickerson (neighbour) – Witness:

I was by Leah's having a cup of tea on the 12 August. A dark fellow was there and said he was a detective looking out for fellows with turbans on.

13 August

Richard Pavey (Leah's father's farm manager) - Witness

I dropped by with some provisions on August 13th. There was this dark guy there, said he was a detective trying to catch Afghan Hawkers. He was odd. He pulled out a revolver at one point and said that he needed it in South Africa, where he came from. He fidgeted the whole time I was there.

He seemed very familiar with Leah. Too familiar, if you ask me. It wasn't quite right, you know what I mean? At one point he asked Leah for a pen and paper to write a letter. She refused jokingly three or four times and then he said to her, "Don't you get my temper up, my lady, or you might be sorry for it." When she got the pen and paper and started to write, she jokingly mocked him about the quality of his writing. He replied, "I'll take that smile off your face, my lady, by writing to the *Sunday Times* about you."

I was there that night and left the next day.

It was starting to look as if this fellow was suspicious. From what the witnesses have said, the police were now tracking his movements. George Sutton saw him near Harvey and the Bunbury police had an account of him impersonating a police officer in Harvey.

Next, they interviewed witnesses in Harvey.

August 5

Joseph Piggott - Witness

I saw him twice, I saw him arrive in town just before the news of the fire came through. He was riding a mare and leading a lame horse. It must have been the Sunday. He must have had business in Harvey because I'd seen him once before ... earlier in August. I'm not sure of the date. Anyway by the Monday he was gone, but he'd left the lame horse behind. Just left it on the main street.

Hotel licensee's Wife - Witness

Yes, I saw him here at the hotel. I couldn't miss him. He was having words with an Afghan hawker in the hotel. I couldn't understand what it was about, but they were definitely arguing. He was making such a fuss. As soon as he walked in here last Sunday I recognised him. This time he had dinner, which he paid for in small change. It's a little unusual for a traveller to carry so much loose change. It was like he had robbed a piggy bank. It was useful though and I swapped some

for a sovereign.

Sarah Coutts (Waitress) - Witness

I saw a fellow who looked just like you describe. I remember him because he gave me a brooch and an imitation pearl necklace and some perfume. He had a leather bag full of perfume so I asked to buy some. I thought he was one of those traders that we get through.

August 11

William Pye - Witness

I saw this fellow, dark fellow about 5 feet 6 inches with straight black hair and a coppered coloured moustache. We met near Hampden, on the Old Coast Road. We chatted for a while. He said he was going to Miss Fouracre's and he asked me in a rather persuasive way whether Leah Fouracre was well off. I told him to be off.

I've never seen him before, but I'd heard of him.

De Kitchalin was also spotted in Benger and Dardanup. In Benger, late Sunday afternoon an Aboriginal Woman was given a brooch, a hat pin and a card of buttons.

De Kitchalin stayed overnight with a man called Joseph Fisher, a farm hand living in Dardanup. Apparently, he was a friend and Augustin had stayed with him before. De Kitchalin had stayed there late July too. He borrowed trousers and left blood stained trousers behind.

While Augustin was in Bunbury gaol he wrote a letter to Leah Fouracre.

Listen carefully to what he writes about the days following his departure from Peppermint Grove Farm and think about what the police have discovered so far.

Dear Madam,

I most humbly beg to inform you of my extreme sorrow for having thus made ill promise to you; the reason is easy got, and it is as follows: After I left you I went to the Mornington Mills to get, as you know, the veterinary surgeon, and before I came within a mile off I met a fellow who informed me that it would cost me four or five pounds to get the veterinary surgeon down to the coast, I whereupon I returned, staying on the Perth road that night ... I went to Bunbury on Monday to see if Mr. Allrodt had any more horses for me to break in, and also get Prince shod. But to my utter despair I have got myself arrested for representing myself as a police officer and I have been remanded twice. I know not why, they don't tell me, and have done with it; but of course, I am like clay in the potter's hand. They can do as they please with a poor fellow. So now, Madam, I beg, nay

entreat, you to forgive me, and do so in your earliest convenience. Let me know your scheme for getting Prince back to the lake again. I have not forgot what you told me about not letting Bob have her, for I told the police she belonged to you and not to Fouracre and Wass, and also I beg of you to aid me by sending the balance you owe me, for I am short of money. Now hoping for success, I conclude with regards.

From what you know about the movements of Augustin based on witness accounts what does he write that doesn't match?

Answer: The lame horse was left in Harvey and not taken to Bunbury.

The police established that he did not go to the vet.

Mr C. Penny, Augustin's lawyer tried hard to make one point, that was, that he was not satisfied that the body found in the ruins was Leah Fouracre. He said the remains found might be that of an aboriginal woman.

Now cast your minds back to the beginning of the story. What piece of evidence suggests that this was unlikely to be true?

Answer: *The corset.*

De Kitchalin was a strange person and didn't seem to realise the situation he was in. While he was being held in Bunbury he entertained the police with folklore stories and his life in Ceylon. He would amuse himself by singing music-hall songs. In the court he argued over words and questioned the witnesses with questions that didn't prove his innocence. He also agreed with the police that he did not work for them.

During the trial, after an hour and half of deliberation, the jury found Augustin de Kitchalin guilty.

On the 23 October he was hung at Fremantle Goal.

