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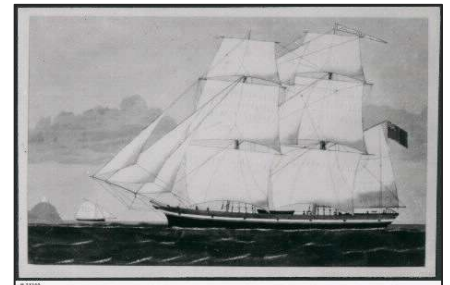
by Sue Geisler

Lost in the Bush

Throughout South Australia's history, there have been countless stories of pioneering bravery, adventures, trials and tribulations. This is one such story of a brave, young woman who inadvertently became lost in the bush. It is a story set in winter in an environment unimaginably different from today.

To begin the tale...

John McHarg, his wife Elizabeth and their seven children set out from Wigtown, Scotland in early May, 1839 to journey 340 km to Liverpool. Awaiting them in port was the South Australia-bound *Lady Lilford*. The voyage lasted 119 days for the 203 passengers, arriving in South Australia on the 27th September 1839. For John and Elizabeth, both aged 47, and their children (James 23, Sarah 22, Elizabeth 19, John 15, Rosanna 11 and Agnes 8), the voyage would have been filled with exotic scenery and adventure, but also privation and terrible seasickness.



The Lady Lilford circa 1839

Within two years of their arrival, the McHarg family had made their home at Prospect Hill in the area that is now known as McHargs Creek. The land was uncleared, so the dense terrain had to be 'tamed' in order for John and his sons to farm and graze stock. From a European settlement perspective, South Australia was barely three years old. The McHargs were true pioneers, clearing and cultivating the land to provide shelter, food and clothing. There would have been apprehension about the unknown 'terrors' in the bush. The few existing walking trails through the scrub could easily disappear after heavy wind or rain. If alone, it would have been easy to become disoriented in such hilly terrain, particularly as there were few other settlements nearby.



Sarah McHarg

Life for these early pioneers was challenging, transposing traditional Scottish farming methods to their new, harsh and primitive environs. Money was scarce. To aid the family, the McHarg's eldest daughter, Sarah, worked for a year as a servant to the Bouch family living on Hindley Street, Adelaide. Such experience would also have helped Sarah to learn about household management and social refinement. She did this for 12 months, but by 1841, she was again living with her family in Prospect Hill. Sarah would have known the immediate area around the homestead to some degree, but having been away in Adelaide, she would not have experienced or learned much about the wider landscape. In addition, Sarah had been born with a deformed foot and although she was able to walk and was sturdy of gait, covering distances would have been a challenge.

Another family to make their home in the area was Thomas and Frances Burr who had arrived in South Australia aboard *The Cleveland* in December 1839. The Burrs had a daughter, Frances Isabel,

who was born either during the voyage or shortly thereafter. Thomas was appointed Deputy Surveyor General in April 1840. Not long after, he and his family made their way to Prospect Hill to establish a survey camp to explore the topography of the region, create maps and assist in the opening up of new tracts of land. Survey teams would have travelled from this base camp for protracted lengths of time to chart waterways, hills and potential road sites, look for mineral deposits and assess areas for possible farming development.

While Thomas and his teams were away, it was left to Frances to manage their home and two-year-old daughter. On 18th April 1841, Frances gave birth to a second daughter named Elizabeth Rusina. It is recorded that Mrs Burr 'disliked being left alone in the bush when the men were out surveying' and 'was very much afraid'. With a young child and newborn, it was just as likely that Frances needed help. Thus it was arranged for Sarah McHarg to temporarily reside with Frances, not only to assist with household duties and childcare, but also to act as a companion. It is unknown how long Sarah stayed with Frances.

Sarah had previously visited the Burr homestead on several occasions. There was a well-used walking trail between the McHargs and the survey camp, a distance of 7.6 km. A convict-servant would customarily accompany Sarah on these visits. Although it is commonly assumed that South Australia was convict free, there were in fact, repatriated convicts present throughout the state. On the completion of their sentences in the eastern States, they would travel to South Australia seeking employment, usually as servants or labourers.

As stated earlier, the length of Sarah's stay at the camp is unrecorded. However, it is known that Sarah left the Burr household to return home on Thursday, 3rd June at 1.30 pm. By this time, baby Elizabeth would have been six weeks old, and Frances might have felt more confident managing the children and her responsibilities at the camp along with the convict-servants help. Alternatively, Thomas and the survey teams may have returned from their exploration. What is known is that Sarah set off alone to walk the relatively short distance to the McHarg property along a familiar trail. The weather conditions are also unrecorded, but it was early June, so it can be assumed that it was cold with shortened daylight hours. She was dressed in a green and white cotton gown with a pink apron and tippet (a small shawl worn draped over the shoulders) trimmed with black velvet, and had on a straw bonnet with light coloured ribbons. She was also carrying two books: one a novel and the other a Book of Psalms.

And with that, Sarah simply vanished.

It took two weeks for anyone to realise that Sarah was missing. Frances Burr assumed Sarah had made it home, and her family assumed she was still at the survey camp. When the alarm was finally raised, on or around the 19th June, all visible traces of Sarah had been erased by the weather. A search party, comprising the local community, Sarah's family, Thomas Burr and the local constabulary headed by Sub-Inspector Lichfield, was immediately organised. Enquiries were made at every hut, station and dwelling. The track between the Burrs and the McHargs was carefully inspected. No trace of Sarah was found. Suspicions of foul play were raised. A stock-keeper, Mr Murray, was apprehended. He had arrived in the area the day before while droving cattle. He was privately interviewed by the Resident Magistrate, remanded for a week, and then released.

Two years passed.

The McHarg family relocated to Lower Finniss. The reasons why are not known. Perhaps it was due to Sarah's disappearance or possibly due to the difficulty of farming Prospect Hill's landscape.

On 17th October 1843, Sarah's remains were discovered by Lieutenant-Colonel Thomas Higgins, more than two long years after she vanished. The grim discovery was made approximately 20 km from the Burrs' home at the survey camp. Human bones had been scattered over a confined area, along with the ragged remains of clothing which identified the remains as those of Sarah. Then, to leave no doubt, her books were found. Inside the Book of Psalms, Sarah had scratched with a pin the words 'Dear Elizabeth (younger sister), grieve not for me, I am resigned to my fate'. It appears that Sarah had fought to survive. Prior to her death, she had attempted to protect herself by building a wurley of scrub branches. However, with no experience in bush survival, Sarah had died from starvation. Newspapers of the day cite that wild dogs tore her body apart after death, scattering her bones.



Sarah's Book of Psalms: David

Sarah had walked a significant distance from the encampment. She was located in an area known as the Double Bridges, which today is near the intersection of the Quarry and Deep Creek Roads at Tooperang. The surrounding scrub would have been extremely dense. Once she had wandered off the track, she would have been completely lost. With no compass to guide her nor food or water to sustain her, her fate would have been sealed. The sights and sound of the wild animals and birds, and the thick scrub would have confused her and heightened her fear. The reasons why she wandered off the trail in daylight hours are unknown. She could possibly have become distracted and accidentally meandered off course or could have mistaken a part of the roughly-hewn trail and wandered into deep bush and become disoriented. For the McHarg family, the discovery of Sarah's remains would have been a relief. Her bones were collected and she was buried at the Currency Creek Cemetery. Other family members lay with her. Alone no more.



Sarah's gravestone at Currency Creek

On Sunday, 25th April 2015 at Prospect Hill, a memorial plaque was unveiled to commemorate where Sarah had set off from on that fateful day 174 years ago. Local dignitaries, representatives from the Prospect Hill Historical Museum, researchers and descendants of Sarah's family attended.



Memorial plaque for Sarah McHarg

It is important to remember this young woman, one who died tragically alone in the dense scrub in an unsettled region of South Australia, and one who struggled bravely to survive until finally succumbing to her grim fate. She represents the hardships that early colonists endured. It also reminds South Australians today of the early settler farmers, pioneers who faced perilous conditions with often dire consequences. They

did so without the modern conveniences of today where visitors to the state's national parks walk on trails that have been designer built for safety. It is worthwhile to stop and think about Sarah, her family and community, and the times in which she lived.



Sources:

Walter Pretty Collection, Goolwa Library
 South Australian Community History

Prospect Hill Historical Museum
 Trove – Digital Newspapers: The South Australian Register, 19 June 1841

Happy Researching

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