

An Adelaide Gaol Execution

William Haines

Executed 16 December 1927

Devina Schmidt was 18 when she and a group of friends left Adelaide by train for a picnic at Bridgewater on Wednesday 12 October 1927. William Haines, who had been trying to pursue a relationship with Devina, was also on the train. He was 25 and had been unemployed for four months. Devina's parents considered him too old for their daughter and didn't approve.

After a picnic lunch Haines approached Devina but she refused to walk with him. He then produced a revolver, warned the rest of the group to stay back, and shot her five times in the head. Devina Schmidt died instantly. Haines then calmly walked away, reloaded his revolver and shot himself in the head. However, his wound was not serious and he assisted two members of the party to lift Devina into a car and waited for the arrival of police. He was then transferred to the Royal Adelaide Hospital and treated for his head wound.

Devina Schmidt was buried at West Terrace Cemetery a few days later in the presence of many friends and relatives. The pallbearers were six young men who were present at the fatal picnic. Long before the arrival of the funeral party the entrance gates and lanes of the cemetery were crowded with people. When the funeral party arrived, the crowd surged forward blocking out friends and relatives as hundreds trampled over graves to get a better view. Those who could not see began conversations which swelled in volume until the hubbub made it impossible for the service to be heard.

Meanwhile, Haines recovered from his head wound and stood trial for murder. The jury took twenty-five minutes to find him guilty and Mr Justice Parsons then pronounced the mandatory death sentence. Several groups, including the Builders' Labourers Union, petitioned for a reprieve but all were refused and William Ephraim Peter Haines was hanged in the New Building at 8am 16 December 1927.

As Haines was being led out of the condemned cell he asked for a final look at the world and was taken to a shuttered window. As he attempted to look though he remarked that he was unable to see anything and was then led on to the drop. He puffed violently on a cigarette as the rope was positioned on his neck. The bolt was drawn and Haines dropped to his death – the cigarette was still burning in his mouth when the medical officer pronounced him dead.

It was the tragedy of Devina Schmidt's death which caused the South Australian Parliament to draw up laws preventing the sale of concealable weapons. Up to this time they could be purchased over the counter and the onus was then on the customer to register the weapon.