

An Adelaide Gaol Execution

William Ridgway - Murder on the Coonatto Run

Executed 1 January 1874

William Ridgway stood in the dock of the Supreme Court on Tuesday 9 December 1873 before Mr Justice Wearing charged with the murder of Frederick Burt on 5 June 1873.

Ridgway had been arrested at Clare in mid August on suspicion of murdering Frederick Burt, before being transferred to Port Augusta Gaol pending his trial in Adelaide.

The Crown Solicitor and Mr Randolph Stow prosecuted. Messers Ingleby and Way appeared for the defence (Stow subsequently became Chief Justice of the Supreme Court in 1876 and was followed by Samuel Way in 1883).

Ridgway pleaded not guilty.

The court was told that Ridgway and Burt were friends who had travelled and worked together on stations around the mid-north. Ridgway was a bullock driver and Burt a shepherd. They worked at Coonatto Station from 23 December 1872 until they left together on 5 June 1873.

Ridgway used his pay to purchase a horse from the overseer and left with the horse and £1 in cash. Burt was known to have taken his wages in both cash and a cheque.

Coonatto Station was a large property in the southern Flinders Ranges about 300 km north of Adelaide and 70 km east of Port Augusta.

Andrew Heron, a 9 year old boundary rider, was riding about 4 miles south of Coonatto on 23 July when he spotted a body partially covered by saltbush. He raised the alarm and led two police troopers to the location of the body.

When the troopers examined the partially decomposed remains they found four fractures in the skull and the coat around the neck clotted with blood. The body was that of a man 5ft 2inches tall and about 44 years of age with dark brown hair mixed with grey.

The troopers put the body into a coffin and transported it to Melrose. An inquest was held where the deceased man was identified as Frederick Burt and then buried.

Police Trooper O'Sullivan told the court that he had been led to the body by the Heron boy and then he examined the scene. He found no money on the deceased but discovered pieces of skull, a tooth, and bits of hair under where the head lay. These had been lost, and so also had a piece of stirrup iron which was found at the scene.

Judge Wearing immediately rebuked the police for the loss and reminded them of the importance of keeping items of evidence.

A statement made by the prisoner was produced to the court. In it Ridgway stated that he left Coonatto with Burt and met a white man and a half-caste who offered them employment to go north with travelling sheep. Burt accepted the offer and left with the men while Ridgway continued south.

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Several other witnesses told the court that there were no half-caste or unknown white persons travelling with sheep in the district at that time.

Robert Steyfang, a farmer at Willochra Creek, knew both men when they worked at his property before moving on to Coonatto. Ridgway was heading towards Melrose alone when Steyfang next saw him. As Ridgway was buying a pair of boots from one of the Steyfang's farm workers several witnesses saw him take out a £10 note to pay for them. He was also seen to have a cheque in his possession. Ridgway had a broken stirrup in his saddle too and explained it away by saying he used it to hit a kangaroo over the head.

Dr Moorhouse testified that he examined the body at Melrose and concluded that death was the result of three wounds inflicted on the skull by a blunt instrument. Upon cross examination he agreed that a piece of stirrup iron could have caused the injuries.

Charlotte Burt, sister of the deceased, identified the waistcoat taken from the body as belonging to her brother. In answer to a question from Samuel Way she said that her brother was married but his wife was too distraught to attend court.

On Thursday 11 December 1873 the case was summed up by the prosecution and defence.

Just after 4pm the jury retired to consider their verdict. An hour later they returned and delivered the finding, "Guilty, but with a recommendation for mercy."

The Judge's Advocate called for silence in court while the sentence of death was passed. Judge Wearing told Ridgway that he would forward the recommendation of mercy to the Governor and then passed the death sentence.

His Honour's concluding remarks were barely audible, this being the second death sentence he had passed in a week, then there was great commotion as several females burst into tears.

The prisoner's father, who had been patiently and anxiously watching the proceedings, utterly broke down and was taken from court sobbing and wringing his hands.

On 31 December 1873, following the execution of Elizabeth Woolcock the day before, William Ridgway broke down and confessed his crimes to Rev Bickford.

He stated that he killed Frederick Burt with a stirrup iron. They were walking side by side when Ridgway struck his victim. Burt, on seeing his purpose said, "Oh don't do it; don't do it; you will be sure to be found out." The murderer, however, completed his task, took the money and then dragged the body to where it was found.

On New Year's Day 1874 the bell again tolled a mournful peal when William Ridgway was led to the same scaffold on which Elizabeth Woolcock had died two days before.

As he stood on the trap, a train full of excursionists passed by the Gaol with a band playing and holidaymakers singing and cheering, apparently unaware of the awful tragedy of the law proceeding only a few yards away.

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The hangman, Benjamin Ellis, drew the bolt and William Ridgway was dead in an instant.

Later that morning he was buried near the grave of Elizabeth Woolcock .

He was nineteen years old.

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