

CROKER PRIZE FOR BIOGRAPHY 2020

2007 The Riddle of the Sarahs

by Clem Ditton

The Riddle of the Sarahs

When Sarah Jane Barron married 52-year-old Abraham in Mackay in 1891, she certified that she was 27, born in Townsville and her parents were Annie Laurie and James Barron, a sea captain.¹ The closest matching record identified Anne and James Barron, whose daughter, Sarah Jane, was born around 1874 in North Queensland.² The challenges with that match are, Sarah would have been just 17 on her wedding day, Anne's maiden name was Farley and James was a carrier on the inland tracks.

These were the frontier days, when settlement often preceded government scribes. Sarah's claim of being 27 and 'the first white child born at Kissing Point', would mean Sarah was there, just before Townsville officially existed.³ Were there two Sarahs, or just the one? It is not a unique name, as another Sarah Jane Barron⁴ arrived in Townsville from England in 1887.⁵

James Barron, the carrier, was born in Newfoundland⁶ and Anne Farley in Ireland.⁷ They married in Bowen in 1865⁸ and had four children before Sarah and one after. All these siblings died young.⁹ Sarah's birth was one of those not recorded, but she was mentioned as a one-year-old on the registration of her younger brother, who drew breath for just one day. Did this Sarah manage to cling to life, when none of her siblings could?¹⁰ James, the carrier also tried his luck on the goldfields at Cape River,¹¹ Ravenswood¹² and Charters Towers,¹³ but the Barron family were strangers to fortune. After several years of residence in Townsville,¹⁴ the family decamped to Cooktown, the supply base for the Palmer rush, described as 'one of the wildest, most lawless and dangerous rushes the world has ever seen.'¹⁵

Searching over the years for James Barron, the sea captain, found some candidates,¹⁶ but nothing to link any of them to Queensland or even to an Annie. A granddaughter was told Sarah's father drowned in India after falling drunk between two ships at dock.¹⁷ A more productive search for Annie turned up a death record for an Ann Barron of the right age in Cooktown. She had died from alcoholic poisoning,¹⁸ but an unrelated official¹⁹ provided unhelpful particulars, making it difficult to be certain of the link.²⁰ The Cooktown episode was not going well for the Barrons as James had faced court for fowl stealing in March 1875.²¹ The absence of a related informant for Anne's demise is probably explained by James being one of 'six prisoners bought to Rockhampton by the *Bunyip* and in turn from the steamer *Leichardt* from up north'. He had been sentenced by the Cooktown Bench to two months' imprisonment for assault.²² The *Leichardt* left Cooktown on 3rd June 1876²³ and Anne had died the day before.²⁴ James' arrest and trial would have preceded her death. His arrest probably contributed to the circumstances leading to Anne's death.

If Sarah was mistaken about her mother's maiden name, then it may be because she lost her mother when she was just two years old. The evergreen Scottish ballad, *Annie Laurie*,²⁵ has existed in writing since 1823 and that song may have filled the gap in Sarah's young memory.

James the carrier, either went to sea or disappeared into the wild north,²⁶ as no more records were found for him after he pleaded guilty to 'furious riding' in Rockhampton in late 1876.²⁷ Sarah appears to be orphaned, but possibly retains some knowledge of her parents via whoever was looking after her. The family story about Abraham's bride, had her living at an orphanage prior to her marriage,²⁸ but that doesn't fit with official records. The Mackay orphanage closed in 1885 with all children transferred to Rockhampton.²⁹ Sarah's name is not on the register of any of these institutions.³⁰ The family realized that Sarah held the local Catholic priest in high

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regard,³¹ when she welcomed him with home cooked roast chicken, a treat her eleven children rarely tasted. It was clear, she had known him from her early years.³²

A few months prior to marrying Abraham, Sarah had given birth to my grandfather.³³ He was the product of a liaison with an unmarried shop assistant from Mackay,³⁴ but Sarah was left to face her predicament alone. Mother and child needed a roof over their heads. Abraham was a farmer who had recently become a widower.³⁵ He went looking for a housekeeper, but his preference was to marry the woman who slept under his roof.³⁶ Abraham had three sons still at home, aged 21, 18 and 13 and his only daughter, living in Townsville, was 27.³⁷ Convincing these sons to treat Sarah as a stepmother rather than a peer or a prospect, would provide a motive to raise a younger age. These sons all moved on within a few years.³⁸ Her own children affectionally remembered her as hard-working, capable and devout.

The lack of any clear records for the parallel family, the almost matching details and the plausible explanations, all supported the hypothesis that the luckless Barrons were my great great grandparents. DNA had identified the shop assistant and it offered hope in resolving this riddle as well. Messages were sent to relevant matches and their trees were scanned for clues nestling in the branches. A kindhearted American correspondent³⁹ did some extra digging and unearthed the following gem from the Missing Friends section of an 1875 edition of the *Boston Pilot*.⁴⁰

Of JAMES BARRON, son of William Barron and Mary Fleming, of county Kilkenny, who left Halifax, N.S., about 1865; when last heard from he was in Cape River Gold Field, Bowen, Port Denison, Queensland, South Australia.⁴¹ Information of him, dead or alive, will be received by his mother, Mrs. Mary Barron, 6 Houghton Street, Cambridgeport, Mass.

This added information about James Barron, the carrier and explained a relatively strong match with a Massachusetts resident⁴² claiming descent from Irish born, William and Mary Barron. Records from Ireland⁴³ suggested the Barrons had fled the Great Famine.⁴⁴ This link provided certainty, the two Sarahs were one.⁴⁵

References

¹ QLD Marriage Certificate 1891/1410 1168, Mackay, 3 Nov 1891, Abraham X & Sarah Barron

² QLD Birth Certificate 1875/ 286 22, Cooktown, 24 Feb 1875, Patrick Barron

³ My great grandmother appears to celebrate her birthday in October, based on when her age changes on official records. E.g. Age 27 on 3rd November 1891 (& 26 in July 1891) suggests a birth in or before October 1864. Officially, Townsville did not have European residents until November 1864 and the first official European birth was in August 1865. *Townsville Daily Bulletin*, Sat 29 Dec 1951, page 3, Northern Development <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article63397166> & rootsweb: William Townsville Boyes b. 25 Aug 1865 – First European birth in Townsville. A note in her son, William's papers, stated that Sarah was 'the first white child born at Kissing Point', a headland at the northern end of the Strand, a street that runs the length of Townsville's seaside foreshore.

⁴ QLD Death Certificate 1968/97256 Brisbane, 16 May 1968, Sarah Jane Barron, born in Durham, UK

⁵ <http://data.gov.au/storage/f/2013-05-12T195404/tmpsLxwENImmigration-1848-1912.txt>

⁶ Most official records state St John's, Newfoundland (British territory separate to Canada at time relevant to story)

⁷ One official record shows Maia, Ireland another shows Meath, Ireland, three state Westmeath, Ireland.

⁸ QLD Marriage Certificate 1865/372 81, St Mary's (R.C.), Bowen, 3 Sep 1865, James Barron & Anne Farley. The MC did not name the parents of either party. No immigration records have been found for relevant Barrons.

⁹ QLD Death Certificate 1866/32 135, Kennedy (Bowen), 20 Jun 1866, William Barron. No BC for William has been found but the DC stated the birth occurred seven days earlier & QLD Birth Certificate 1867/73 305, Conway Station, 15 May 1867, Mary Anne Barron & QLD Death Certificate 1868/107 8, Cape River, 15 Nov 1868, Mary Anne Barron

& QLD Birth Certificate 1870/3151 186, Townsville, 5 Jan 1870, Mary Jane Barron
No DC for Mary Jane has been found but records and choice of name for the next child confirms she has died.
& QLD Birth Certificate 1873/3891 474, Townsville, 2 May 1873, Mary Barron
& QLD Death Certificate 1873/1498 306, Townsville, 19 May 1873, Mary Barron
& QLD Birth Certificate 1875/ 286 22, Cooktown, 24 Feb 1875, Patrick Barron
& QLD Death Certificate 1875/241 94, Cooktown, 25 Feb 1875, Patrick Barron
Recorded causes of infant death were ‘convulsions’ in three cases and ‘debility from birth’ in the other.
¹⁰ No death record was found for Sarah Jane, but no death record was found for her sister, Mary Jane, either.
¹¹ Implied from presence at Cape River for death of Mary Anne, and subsequent applications for gold licences.
¹² QLD Miner’s Rights & Business Licences 1870-1884 applications on 23 Sep 1871 for Ravenswood
¹³ QLD Miner’s Rights & Business Licences 1870-1884 5 Oct 1872 for Charters Towers, Broughton & Cape River
¹⁴ *The Queensland Post Office Directory of 1874*, published by Bailliere, has James as a ‘carrier’ in Walker Street, Townsville. An undelivered letter for James was registered at Townsville in January 1874.
¹⁵ Quote from David Hill’s *The Gold Rush*, Random House 2010 – in the caption for JV Mulligan’s photograph. & backed by detail from *River of Gold* by Hector Holthouse Angus & Robertson (first published 1967 reprint 1994)
& *Missing Friends: the adventures of a Danish immigrant (1871-1880)* by Thorvald Peter Ludwig Weitemeyer
¹⁶ *Evening Post*, Volume V, Issue 7, 17 Feb 1869. Loss of the ship *St. Vincent*
& *Nelson Examiner and New Zealand Chronicle* Vol XXVIII, 21, Sat 13 Mar 1869, Wreck of the Ship *St. Vincent*
& Lloyds Register, Sea Captains, State Library of NSW
& *Argus* (Melbourne), Fri 27 Jul 1866, page 4, Deaths <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article5768944>
& *Age* (Melbourne), Fri 17 Dec 1858, page 4, Shipping <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article154876953>
& *Argus* (Melbourne), Tue 2 Jun 1863, page 4, Shipping Intelligence <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article6486252>
¹⁷ 2016 Oral History: Delma Haack, daughter of Sarah’s son William (1905 – 1996) – name used with permission.
¹⁸ A report from Cooktown described the ‘poisonous alcohol vended by unscrupulous shanty-keepers’
Northern Argus (Rockhampton) Thu 10 Dec 1874, Page 3, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article214286267>
¹⁹ The ‘informant’, William Hartley, was the Land Commissioner for Cooktown and also a prominent businessman.
²⁰ QLD Death Certificate 1876/350 386, Cooktown, 2 Jun 1876, Ann Barron
Name fits, Age 31, which fits. Attended by RC priest which fits. In the colonies 7 years, which is acceptably close to the more likely 11 years. Married which fits, but husband named as George - No matching George has been found. Two Georges found deemed unlikely. No parental detail. No children listed (so no Sarah). Place of Birth and marriage ‘Kulborough’; not located.
²¹ *Cooktown Courier*, 20 March 1875, as advised by The Cooktown Historical Society by email on 26 Jun 2013
²² *Rockhampton Bulletin*, Fri 9 Jun 1876, page 2 <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article51904408>
²³ *Mackay Mercury and South Kennedy Advertiser*, Sat 10 Jun 1876, p 2, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article169855611>
²⁴ QLD Death Certificate 1876/350 386, Cooktown, 2 Jun 1876, Ann Barron
²⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Annie_Laurie
²⁶ Some QLD Death Certificates have no names or only partial names. Many individuals disappeared without trace.
²⁷ *Rockhampton Bulletin*, Tue 7 Nov 1876, page 2 <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article51906508>
²⁸ 2016 Oral History from Delma Haack, daughter of Sarah’s son William (1905 – 1996)
²⁹ <https://www.findandconnect.gov.au/guide/qld/QE00659> site giving history of St Joseph’s Orphanage, Mackay
³⁰ QLD State Archives admission registers for Townsville, Mackay and Rockhampton orphanages
³¹ Probably the widely admired French born, Father Pierre-Marie Bucas, who was at Mackay in Sarah’s time. He devoted his energies to those who were hard done by, including the aboriginals, the kanakas, escaped ex-convicts of New Caledonia, orphans and the poor. He was the priest who ran St Joseph’s orphanage, Mackay, before it was closed in 1885. *Early Settlers of Mackay* (1860-1885) Mackay Family History Society 2009. P 124-125
³² 2016 Oral History from Delma Haack, daughter of Sarah’s son William (1905 – 1996). Sarah had ten children with Abraham from 1893 to 1913. Three died in childhood, one aged 7 years, one aged 2 years and the other a newborn.
³³ QLD Birth Certificate 1891/8088 5204, Mackay, 25 Jul 1891, Arthur Barron

³⁴ DNA matching via Ancestry.com identified that the father had to be a son of Crescentia Bihlmaier (1833 – 1916) who migrated to Australia in 1864 and lived in the Mackay district. An analysis of the candidates based on their likely place of residence and traits that were shared, selected the third son as the outstanding candidate.

³⁵ QLD Death Certificate 1891/2610 5701, Mackay, 29 Mar 1891, Marion X.

³⁶ 2016 Oral History from Delma Haack, daughter of Sarah's son William (1905 – 1996)

³⁷ QLD Death Certificate 1916/ 895 9852, Sandy Creek near Mackay, 18 Jan 1916, Abraham X
& from the memoirs of Annie X (née Clay) wife of Archibald X, first son of Abraham (son of Abraham)

³⁸ from the memoirs of Annie X (née Clay) wife of Archibald X, first son of Abraham (son of Abraham)

³⁹ Barbara Rex, a librarian from Madison, Wisconsin – name used with permission

⁴⁰ *Boston Pilot*, Thu 13 Feb 1875, page 471, Missing Friends - Ancestry Library edition database.

⁴¹ South Australia is an incorrect detail, as it was another colony, separate to the colony of Queensland.

⁴² Ancestry match (cM, segs) between 'PHH' (desc. of William J Barron - born 1849, New Brunswick – parents William & Mary Barron) and Delma (53,4) Cousin Bob (16,2) Author (9,1)

⁴³ Irish Catholic records from Inistogue, Kilkenny identify a William Barron and Mary Fleming marrying on 6 Feb 1837. Four relevant baptism records followed, December 1837, one in 1840, another in 1843 and a final one in March 1846. There is no guarantee these records account for James' family, but it is rated as a strong possibility.

⁴⁴ Consistent with the last recorded baptism in early 1846, was the mass exodus to mostly Canada, in what were termed, coffin ships. *The Irish Famine* by Helen Litton, Wolfhound Press, second edition 2003

⁴⁵ Barron brothers William J (born 1849, New Brunswick) & Patrick J (born 1856, Ontario) shared the same address in 1876. Two Mary Barrons were found in Cambridge in the 1880 census, one was the Irish born widow of William living with son, Patrick J & wife, the other was born in Prussia & married to Herman.