

# **CROKER PRIZE FOR BIOGRAPHY 2020**

## **2017 A Happy End to an American- Australian-European Search for an Elusive Ancestor**

**by Douglas Claus**

## A Happy End to an American-Australian-European Search for an Elusive Ancestor

He did not plan on being buried 10,000 miles from his birthplace, but Charles James Watson's life did not exactly play out as anyone would have expected when he arrived into this world on November 24, 1866 in Roxbury, Vermont<sup>i</sup>. His family stayed in Roxbury for at least the first four years of his life, sharing the home with his 12-year older aunt, Euraine.<sup>ii</sup>

According to family tradition<sup>iii</sup> Charles' father, Josiah, joined the Mormons in Vermont leaving his family to follow them, returning after the birth of his daughter, Lydia Amelia in mid- 1872<sup>iv</sup>. When she died in January 1873<sup>v</sup>, he again left and never came back. Charles' mother, Roselia (a.k.a. Rose) had her husband declared an "absconder" for having left his dependant wife and children. She moved to New Haven, Connecticut<sup>vi</sup>, put her children in an orphanage, got a job as matron in the orphanage.

At the ripe old age of 26 and 29 Charles had two daughters with Florence Hill: Lillian in 1892 and Elizabeth in 1896. There is no record of a marriage, even though two family-trees in Ancestry.com each reference the same marriage in St. Louis, Missouri in 1894 between a couple of the same names. However, the referenced marriage certificate states that the husband was born in Germany and the wife in Ohio, so this is most certainly a different couple. Later US census reports continue to describe Florence Hill as "single".<sup>vii</sup>

Charles James left Florence, marrying Emma Beckstein in Manhattan in 1903<sup>viii</sup>. They moved to Emporia, Virginia where in 1907 they had a son, Charles Howard. Tragically, Emma died during childbirth. Three years later Charles Sr. took Charles Jr. and embarked on a trip to seek his fortune in Australia. He arrived in Sydney on Feb 10, 1911 via New Zealand on the ship Victoria.<sup>ix</sup>

It seemed that Charles was planning on staying in Australia, because soon after the minimum two-year waiting period was up, on April 19, 1913 he applied for naturalization. There he is listed as "Widower with One Male Child."<sup>x</sup> On April 28, 1913 he took the oath of Allegiance to King George V and became an English subject.

Form A.

COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA.

NATURALIZATION ACT 1903.

APPLICATION FOR CERTIFICATE OF NATURALIZATION.

TO HIS EXCELLENCY THE GOVERNOR-GENERAL.

1. Name in full. I. Charles James Watson,

2. Address and occupation. Wooroolin Queensland Farmer

hereby apply for a Certificate of Naturalization under the Naturalization Act 1903.

3. State whether applicant is: American

4. I arrived in Australia from New Zealand on the 10 day of February in the year 1911 per the Victoria and disembarked at the port of Sydney

5. Since my arrival in Australia I have resided at Leaves West year 9 Bushland Lyons.

6. I have resided in Australia continuously for a period of two years immediately preceding the date of this Application.

7. I forward herewith a Statutory Declaration, setting forth the particulars required by Section 6, Sub-section (1), paragraph (a) of the said Act.

7. I am: Widower

8. I have one children: Male

9. State number of such one, and where resident. Wooroolin Queensland

10. I am not a naturalized subject or citizen of any other country.

10. I forward also a certificate signed by Daniel Richards Doctor J. J. Richards to the effect that I am known to him, and am person of good repute.

11. Signature of applicant. C. J. Watson

Dated at Wooroolin 19 April 1913

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Whilst he was working as a carpenter, he entrusted his son, “Charley”, to an American family in Kingaroy, James and Susie McDonald. Fate did not smile upon Charles Sr. as only two and a half years after becoming an English subject, he died on October 11, 1915 of pneumonia while out working in Jones Hill near Kingaroy. He is buried in grave 34 in the Presbyterian section of the Murgon Cemetery.<sup>xi</sup>

A copy of a newspaper article as well as an accompanying letter dated March 7, 1916 from the McDonalds informing them of his untimely death was in my mother’s possession. This led me in 1993 to send out a “shot in the dark” to a random McDonald family in Kingaroy to see if he was in any way related to the McDonalds in my story.

Hugh McDonald responded to me and told me that he had contacted the local courthouse as well as approached the local paper. They included the details of my letter in the South Burnett Times of July 6, 1993! The article states “The South Burnett pieces in a global jigsaw puzzle are starting to fall into place and pictured a Murgon Shire Council student environmental health officer examining the cast iron marker of Charles James Watson’s grave, which up until then had not been identified..”<sup>xii</sup>

After nearly 20 years I reconnected with a 3<sup>rd</sup> cousin, who is an avid genealogist with whom my mother had been in contact. He is descended from Josiah Watson on the Florence Hill side and I from Charles James’ brother, Guy Maryon Watson, with whom the McDonalds were in contact after Charles Sr’s death. According to this cousin, “the McDonalds and Charles Jr. left Australia shortly after Charles Sr’s death. They applied for Charles’ estate from Virginia and later again from Toronto, Canada<sup>xiii</sup>. Susan McDonald applied in December 1941 for a “Delayed Certificate of Birth” for Charles Howard, claiming “I raised this boy from the time of infancy until he was twenty-one years of age.” On the form she also claimed to be his aunt.<sup>xiv</sup>

Preceding a trip to Australia earlier this year I reached out to said cousin once again and was pleasantly surprised to find out that he had found records of Charles Howard Watson in the US, including his first marriage to Mary Elizabeth Ingram<sup>xv</sup> in February 1942 (perhaps that is why he needed the birth certificate?!) This couple had four children (all still living). Later he married Maria Ines, with whom he shares a grave.<sup>xvi</sup>

Sadly, after chasing him from three continents and over two centuries, Charles Howard Watson passed away in 1995. I have, though, been in contact with his son, Charles J. Watson in Los Angeles, the grandson of my great-great uncle, Charles James Watson, my most elusive ancestor!

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<sup>i</sup> State of Vermont. Vermont Vital Records, 1871–1908. New England Historic Genealogical Society, Boston, Massachusetts. Roxbury, Washington Co, Vermont, "Vermont Vital Records 1720-1908," Book 1, p. 12, Charles James Watson; digital image.

<sup>ii</sup> US Federal Census Year: 1870; Census Place: *Roxbury, Washington, Vermont*; Roll: *M593\_1626*; Page: 257A; Family History Library Film: 553125.

<sup>iii</sup> Family oral stories communicated by Marian (Jenks) Claus.

<sup>iv</sup> State of Vermont. Vermont Vital Records 1720-1908. Granville, Vermont, p. 39; digital image.

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<sup>v</sup> Find a Grave, database and images, memorial page for Lydia Amelia Watson (13 Jul 1872–27 Jan 1873), Find a Grave Memorial no. [107624090](#), citing Branch Cemetery, Hancock, Addison County, Vermont, USA ; Maintained by Joe Schenkman (contributor [48082354](#)) .

<sup>vi</sup> <https://records.myheritagelibraryedition.com/research/record-10129-48501660/charles-j-watson-in-1880-united-states-federal-census>

<sup>vii</sup> US Federal Census Year: 1910; Census Place: Syracuse Ward 19, Onondaga, New York; Roll: T624\_1057; Page: 19B; Enumeration District: 0194; FHL microfilm: 1375070.

<sup>viii</sup> *New York and Vicinity, United Methodist Church Records, 1775-1949* [database on-line], Vol 335-339: NYC: *Seventeenth St Church: Baptism, Marriage and Other Records, 1852-1920*; p. 368.

<sup>ix</sup> <http://marinersandships.com.au/1911/02/052vic.htm>

<sup>x</sup> Commonwealth of Australia: Application for Certification of Naturalization, 19 April 1913.

<sup>xi</sup> “Pieces Fall into Place.” South Burnett Times, 6 July 1993, p. 3.

<sup>xii</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>xiii</sup> Private e-mail from Jack Dempsey to the author; 3 August 2006.

<sup>xiv</sup> *Virginia, Birth Records, 1912-2015, Delayed Birth Records, 1721-1911* [database on-line]; Certificate Range: 00001-00348; Certificate-No. 1907000337.

<sup>xv</sup> Michigan Department of Community Health, Division of Vital Records and Health Statistics; Lansing, MI, USA; *Michigan, Marriage Records, 1867-1952*; Film: 179; Film Title: 63 Oakland 23210-26389; Film Description: *Oakland (1941-1943)*; State File Number: 63 24193; County File Number: 237.

<sup>xvi</sup> Find a Grave, database and images, memorial page for Maria Ines Watson (1925–9 May 2012), Find a Grave Memorial no. [160339504](#), citing Woodlawn Cemetery, Santa Monica, Los Angeles County, California, USA ; Maintained by pboren (contributor [47316184](#)) .