

A MEMORY OF COLONIAL LIFE

Beryl Tyler

If we could speak with our ancestors, we should probably find their vocabulary confusing and, of course they would not understand our everyday talk of mobile phones, satellites, e-mail and the Internet etc.

My maternal grandmother, who was born in Perth in 1871, the daughter of a convict, and who married the eldest son of a convict always referred to the back yard as “the grant”. When we were children visiting her home in South Perth, she would say, -“Go and play up the grant”. We never queried this as we knew what she meant.

However, once after such a visit my mother said, “Why does she call it the grant?” She should have known, having grown up with the expression but, like us, she accepted it as one of Grandma’s oddities. My father replied, “I suppose it is because when she was young the land was just that – a grant from the Colonial Government”.

The Elegant Spade

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Alexander WILSON, my maternal great grandfather was transported to Western Australia in 1856, having been convicted of forging and uttering. He received his ticket of leave on arrival, but was re-



convicted on 05.10.1859, again for forging.

On 26th October 1864 he married Sarah MAGUIRE who had arrived on the Strathmore some months earlier from Ireland.

When I was a child my grandfather, Alexander’s eldest son, Theo used to tell me that his father had made the trowel which was used to turn the first sod for the construction of the railway. He urged me when on our school visits to the Perth Museum to ask to see it.

This I did, and the teacher assured me that it was at that time housed in the State Library and promised to show it to me. However, due to a changeover in classes I did not get to see it then.

In 1992 when we were involved in the celebrations at Armadale for the electrification of the suburban rail system we made enquires about this trowel and found it was actually a spade, beautifully made and with a silver shield suitable engraved on the handle.

We must have impressed Museum officials as being respectable citizens although of convict stock, because we were permitted to borrow it and have it on display.

There were no other markings on it so we don’t really know if the whole thing were Alexander’s work or just the engraving. He seems to have been a pretty handy sort of fellow so quite possibly he did it all. According to the official report of the ceremony - “Governor Ord formally commenced the work of constructing our original railway from Fremantle to Guildford passing through Perth by turning the first sod on 3rd June 1879 as part of the programme for celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Colony of Western Australia”.

The report in the WA Times on 6th June 1879 said, “The elegantly made spade (he used) was subsequently presented to His Excellency in the name of Mr Robb”. (the man who had secured the contract to build the railway)