

NED KELLY WAS HERE ...

Uncovering the bushranger's secret South Australian hideout

By CHRIS BRICE

The sun was setting as the Kelly gang rode out of the five-pub town of Jerilderie, which hugs the banks of Billabong Creek in the vast NSW plain country midway between Wagga Wagga and Deniliquin.

Ned Kelly and his henchmen had been in the sheep and cattle town for three days. They arrived on the Saturday; February 8, 1879, tying up their horses outside the Woolpack Inn and then spent the evening boozing with a tough bunch of broken-nosed teamsters and drovers, and being entertained by good-time-girl Mary the Larrikin.

About midnight on that Saturday, the gang raided the local police station, threw the constables into their own lock-up and then, for the next two days, swanned through the town as though they owned it.

At dusk on Monday, February 10, with £2140 in cash stolen from the Bank of NSW packed in their saddlebags, the gang galloped south out of Jerilderie... and vanished.

Nothing more was heard of the outlaws - Ned Kelly, his brother, Dan, Steve Hart and Joe Byrne, whose exploits of murder, robbery and derring-do had brought them national infamy until more than a year later.

In June 1880, the gang broke out of hiding to assassinate cohort Aaron Sherritt, who had turned police spy, and a few days later they met their Waterloo at Glenrowan where Ned, despite his suit of armour, was wounded and his sidekicks killed.

No one is sure where the Kelly gang was hiding during the time between Jerilderie and Glenrowan.

Frustrated and embarrassed police believed the rogues were holed-up in their home country in the wild bushland in the north-east of Victoria, just west of the Victorian Alps.

Posses of police - led by blacktrackers, chased shadows for more than a year but didn't come within cooee of putting a hand on Kelly or his gang.

Popular opinion was that Ned had left the Victorian colony.

Even after his capture at Glenrowan, Kelly wouldn't give a clue to where he had been hiding.

A report in the Australasian Sketcher newspaper tells of a witness to Kelly's arrest remarking to the wounded bushranger: "Since the Jerilderie affair we thought you had gone to Queensland." Kelly replied: "It would not do for everyone to think the same way."

Now a story has come to light which suggests Ned Kelly may have been hiding out in South Australia's Clare Valley for at least a few weeks or months of that year in which he was on the run from the Victorian police.

Folklore of the valley's Polish Hill River region claims Kelly lived in a stone and mud mortar hut near the base of Mt Horrocks. The hut, the ruins of which still stand on the property now known as Kadlunga station, has been called "Ned's Hut" or "Kelly's Place" by generations of Polish Hill River residents.

While in the Clare region Kelly is said to have mixed with the neighbourhood riff-raff who hung around the wine shanties that lined the bullock track known as the Gulf Road, which linked the copper-mining town of Burra to Port Wakefield.

He's even said to have joined some of these bushrangers, who had a hideout on a scrubby hill above Watervale, in some rustling and horse-stealing ventures.

It is also suggested he met up with his sister, Kate, who was also staying in the area.

The story, which has several versions, has always been part of the local folklore, accepted as fact, but has never been fully investigated or published in detail.

That was until it came to the ears of Polish Hill River winemaker Dr John Wilson.

Dr Wilson was fascinated by the legend and has attempted to discover its origins and, as part of his research, has spoken to many Polish Hill River old-timers and local historian Geraldine Pearce, tried to trace the families of several Kelly families which lived in the area at the time and read many of the books published on Ned Kelly's life.

One of Dr Wilson's sources is 89 year-old Johnny Rucioch, who has lived all his life in the house that his grandfather built near the base of Mt Rufus in the Polish Hill River area.

Johnny is the last of the descendants of the original Polish settlers who moved into the region in the 1850s.

He remembers his grandmother, Maria, telling him that the bushranger Ned Kelly had stayed in the area and that Ned's sister, Kate, who later joined a Wild West show as a star horse rider, had lived for a period only a short distance away with relatives who had a property on the other side of Mt Rufus.

"That's all I know," Johnny says. "My grandmother told me that Kelly was here, and so was his sister."

Many other old-timers have told Dr Wilson similar stories, including Tom Hill, a former caretaker at nearby Martindale Hall, who says his family elders had told him that Ned Kelly had stayed in a hut which was in the Rocky Ranges in the Rockwood area, now part of Kadlunga station.

The story is also perpetuated by some of the younger members of long-established local families, such as businessman and property owner Martin Smith, who was told by his 92-year-old father of the Ned Kelly connection to the area.

They each identify the ruin on Kadlunga station as being the hut where the bushranger hid.

The hut is on the base of a hill overlooking a wide river flat with Mt Horrocks overlooking it. There appears to have been only one room in the hut, which had a central door and windows on each side. At the back are the remains of stone walls, possibly used for yarding stock.

A huge fig tree still grows in what would have been the front garden and out the back are a few almond trees.

Through land title searches Dr Wilson has established that "Ned's Hut" is near a property once farmed by Martin Kelly, one of a whole clan of Kelly's that lived in the area from around the 1860s, including a Patrick Kelly who owned a property, now only a pile of rubble, said by Johnny Rucioch to be where Kate Kelly is supposed to have stayed.

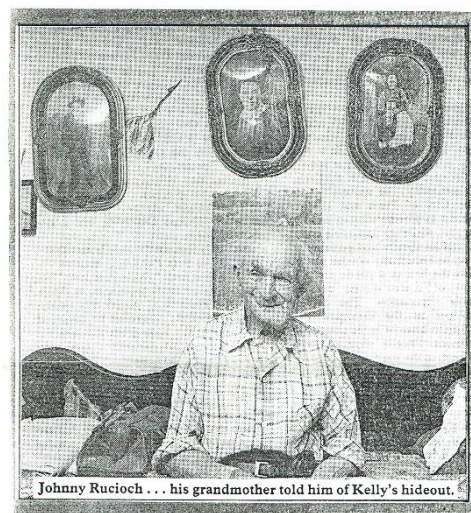
Dr Wilson has managed to trace only distant relatives of these Kelly families, and none of them has claimed Ned as a family member or been able to cast any light on the legend.

"That, of course, doesn't mean anything," Dr Wilson says. "The fact that there were Kelly's here doesn't necessarily mean they were relatives of Ned Kelly. It may be that the relatives of Ned who are said to have lived in the area were from his mother, Ellen's (nee Quinn), side of the family."

And that's where Geraldine Pearce, of Watervale, comes in. She has also lived in the region all her life, her relatives having, farmed there since 1916.

She says she was first told of the Ned Kelly legend as a child and has since spoken to many of the region's old people who remember hearing stories of Kelly visiting the area.

But Mrs Pearce has a different version of the tale to that of Johnny Rucioch. She says that Kelly may have come to Polish River Hill twice.



According to the legend as Mrs Pearce understands it, Kelly had first come to the area when still a child, brought by his mother to meet relatives.

Although Mrs Pearce has been unable to pinpoint a date, she suggests it could have been about the time Ned's father, John "Red" Kelly, died in 1866.

Ned was then aged 12 and his widowed mother, according to various histories of the Kelly family, appears to have been unsure where she wanted to live. Eventually she moved her family from their Avenel home, about 120km north-east of Melbourne, further north to Greta near Glenrowan where her father, James Quinn, and other relatives lived. Mrs Pearce says folklore claims the second time Ned came to the Clare Valley was when he was on the run from police and that he had stayed in an area she knows as Kellytown, the site of Johnny Rucioch's 'Ned's Hut', or 'Kelly's Place', as it is known to others.

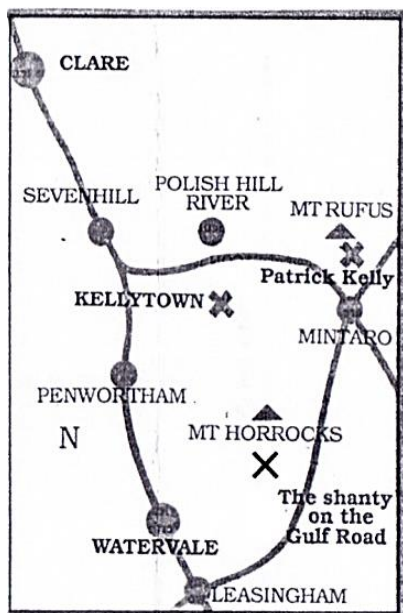
Her version of the story identifies 'Ned's Hut' as being a wine shanty near Watervale on the historic Gulf Road; a series of tracks which wound their way through the hills from Burra and along which there was constant traffic of bullock teams taking copper to Port Wakefield. It was at this shanty, owned by a man called Nankervis, where a rough red called 'Pinky' was generously served and freely consumed, that Ned is said to have met his sister.

Kate, it seems, might have been in Adelaide, made contact with her bushranger brother and arranged to meet at the shanty.

Legend claims the shanty which was made of timber and with only an old pear tree now marking its site, was a favourite of local bushrangers.

It sits at the bottom of a hill known as 'the Mount' adjacent to Mt Horrocks and only a few kilometres south, as the crow flies, from Kellytown.

The bushrangers are said to have always kept a lookout on top of 'the Mount' where there was an unhindered view for kilometres around. The arrival of police could easily have been signalled by the lookout to the bushrangers' hideout in scrub on a hill above Watervale further to the west.



Ned Kelly, it is suggested, joined up for a time with these bushrangers who kept stolen horses and rustled cattle yarded in scrub near Hoyleton on the western side of the Skilly Hills.

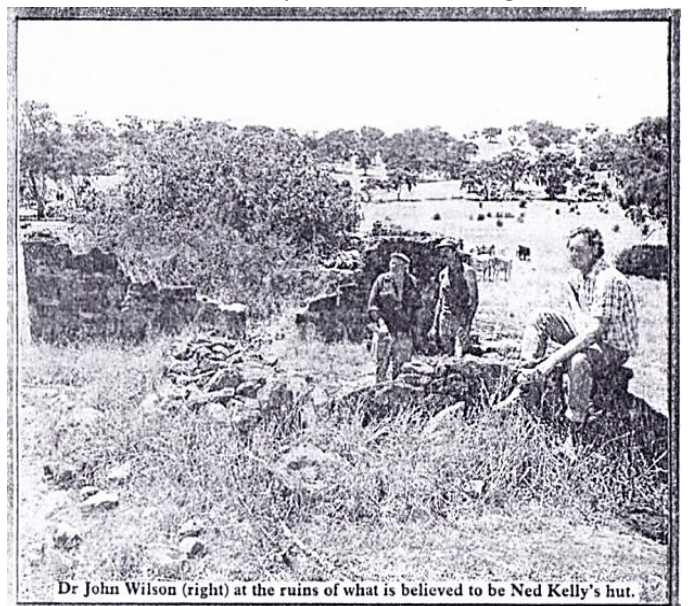
Mr Keith Thomas, of Auburn, has told Mrs Pearce that his grandmother, Grace Kirk, who lived at Lower Skilly, had said she had heard stories that Ned Kelly had been seen riding through the Skilly Hills.

The Polish Hill River legend doesn't explain how Ned Kelly got to the area from Greta in north-east Victoria.

However, both he and Kate were experts on horseback, and it seems an overland trek of about 800 km was not beyond their ability.

They could have, of course, travelled from Victoria by river boat, disembarked at Morgan and then ridden the short distance to Clare.

It would seem unlikely, though, that Ned at least, with half the Victorian police force looking for him,



would have risked being trapped on a river paddle steamer.

Kelly is known to have travelled out of Victoria before the Jerilderie raid, having spent some of 1878 in Dubbo and Orange in NSW and perhaps to have visited relatives at Wagga.

On April 15, 1878, Constable Alexander Fitzpatrick claimed that Ned Kelly, aided and abetted by his brother and mother, had tried to murder him.

Kelly always denied this, and in a manuscript, that he wrote, known as the Jerilderie Letter, in which he

tried to put history straight on his life of crime, he claimed he was 400 miles away from Greta at the time of the alleged attack on Fitzpatrick.

In October 1878, a police posse sent out to hunt for Ned Kelly and his brother and to bring them back to face charges of the attempted murder of Constable Fitzpatrick, was cut to pieces by Kelly and his gang at Stringybark Creek near Mansfield in the Victorian Alps.

Kelly escaped leaving behind the bodies of three policemen. Two months later Kelly and his desperadoes held up the bank at Euroa, between Avenel and Benalla. In February 1879, the Kelly Gang was in Jerilderie.

After Stringybark Creek and Euroa, Ned Kelly, Dan Kelly, Joe Byrne, and Steve Hart were the best-known bushrangers in the country.

Reports of their whereabouts were constantly turning up in the most unlikely places.

An example can be found in the Clare newspaper. The Northern Argus, published on February 4, 1879, only a few days before the Jerilderie raid.

The paper's 'Northern Jottings' reporter who wrote under the by-line 'Idler', said that a young German living in Clare had told some locals that he knew the whereabouts of the notorious Dan Kelly.

So confident was the German of claiming the £1000 reward that had been placed on Dan Kelly's head that he had already promised various amounts to friends.

A few minutes after making his claim the German, according to the newspaper report, was seen talking to a 'semi-intoxicated Irishman'.

"Yah, mien vrend, come mid me. You is de Dan Kelly from Victoria. Mine vord, I locks you up loike anytings", the German is alleged to have said to the Irishman whom he handed over to a nearby trooper.

Paddy was duly charged with being drunk, fined, and released.

Is this the incident which spawned the Polish Hill River Ned Kelly legend? Is the legend based on fact, or is it a load of Irish blarney?

Says Dr Wilson: "We will probably never know. It seems doubtful if this story of Ned Kelly and his association with the Polish Hill River area can ever be verified beyond doubt, but there are enough consistencies to make it credible."

Could there be a connection between, the Wright family, alleged Penwortham cattle thieves and the Irishman 'Wild Wright', the recognised Kelly sympathiser?

Consider the following:

In her letters (c.1850s) to her relatives, Mrs Solly told of how, "she feared to walk far in the bush, because of cattle thieves who had their camp in the hills barely a mile away."

Around this time, Police were stationed at Watervale, Penwortham and Mintaro to help combat cattle thieves.

The Wright Family had cattle yards in an area known as 'Hidden Valley' east of 'Hughes Park' and other yards behind Mt Oakden and in the Pinery, Spring Gully.

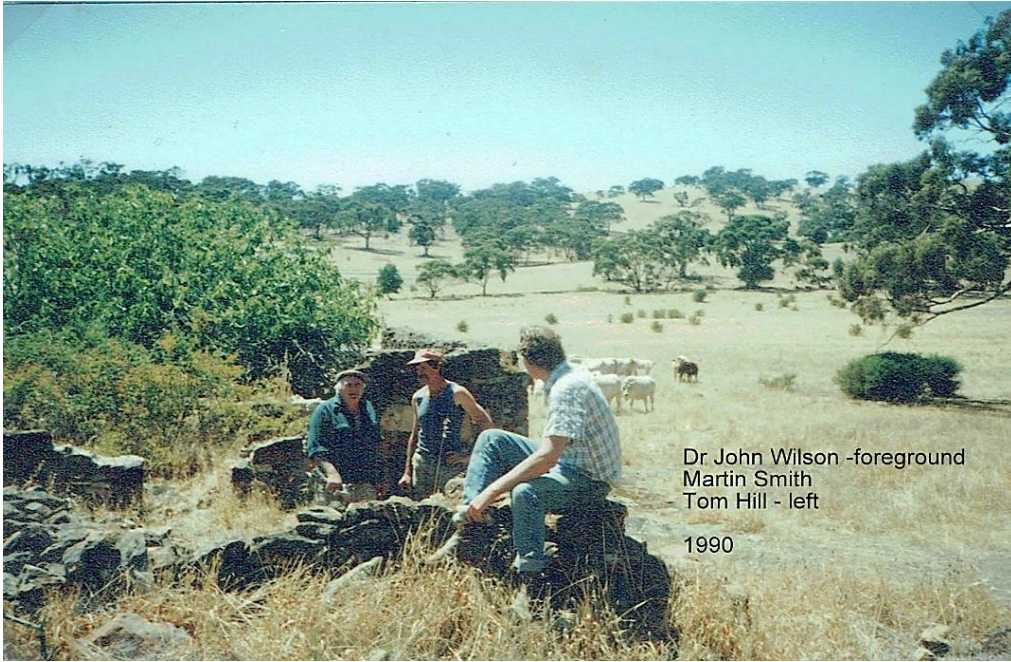
The 476 metre point on the Stringy Bark range was known as 'Signal Hill' and it is said that warnings were signalled to and from the ridge south of Mt Horrocks, perhaps to warn cattle thieves of approaching police.

Patrick Kelly purchased land at Mt Rufus.c.1862.

Stories exist of members of the Kelly Gang visiting their relations at 'Kellytown' in 1879 and of Ned Kelly meeting with his sister, Kate, nearby at Nankervis' 'Wine Shanty' on the slopes of Mt Horrocks

Yet to be researched; David Lloyd tells of his Great-Great-Grand Father's diary held in the Mortlock Library of him interviewing Ned Kelly on his visit.

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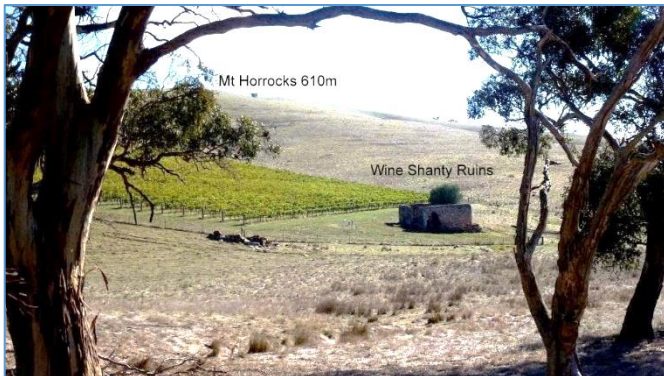
Dr John Wilson -foreground
 Martin Smith
 Tom Hill - left
 1990

Ruins of what is believed to be 'Ned's Hut' in what is known as 'Kellytown.'

Patrick Byrnes lived in Kellytown, and the Hart family also lived in the district.

'Kelly Road' Mintaro heads towards 'Kellytown'.

Felz 'Wine Shanty' is one of the resting points for man and beast on the Burra to Port copper Gulf Road



A 180 degree view south from The Stringy Bark Range, as seen from Mount Horrocks



View from 580m feature
 SSW of Mt Horrocks

