

The Lonely Grave at Horse-shoe Bend

Written by R. T. STEWART.

On the tussock covered hill-sides around old and now deserted gold-mining townships in Otago ; or along the trails followed by early diggers on their way to the upper reaches of the Molyneux and its tributaries, may be seen many lonely and forgotten graves. Some marked by a slab of wood or stone and some by a decaying wooden cross, but many of them by just a mound of earth, where somebody unknown had laid life's burden down. Nearly a century ago a digger named William Rigney buried the body of "Somebody's Darling" where an old Maori Track crosses the divide between two watersheds, in a grave now known far and wide as "The Nameless Grave at Horse-shoe Bend."

In 1863 when every trail which led to Central Otago was thronged with men on their way to the newly discovered diggings beyond the Dunstan Range, a party of three Irishmen, James Lundy, James Sullivan and William Ford, arrived at the Molyneux at Beaumont on the evening of the second day after leaving Dunedin. Instead of joining the eager crowd which next morning crossed the river on a roughly constructed ferry and following the road travelled by the slow moving bullock teams, over the shoulder of the Blue Mountains, and along the foothills on the western side of the Molyneux, they decided to follow an old Maori Track along the eastern side of the river to Miller's Flat about fifteen miles further inland. After leaving Beaumont they experienced some very rough travelling for the first three or four miles and at sundown pitched their tent at Jesse's creek, which flows into the Molyneux at Mayo Island, an island in the river about nine miles above Beaumont. They were surprised after darkness had set in to receive a visit from a runaway sailor who lived on the Island and had seen the light in their tent. He proved to be a Yorkshireman named Patillo, who in later years was known as "Jack the Boatman". He was employed as Ferryman to convey the season's wool-clip from Grant's Station across the river to a shed on the western side where it was stored, in charge of a man named Evans, until bullock-waggons returning from the Goldfields, called in at the Landing, to load the wool and cart it to Dunedin. Evans and his wife kept an accommodation house near the Landing, and readers may be surprised to learn that even in those very early days and in such an out of the way place, roast pork, fish and fowl were frequently on the menu. Perhaps I should tell you that the roast pork was wild pig, the fish eels caught in the river alongside and the fowl Weka, better known in those days as the Maori-hen.

Patillo spent the evening with the party of diggers in their tent and before returning to his camp on the Island, which he reached by ferrying himself across the channel in a bullock-hide boat, he told them that a mile or so further up stream they would reach a bend in the river where he had seen traces of gold on the beach near the water's edge. This statement proved to be correct, for after travelling not more than two miles next day they reached the place which Patillo had described, and as it presented some promising features they decided to try their luck there before proceeding further inland. They pitched their tent in a sheltered spot on the terrace and spent the afternoon prospecting on the beach. In every hole put down they found gold, and as the ground was shallow and would pay well for cradling, they marked out a claim for each member of the party. Next day, with the assistance of Patillo, who took them across the river in his ferry-boat, they procured from Evans of the accommodation house at the Ferry, some timber and an empty gin case with which to make a cradle. After making a cradle and getting everything ready for working they made a start on the beach and reaped a rich harvest, for their first day's work yielded nearly three ounces of gold at that time worth 13 15s Od per ounce. Their activities did not long escape the notice of prospectors and others

travelling inland on the other side of the river, and before many weeks had passed, the whole of the ground on the beach above and below them had been taken up and was being worked by other groups of diggers. This new field became known as the Horse-shoe Bend Diggings, for the reason that here the channel through which Molyneux river was flowing, when viewed from the hills above, presented an appearance not unlike a horse-shoe in shape.

When the shallower ground on the beach had been worked by paddocking and cradling, claims were marked out on the terraces by a number of parties who intended constructing water-races and bringing in a water-supply for sluicing. A race several miles in length was brought from the Minzion Burn by Lundy and party, to work a claim on the terrace after their claims on the beach had been worked out. Water was brought on to the field through this race in 1865, when the population of Horse-shoe Bend numbered some hundreds, and the place could boast of a school and a church. The railway from Milton to Roxburgh crosses the old diggings and at their western end a small flag-station, named Rigney, can be seen from the old road along the foothills.

In a Theological College in Dublin in the year 1858, a student named William Rigney disagreed with his superiors and was expelled. He then joined a group of young men who emigrated to Australia, where he spent some years as a private tutor, and when the rush to Gabriels Gully took place in 1861 he came to New Zealand to try his luck on the goldfields. About the end of 1864 he paid a visit to Horse-shoe Bend, and while there was offered employment by Lundy and party who were then engaged in tunnelling through a high bar of rock which separated their claim from the river, their intention being to discharge the tailings from the claim tunnelling through a high bar of rock which separated their claim from the river, their intention being to discharge the tailings from the claim through the tunnel into the river. Rigney accepted the offer of employment and commenced work. The tunnel was driven through the intervening wall of rock at a level which permitted sluicing operations on the claim to be carried on while the river was at, or below, its normal level. When it was running at a higher level, work on the claim was suspended until the water had fallen sufficiently to enable sluicing to be resumed.

In the spring of 1865 a heavy flood took place in the Molyneux and held up all mining operations along its banks. In some of the claims tail-races were destroyed and sluice-boxes carried away. The tunnel tailrace owned by Lundy and party was not damaged but the level of the river prevented its being used. After the lapse of a week or more when the river having fallen nearly low enough to enable work in the claim to be resumed, an inspection of the tunnel outlet was made each morning. On one of these occasions Rigney was sent out to ascertain if the river had fallen to the required level. Finding that the end of the sluice-box was no longer submerged he was on the point of returning to report to that effect when he noticed a collie dog, wet and shivering lying near the water's edge, and a few feet away, in the shallow water, the body of a man fully clothed. Hurrying to the claim Rigney told his employers what he had seen and they accompanied him to the river. On lifting the body out of the water they found it to be that of a young man fair-haired and of clear complexion, about twenty-five years of age, of slender build and possessing smooth white hands and long tapering fingers.

The next step was to acquaint the Police at Roxburgh of the finding of the body. This was done by Robert Harrison the local Schoolmaster, who was the owner of a horse and who, at Rigney's request, rode a distance of seventeen miles to give the information. The Officer-in-charge at Roxburgh accompanied Harrison on his return to Horse-shoe Bend and after examining the body authorised its removal to a shed belonging to a local resident. Having obtained the names of twelve men to serve on a Jury, he made arrangements for holding an inquest on the following afternoon, when he would return with the Coroner from Roxburgh.

The Coroner and the Police officer arrived at Horse-shoe Bend at the appointed time next day to hold an inquest. Rigney, who was the first witness to be called, testified to the finding of the body, but neither he nor any of the others called could give any clue which might lead to the identity of the deceased. The Jury, on the recommendation of the Coroner, brought in a verdict of "found drowned" and the inquest was closed.

When all the formalities had been complied with and the Jury discharged, Rigney approached the Coroner and enquired if there was any legal barrier which would prevent the body being placed in his charge for burial. He was prepared to fill the office of undertaker and accord the unknown young man decent burial. The Coroner replied that there could be no objection to what Rigney proposed and formally delivered the body to him for burial. Shortly afterwards the Coroner and the Police officer left for Roxburgh.

Rigney obtained from the claim where he was employed some boards of suitable width and of these he made a rough coffin. For a burial place he selected a spot on the summit of the divide between the watersheds of Horse-shoe Bend and Jesse's Creek, and there he dug a grave amongst the manuka near the old Maori track. On the day of the burial all work on the field was suspended and the coffin fastened securely on a sledge drawn by two bullocks, was conveyed to the grave-side, followed by every man and boy on the Horse-shoe Bend. The service was read by Harrison the Schoolteacher.

To prevent wandering cattle from trampling over the grave, Rigney erected around it a post and rail fence and at the head of the grave placed a short length of black pine planking, into which, with a piece of iron heated in the smithy forge, he burned the words "Somebody's Darling lies buried here." When the wooden fence decayed Rigney replaced it with iron standards and wire, and for nearly forty years maintained his interest in the lonely grave, although, for long periods, his activities in connection with, goldmining compelled him to reside many miles distant from Horseshoe Bend.

In 1902 a newspaper reporter made a tour of the goldfields to obtain information for a series of articles on the gold-dredging industry. At Lawrence he met a Miller's Flat hotelkeeper, with whom he travelled to . Miller's Flat on the eastern side of the river, from Beaumont. When they reached the divide between the watershed of Jesse's Creek and the Horse-shoe Bend diggings, a halt was made beside the Nameless Grave, and the reporter was told of the burial of "Somebody's Darling" by William Rigney so many years before. On reaching Miller's Flat the reporter booked in at Sheehy's Hotel for the week-end. The hotel on Saturday night was the rendezvous for a large number of men employed on the dredges as well as those engaged in other occupations who were off duty on Saturday evenings.

The reporter, who had been deeply interested in the story of the nameless grave, referred to it when speaking during the evening to the crowd gathered in the commercial room. He said that some steps should be taken to raise money for the purpose of erecting a permanent fence around the burial plot, and to provide a marble or granite headstone—in place of the wooden one which was falling to pieces because of its long exposure to the weather. It was inevitable that those who had tended the grave for so many years must themselves pass away, and unless something on the lines he suggested was done before that took place there was a possibility that the grave would be neglected and all the circumstances connected with it forgotten. These remarks bore fruit and shortly afterwards a committee of five well-known gentlemen was formed, and a subscription list opened. Strong local support was accorded to the proposal and before long a sum sufficient to meet the expenditure involved was in hand. William Rigney, who was in hospital at this time, on learning that a permanent fence was to be erected around the grave, made the request that sufficient ground should be enclosed to provide room for another grave as he wished when his time came, to be buried beside "Somebody's Darling." His request was granted on account of the friendly interest he had taken in the burial of the unknown young man, and his care of the lonely grave through all the years since 1865.

Before any progress had been made it transpired that Rigney's body could not legally be buried beside the Nameless Grave for the reason that the site, as was now required by Statute, had not been set aside for burial purposes. To overcome this difficulty, the committee communicated with the Department of Internal Affairs, laying before it a full statement of the facts concerning the matter. An application was also made to have a small area which had been duly marked out, proclaimed a cemetery. The committee's application was granted, and the necessary proclamation was issued setting that particular piece of ground aside as a cemetery, and appointing two local miners as Cemetery Trustees. It was something of a coincidence that these two men were at that time engaged in working the deeper ground, on the same claim on which Rigney was employed when he arrived at Horse-shoe Bend in 1864. Following the proclamation of the site as a cemetery the committee proceeded with the erection of a concrete and iron fence around the Nameless Grave and the provision of a marble headstone to replace the wooden slab erected there by Rigney in 1865.

Rigney died in the Hospital at Lawrence on June 4th, 1912, and in compliance with his request his remains were buried beside those of "Somebody's Darling," and on his grave too, a marble headstone was erected bearing the inscription

"Here lies William Rigney

The man who buried Somebody's Darling."

The old wooden slab with its memorable inscription renovated and enclosed in a glass fronted case in 1922 is still standing at the head of the Nameless Grave where Rigney had placed it so long ago.

William Rigney I knew from my earliest boyhood days. He was slight in build, with fine features, dark hair and eyes, and wore a short black beard. He was possessed of literary tastes, and always in his camp one would find a book or two not usually seen except on the shelves of a reference library. His mother, of whom he always spoke with reverence and affection, had hoped to make him a Priest of the Roman Catholic Church—an office which I am sure he could, and would have filled with honour, but his imperious nature could brook no restraint and his refusal on several occasions to submit to discipline resulted in his being expelled from College. With a long farewell to his native land, and all who held him dear, he joined an emigrant ship bound for the Colonies and later, when travelling the Golden Road in search of fortune, Destiny turned his steps to the diggings at Horse-shoe Bend where his mortal remains lie buried, and his name is enshrined in a slab of marble beside a Nameless Grave.