

GRAPEVINE CUTTINGS (September 1998)

By Rob Upson

The PIONEER'S GRAVE at MAIDEN GULLY

On the Bendigo History touch screen, behind the Red Ribbon Rebellion display, call up 'Monuments in Stone' and then 'Take a Tour'. After being shown a plaque indicating the location of Bendigo's first burial ground, you will see a picture of a Pioneers' Grave or the Lonely Grave as it has been sometimes called.

This grave is located on a property, once known as Robin Hill, just outside Bendigo adjacent to the Calder Highway at Maiden Gully. Mrs. Edith Lunn who lived on Robin Hill many years ago researched the story behind this grave. Here is a brief account of her story.

In 1852, just one year after the discovery of gold in Bendigo, Thomas Ninnes, of Clare, in South Australia, set out in a horse drawn wagon with his wife Maria and their four young daughters (Mary, Martha, Grace and Jane) to start a new life on the goldfields. Maria was 34 years old; the two youngest were babes of 2 years and five months.

It was a long and arduous journey over almost trackless country and when they had drawn close to Bendigo winter had set in. General hardship and a lack of proper food must have been endured. When almost in sight of their destination tragedy struck the young family. No doubt worn out by their experiences, Maria and the two youngest children fell ill. The anxious father set off to seek help at the nearby diggings. On his return he found his wife and babies had died.

The grieving father made simple coffins from timber he had brought with him to build their first permanent shelter. To mark the spot Thomas Ninnes gathered large stones from the area and formed a protecting wall around the grave. On the trunk of one of the sheltering gum trees he carved the names of his wife Maria and his children Grace and Jane, and the date, July 7, 1852.

Realising he could not stay on the goldfields with his other young daughters Martha and Mary, he returned to Clare and started a farm and orchard. Eventually the two girls grew up and married. The story of their epic journey to the Bendigo goldfields and back was often related by Thomas Ninnes to his daughters and their families; they never forgot the lonely grave in the bush near Bendigo.

By 1905, Martha and Mary and their husbands had returned to the gravesite and arranged to have the stonewalls made more substantial and a proper headstone installed. Their descendants have continued to visit the site over the ensuing years. The City of Greater Bendigo, recognising the historical importance of the Ninnes grave has undertaken to ensure its protection and integrity. You can find it on a bush track leading off the end of Pioneer Drive at Maiden Gully.

Reference: Edith Lunn