

The Sunshine Swimming Pool

Kororoit Creek

Triple Drowning Tragedy

1932

In 1931, the Russell family, Mr. Harold "Harry" James Russell (Mr. Russell), Ivy "Jessie" Letitia Russell (Mrs. Russell) and their sons Harold George and Eric, were living in King Edward Avenue, Albion. (Sands & McDougall Melbourne Directory)

At the time of the drowning tragedy in 1932, the family were living in Alma Street, Maidstone. (Sands & McDougall Melbourne Directory)

The Drowning

On Sunday 12th June 1932, at about 7:30am, Henry Thomas Trueman, a local schoolboy from Albion, whilst fishing, found the bodies of two boys, Harold George, aged 3 ½ years and Eric, aged 18 months, floating in the Sunshine Swimming Pool Kororoit Creek Albion.

On the 13th June, the police spoke to Mr. Russell, the father of the boys at his house in Alma Street Maidstone. They told him that they believe the two boys found were his sons. Mr. Russell later went with the police to the City Morgue to identify the bodies of his two children.

On the same day Mr. Russell admitted to bigamy after marrying Alma Davey (Miss. Davey), a girl from Cowper Street Footscray. Alma did not know that Harold was still married.

On the 14th June, the police found the body of the boys' mother Mrs. Russell, aged 27 after they dragged the pool from a boat using grappling irons. Her body was found approximately 70 yards upstream from the boys' bodies, directly below the driving stage.

Later that day Mr. Russell identified his wife's body at the City Morgue.

A postmortem by Dr. John Wright Smith revealed the three of victims died from drowning. There was no indication that Mrs. Russell took poison first, nor was there any sign of violence. (13th July 1932 - Herald (Melbourne, Vic. _ 1861 - 1954), Wednesday 13 July 1932, page 9)

Initially the police were convinced that due to depression, Mrs. Russell drowned her two sons and then herself. They believe Mrs. Russell wheeled the children in a perambulator over the driving stage and then jumped in after them. The perambulator, bundles of children's clothing, Mrs. Russell's handbag and wedding ring and a man's overcoat were recovered nearby. (16th June 1932 - Sun News-Pictorial (Melbourne, Vic. _ 1922 - 1954; 1956), Thursday 16 June 1932, page 2)

Police were also investigating reports of a man being seen by a person in Ballarat Road, about half a mile from the pool. (22nd June 1932 - Herald (Melbourne, Vic. _ 1861 - 1954), Thursday 23 June 1932, page 17)

Mrs. Russell and her sons were last seen alive by relatives on Saturday at 6:30pm, when she left her sister-in-law's home in Benjamin Street, Sunshine to visit her mother at Deer Park. She appeared to be in normal spirits. (15th June 1932 - Sun News-Pictorial (Melbourne, Vic. _ 1922 - 1954; 1956), Wednesday 15 June 1932, page 4)

The Arrest

On the 16th June, the husband and father, Mr. Russell, aged 26 , a mechanic living in Alma Road Maidstone was arrested for bigamy after marrying Alma Davey on the 5th May 1932, whilst his wife Mrs. Russell (her maiden name was Heffer) was still alive. Mr. Russell was remanded in custody. (22nd June 1932 - Herald (Melbourne, Vic. _ 1861 - 1954), Thursday 23 June 1932, page 17)

On the same day, after leaving from the home of Mrs. Russell's Aunt Mrs. Sparritt in Commercial Road, Footscray, the bodies of Mrs. Russell and her two sons were buried at the Footscray Cemetery, Geelong Road, Yarraville. (16th June 1932 - Sun News-Pictorial (Melbourne, Vic. _ 1922 - 1954; 1956), Thursday 16 June 1932, page 2)

On the 24th June, Mr. Russell was charged with the murder of Mrs. Russell, Harold George Russell and Eric Russell and was remanded in custody. (24th June 1932 - Herald (Melbourne, Vic. _ 1861 - 1954), Friday 24 June 1932, page 1)

The Inquest

On the 13th July, an inquest at the City Morgue investigated the drownings and alleged murders commenced. The coroner was Mr. D. Grant. (12th July 1932 - Herald (Melbourne, Vic. _ 1861 - 1954), Tuesday 12 July 1932, page 1)

Twenty-nine witnesses were called to tell their story of the events leading up to the tragedy. (12th July 1932 - Herald (Melbourne, Vic. _ 1861 - 1954), Tuesday 12 July 1932, page 1)

When the inquest began, every seat in the City Morgue and the standing room around the wall were full. The crowd even spilled out on to the footpath. (14th July 1932 - Age (Melbourne, Vic. _ 1854 - 1954), Thursday 14 July 1932, page 8)

Initially Mr. Russell denied to the police of being in Sunshine with his wife on the Saturday evening but afterwards admitted being in Ballarat Road looking for his wife. (15th July 1932 - Sunshine Advocate (Vic. _ 1924 - 1954), Friday 15 July 1932, page 4)

Witnesses at the inquest spoke about Mrs. Russell talking about suicide. Walter Dixon Russell, the brother of the Mr. Russell also said that Mrs. Russell had threatened more than once to commit suicide. (13th July 1932 - Herald (Melbourne, Vic. _ 1861 - 1954), Wednesday 13 July 1932, page 9)

Mr. Russell's mother Mrs. Mary Jane Russell told the inquiry that Mrs Russell had on several occasions said she that was tired of living and would drown herself, but everyone thought she was only joking.

John Heffer, the father of Mrs. Russell said the last time he saw his daughter alive was on the 7th June. He stated he was not on good terms with Mr. Russell, but his daughter thought a lot of her husband and stuck up for him no matter what was said. He confirmed that his daughter had never threatened suicide. (14th July 1932 - Age (Melbourne, Vic. _ 1854 - 1954), Thursday 14 July 1932, page 8)

The Hampshire Road chemist, Mr. Robert K. McDonald told the inquest that Mr. Russell had come to shop to buy strychnine to kill dogs but left the shop without making a purchase due to insufficient funds. (14th July 1932 - Age (Melbourne, Vic. _ 1854 - 1954), Thursday 14 July 1932, page 8)

At the inquest, the Government Pathologist Dr. John Wright Smith said the death of Mrs. Russell was more consistent with suicide, and that the woman picked up the children and threw them into the water. Once again it was confirmed by the medical examiner, that there were no scars or marks of violence on the woman and her condition was consistent with suicide. (14th July 1932 - Age (Melbourne, Vic. _ 1854 - 1954), Thursday 14 July 1932, page 8)

The police alleged that Mr. Russell once said to them, "Do you think I will get my neck stretched for pushing them in?" and then said immediately afterwards, "I didn't push them in, but I know I will get the blame for it". (13th July 1932 - Herald (Melbourne, Vic. _ 1861 - 1954), Wednesday 13 July 1932, page 9)

Mr. Russell's 2nd wife, Miss Davey was questioned and told the inquiry that Mr. Russell told her that he thought his wife's body was also in the pool and had asked Mr. Russell why he did it and he replied "Well, he was never a woman to me".

At the end of the inquiry, the coroner committed Mr. Russell for Trial. He was remanded in custody on a charge connected to the drowning murder of the three victims. (14th July 1932 - Age (Melbourne, Vic. _ 1854 - 1954), Thursday 14 July 1932, page 8)

The Trial

The trial of Mr. Russell began on Monday 22nd August 1932 in the Criminal Court by Mr. Justice Wesley. Twenty-nine witnesses and new evidence was heard during the trial. (20th August 1932 - Herald (Melbourne, Vic. _ 1861 - 1954), Saturday 20 August 1932, page 13)

The Crown Prosecutor Mr. C. H. Book told the jury that a witness would be called who would say that he had several conversations with Mr. Russell at the Metropolitan Goal.

After the jury was sworn in, Mr. Russell pleaded not guilty to the three accounts of murder. (22nd August 1932 - Herald (Melbourne, Vic. _ 1861 - 1954), Monday 22 August 1932, page 1)

The Crown Prosecutor, Mr. Book in his address to the jury said that one statement provided by Mr. Russell is that he alleged to have said that his wife ran down the hill, pushing the perambulator in which were the two children into the pool. That he rushed to the water and tried to catch hold of her but could not reach her. He then undressed, dived in, but could not find wife or the children. Mr. Book suggested that Mr. Russell never dived in, but that he put his arm to the elbow by standing on the platform and holding his victims down. (22nd August 1932 - Herald (Melbourne, Vic. _ 1861 - 1954), Monday 22 August 1932, page 7)

Throughout the trial, many witnesses gave evidence about seeing Mrs. Russell walking along Ballarat Road, Sunshine North and near the Braybrook Hotel pushing a perambulator. Other witnesses said they were asked by Mr. Russell if they have seen a woman pushing a perambulator. (23rd August 1932 - Herald (Melbourne, Vic. _ 1861 - 1954), Tuesday 23 August 1932, page 1)

Several witnesses stated the suicidal thoughts of Mrs. Russell, but Mr. Russell's sister Ruby Ettie Thompson, said she never knew of Mrs. Russell suicidal tendencies. (24th August 1932 - Ovens and Murray Advertiser (Beechworth, Vic. _ 1855; 1857 - 1890; 1892 - 1955), Wednesday 24 August 1932, page 2)

New evidence presented to the court was by Harold Frederick Brown (Mr. Brown), who said he had been arrested on the 6th July and he said that he had several conversations with Mr. Russell in the Metropolitan Goal, Coburg. In the first conversation Mr. Russell told him that his wife committed suicide, and that he dived in to try to save her. A later conversation Mr. Brown alleged that Mr. Russell confessed to him that he murdered his wife and two sons. (23rd August 1932 - Horsham Times (Vic. _ 1882 - 1954), Tuesday 23 August 1932, page 2)

Under cross examination, Mr. Russell refuted the claim that he confessed of the murders to Mr. Brown. (26th August 1932 - Argus (Melbourne, Vic. _ 1848 - 1957), Friday 26 August 1932, page 7)

After a hearing extending over five days and lengthy final addresses by the Crown Prosecutor and Defence Attorney, the jury retired to consider its verdict.

After six hours of deliberation, the jury returned to say that there is no possibility of an agreement. The jury was subsequently discharged, and Mr. Russell was remanded for a new trial in September. (27th August 1932 - Sun News-Pictorial (Melbourne, Vic. _ 1922 - 1954; 1956), Saturday 27 August 1932, page 3)

The Retrial

The second trial of Mr. Russell began on Monday 26th September 1932.

Mr. Book, the Crown Prosecutor, spent nearly two hours outlining the case against Mr. Russell, that he drowned his wife and his two children on the night of 11th June 1932. Mr. Book stressed the extortionary dilemma that Mr. Russell found himself in after marrying another woman, Miss Davey whilst still married to his first wife Mrs. Russell. (27th September 1932 - Argus (Melbourne, Vic. _ 1848 - 1957), Tuesday 27 September 1932, page 5)

Considerable time was spent on Mr. Russell's movements on the night of the tragedy. (27th September 1932 - Herald (Melbourne, Vic. _ 1861 - 1954), Tuesday 27 September 1932, page 5). Miss Davey was once again questioned about when Mr. Russell returned to her aunt's house in Maidstone at about 10:30pm with his left sleeve of his coat wet up to the elbow. (27th September 1932 - Herald (Melbourne, Vic. _ 1861 - 1954), Tuesday 27 September 1932, page 5)

Further evidence was presented to the court including from Mr. Russell's brother Walter Dickson Russell. His evidence including seeing Mrs. Russell walking and pushing the perambulator with her two children on the night of the 11th June. He stated that she seemed well, although she was restless and showed a desire to get away. He also confirmed that about four years ago and again in the week leading up to the tragedy that he had heard Mrs. Russell threaten to commit suicide. (28th September 1932 - Age (Melbourne, Vic. _ 1854 - 1954), Wednesday 28 September 1932, page 11)

Mrs. Linda Comley, of Forrest Street, Sunshine gave evidence that on the night of 11th June while on her way home, heard screaming coming from the direction of the pool. (28th September 1932 - Age (Melbourne, Vic. _ 1854 - 1954), Wednesday 28 September 1932, page 11)

On the 28th September, the jury visited the swimming site. Later the same day in court, Mr. Brown again confirmed that Mr. Russell informed him of the argument he had with his wife and that he had admitted to him about drowning his wife and two children. (28th September 1932 - Sun News-Pictorial (Melbourne, Vic. _ 1922 - 1954; 1956), Wednesday 28 September 1932, page 10)

On the same day, Mr. Russell entered the witness box. He alleged that he met his wife after a long search for her on the night of June 11th. After finding her Mrs. Russell was determined to commit suicide and drown the children. He tried to dissuade her and followed her to the pool. After further altercation with him, Mrs. Russell consented to return home with him, but immediately after turning his back she rushed down to the water pushing the perambulator in and then jumping in herself. Mr. Russell stated that seeing his children had gone, that he had thought about committing suicide himself but could not, so her got dressed and left the scene. (29th September 1932 - Herald (Melbourne, Vic. _ 1861 - 1954), Thursday 29 September 1932, page 9) Mr. Russell also denied the confession to Mr. Brown. (Sunraysia Daily (30th September 1932 - Mildura, Vic. _ 1920 - 1971), Friday 30 September 1932, page 5)

On the 29th September, Mr. Book, the Crown Prosecutor told the jury there was only two alternatives, either Mr. Russell drowned his wife and two children, or Mrs. Russell committed suicide after drowning the children.

On the 30th September, the jurors retired to consider their verdict. After three hours of deliberation, the jury raised the question to the judge, that if Mrs. Russell pushed their children into the pool, then should Mr. Russell be found guilty of murder? Mr. Justice Mann directed the jury that in those circumstances Mr. Russell would be guilty of manslaughter. (1st October 1932 - Sun News-Pictorial (Melbourne, Vic. _ 1922 - 1954; 1956), Saturday 1 October 1932, page 2)

After one addition hour of deliberation the jury returned with a verdict of manslaughter. (8th October 1932 - Weekly Times (Melbourne, Vic. _ 1869 - 1954), Saturday 8 October 1932, page 7)

The jury did not accept the murder charge. They accepted a scenario where Mr. Russell allowed or failed to prevent the drownings, which legally constituted manslaughter.

The prisoner, Mr. Russell was then remanded for sentencing. When he was asked whether he had anything to say why sentence should not be pass on him, Mr. Russell

said he was not guilty. (8th October 1932 - Weekly Times (Melbourne, Vic. _ 1869 - 1954), Saturday 8 October 1932, page 7)

The Appeal

Mr. Russell barrister then lodged an appeal against the verdict on the grounds that the jury was misdirected by the trial judge of failing to adequately direct the jury on the question of manslaughter. (11th October 1932 - Age (Melbourne, Vic. _ 1854 - 1954), Tuesday 11 October 1932, page 7)

On the 1st November the appeal was heard. The prosecutor for the Crown argued that it was the moral duty of a father that they must risk life for their children and that they are legally bound to save their children. (3rd November 1932 - Herald (Melbourne, Vic. _ 1861 - 1954), Thursday 3 November 1932, page 5), (4th November 1932 - Sun News-Pictorial (Melbourne, Vic. _ 1922 - 1954; 1956), Friday 4 November 1932, page 25)

The appeal failed and the jury's verdict was upheld. (16th November 1932 - Herald (Melbourne, Vic. _ 1861 - 1954), Wednesday 16 November 1932, page 1)

The Sentencing

After the appeals failed, Mr. Russell was sentenced to 10 years for manslaughter of his wife Mrs. Russell and his sons Harold George and Eric. (17th November 1932 - Sun News-Pictorial (Melbourne, Vic. _ 1922 - 1954; 1956), Thursday 17 November 1932, page 2)

After Prison

After finishing his sentence, Mr. Russell married Alice Doris Clarke (Mrs. A. Russell) in 1941. They had 6 sons and 2 daughters, Edward, David, Ronald, George, Ian, Lois, James (b1949 d13/7/1949) and Lynette (b28/5/1959 d7/8/2004).

In 1946 and in 1949, Harold and Alice are recorded as living in Church Street, Carlton. He was listed as working as a timber carter. (Ancestry - Australian Electoral Rolls 1903 – 1980)

In 1954, Harold and Alice are recorded as living in Knowsley, near Heathcote. He was listed as working as a timber carter. (Ancestry - Australian Electoral Rolls 1903 – 1980)

In 1967, 1972 and in 1977, Harold and Alice are recorded as living in Flinders Road, Longwarry. He was listed as working as a driver or timber carter. (Ancestry - Australian Electoral Rolls 1903 – 1980)

Mr. Russell & his new wife moved to Gippsland, eventually settling in Bowen Street, Warragul, where he lived until his death in 1982. (Ancestry - Australian Electoral Rolls 1903 – 1980)

Mr. Russell & Mrs. A. Russell are both buried in the Warragul Cemetery. (Ancestry - Australian Electoral Rolls 1903 – 1980)

Alma Davey married Ronald “Ron” Baker (b21/11/1914 d28/5/1953) on the 14th August 1936 in Footscray. They had two daughters together.

Alma is buried in the Fawkner Cemetery.

Birth, Death & Marriage Details

Harold "Harry" James Russell

(B) 1904 Footscray, Victoria

(D) 24th July 1982 Warragul, Victoria

(Buried) Warragul Cemetery, Victoria (Lawn 3 444 Row M)

(M1) Ivy “Jessie” Letitia Heffer 3rd April 1926 Sunshine, Victoria

(M2) Alma Davey 19th May 1932 Fitzroy, Victoria

(M3) Alice Doris Clarke 1941 Victoria

Ivy “Jessie” Letitia Russell Heffer

(B) 1904 Bendigo, Victoria

(D) 11th June 1932 Albion, Victoria

(Buried) Footscray Cemetery, Victoria (Presbyterian C, Grave 772)

(M) Harold "Harry" James Russell (Mr. Russell) 3rd April 1926 Sunshine, Victoria

Harold George Russell

(B) 1929 Sunshine, Victoria

(D) 11th June 1932 Albion, Victoria

(Buried) Footscray Cemetery, Victoria (Presbyterian C, Grave 772)

Eric Russell

(B) 1930 Sunshine, Victoria

(D) 11th June 1932 Albion, Victoria

(Buried) Footscray Cemetery, Victoria (Presbyterian C, Grave 772)

Alma Davey

(B) 9th May 1914 Footscray, Victoria

(D) 2nd July 1982 Richmond, Victoria

(Buried) Fawkner Cemetery, Victoria (H C Curwen Walker Gardens Garden Bed 15, Position 1)

(M1) Harold "Harry" James Russell (Mr. Russell) 19th May 1932 Fitzroy, Victoria

(M2) Ronald "Ron" Baker 14th August 1936 Footscray, Victoria

Alice Doris Clarke

(B) Abt 1910

(D) 22/11/2012 Warragul, Victoria

(Buried) Warragul Cemetery, Victoria (Lawn 3 444 Row M)

(M) Harold "Harry" James Russell (Mr. Russell) 1941

Ronald "Ron" Baker

(B) 21st November 1914 Melbourne East, Victoria

(D) 28th May 1953 Heidelberg, Victoria

(M) Alma Davey 14th August 1936 Footscray, Victoria

(Buried) Fawkner Cemetery, Victoria (Gardens of Remembrance 2, Wall 7, section 2, Niche 215)

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By John Alchin Sunshine & District Historical Society 28th February 2026