

TRAGEDY AT LAWN HILL

Unfortunately Bauer does not provide his sources of information ... Bob F

N. W. BAUER*

The inscription on the headstone which marks the grave on the bank of Lawn Hill Creek, 210 miles by road, NNW of Mt. Isa reads: "This monument was erected by the comrades (in conjunction with the Government of Queensland) of Alfred Wavell, a Senior Constable of the Queensland Police Force, who was shot dead whilst bravely performing his duty on the 27th October 1889. Aged 37."

To the left side and south of this grave is a further grave with a piping rail around it supported on piping posts. This grave is otherwise unmarked, but it is the grave of Joe Flick who died of gunshot wounds on 28th October 1889. There is a further grave about 200 yards south-east of these two graves. This grave is also enclosed by a piping rail fence and posts, and has a headstone bearing an inscription which reads: "Nym, black boy who was shot by Joe Flick. 28th October 1889. A faithful boy was Nym."

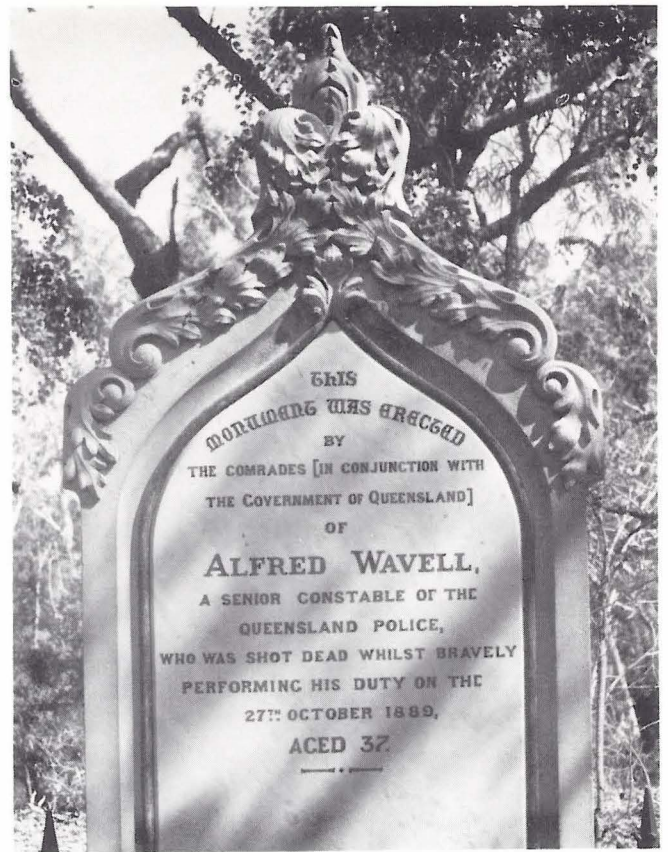
At the time of his death Senior Constable Wavell was attached to Corinda Police Station. The Police Station was later known as "Turn Off Lagoons" and is now the site of Doomadgee Aboriginal Mission. (Corinda Station Homestead is further to the west).

The "Turn Off Lagoons" Station Homestead was about two hundred yards from the Police Barracks and Station. About twenty miles east of the Police Station, and down the Nicholson River, was a homestead known as "Bannockburn". There was also a police paddock here.

The "Lawn Hill" Station Homestead is about sixty miles or a little further south of the Police Station site, near Lawn Hill Creek, which runs into the Nicholson River which is a running fresh water river of considerable beauty. The homestead is built on the flat top of a hill about one hundred and fifty feet higher than the surrounding fairly level country. It is easily accessible from the eastern side but rather precipitous on all other sides though not inaccessible. Lawn Hill Creek runs in a northerly direction about one hundred and fifty yards west of the western bluff of Lawn Hill.

The Gregory Downs Station Homestead and Gregory Downs Hotel are situated about one and a half miles apart on the Gregory River, which is also a running fresh water stream with tropical jungle clad banks, about fifty miles east of Lawn Hill. Lawn Hill is a large pastoral holding, its boundaries extending out to the Northern Territory border.

The only mode of travel at the time of this story was by horse, horse-drawn vehicle or camel.



Constable Wavell was quite familiar with the far North-west as he had previously been stationed at Normanton (then known as Norman River Police Depot) in 1882. After a short stint at Carl's Creek Depot he was transferred to Georgetown in 1887. He returned Normanton the following year and on the 20th October 1888 was promoted to the rank of Senior Constable and transferred to Corinda.

Persons involved with Senior Constable Wavell during his last few days were Mrs. Anderson, wife of Tom Anderson of "Turn Off Lagoons", and a black boy in their employ; Mr. Symes who was at "Bannockburn"; Constable Gunn whom Wavell met at the Police Paddock near "Bannockburn"; Trackers or Troopers and Noble; a black boy named Nym; a half-caste named Monohan Wilson who had recently been released from gaol for horse stealing; and Wilson's mate, another half-caste named Joe Flick.

Joe Flick was born at Burketown of a white father and an aboriginal mother. He was reared in the ways of the white man, but as he grew into youth he soon developed the remarkable skills and bushcraft of the aboriginal. He developed that standard of horsemanship which has made the aboriginal famous amongst the finest stockmen in the world. He was popular and renowned as a good worker and was well respected by all those with whom he came in contact. Being trustworthy and intelligent and a good man with cattle, he was in constant demand by the surrounding stations for mustering and droving work. In these roles he was given more responsibility than usually accorded to half-castes, and his reputation was that of a likeable and capable young man.

Being a half-caste in those times placed him in a pariah class — rejected by the whites and spurned by the aboriginals. Did he resent the white attitude towards his mother of whom he was very fond, or did he resent the

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jibes concerning his breeding which came his way in the droving and mustering camps? Nobody knows just what went on inside his mind. However, it would seem certain that two separate matters exercised a great influence towards his subsequent actions. Returning from a droving trip one day, he found his father cruelly flogging his mother. Caring for his mother as he did, he attacked his father and gave him a severe thrashing.

Where ?

At about this time Joe Flick was courting an aboriginal girl who was employed as a house girl at the Brook Wayside Hotel on Beames' Brook, and the girl appeared to be favourable towards him. Suddenly the girl broke off her friendship with him, having nothing further to do with him. Believing that the proprietors of the Hotel (Mr. and Mrs. Cashman) must have turned the girl against him, he waylaid them and savagely attacked them apparently in an attempt to kill them. They fought him off and he decamped making a beeline for Normanton. A complaint was made concerning his conduct and Flick was located and arrested and charged with attempting to murder the publican and his wife. He was placed in the Normanton lock-up but soon escaped and took to the bush. Investigations gained the information that he was seen south of Burketown and heading west.

to whom & how ?

On 23rd October 1889 Constable Wavell was at Corinda Police Station. He was very sick and weak as a result of having suffered fever and dysentery for over a week; it was thought that he might have contracted malaria. That night the Constable visited the home of Anderson's at "Turn Off Lagoons", as Mrs. Anderson had been treating him for his fever and dysentery. It was then that he learned that Joe Flick and a criminal half-caste named Monohan Wilson were apparently in the vicinity. Mrs. Anderson told him that her aboriginal houseboy was surprised in the bush near the house by Flick who threatened the boy, demanding information as to the whereabouts of the Police and the location of the Police horses. He threatened to 'point the bone' at the boy if he did not supply the required information.

While they were talking that night Mrs. Anderson heard someone ride up to the back of the house, and thought it was her husband returning from mustering. She called out "Is that you, Tom?". Getting no reply she opened the door and saw a horseman galloping away into the darkness and a mocking 'cooe' floated back to her on the night air. Mrs. Anderson returned inside and told Wavell that although she could not be sure she thought that the rider was Joe Flick.

Wavell had received information that Flick had been at Gregory Downs trying to see his former sweetheart, and that he had stolen a horse and had committed a series of thefts including the pack saddle and bags, the property of the Burketown-Camooweal mailman, from the Gregory Downs Hotel. Wavell had been instructed to search for the half-caste gaol-breaker.

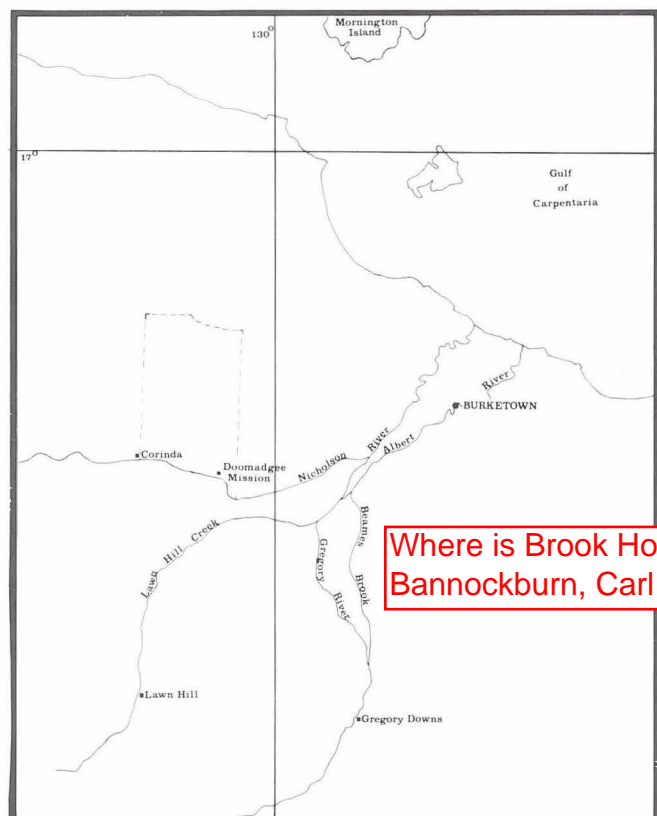
Although still sick and weak, Wavell returned to the Barracks, armed himself and returned to the Homestead where he kept watch through the night but the mystery rider did not return. At daylight on the 24th October Constable Wavell went in search of his horses in the nearby horse paddock. He was shocked to discover that his troop horse 'Railway' as well as a well-bred and valuable horse owned by himself had been shot. In those days the stealing or killing of a horse, and particularly a valuable horse, was a heinous offence. Wavell's anger was kindled by the pride he had for the magnificent animal which had been so wantonly slain.

After searching all day Wavell was unable to find the other two Police horses which should have been in the paddock. It was dark when he returned to Anderson's home and he arranged with Mrs. Anderson to borrow some of her husband's stock horses.

Mrs. Anderson was very concerned about Wavell's state of health, and it was then that she told him of the bad dream she had had on the previous night, when she dreamed that Joe Flick had fatally shot both Constable Wavell and Flick's associate Monohan Wilson. Mrs. Anderson begged Wavell to take good care of himself as the dream had seemed very real. The dream however did not deter Wavell from his avowed intention to track down the man who had slaughtered his horses. Apparently, however, it did give him cause to ponder seriously on the possible outcome of his intended hunt after Flick. Borrowing writing paper, pen and ink from Mrs. Anderson, he wrote out his will, sorted out some private papers and Insurance Certificates, and tying them all together in a neat bundle, he handed the parcel to Mrs. Anderson. Constable Wavell then wrote a letter to his mother which he asked Mrs. Anderson to post.

About 9.30 p.m. Wavell and native tracker Jerry left Turn Off Lagoons Homestead riding on horses they had borrowed from the Andersons and rode to Bannockburn, arriving there about 3.30 a.m. on 25th October. Here they found that Mr. Symes had been up all night as a result of stones having been thrown on the house by someone early in the night. After Symes had fired a shot he heard a man hoot and ride away.

At break of day, Wavell and Jerry set off from Bannockburn and the tracker soon picked up the fresh tracks of two horses where they had crossed the Nicholson River, and set off to follow the tracks which went in a southerly direction from the river in the



Where is Brook Hotel, Bannockburn, Carl Ck etc

Map showing the area of Queensland in which the incidents occurred



direction of Lawn Hill Station. When passing the **Police paddock** Wavell met **Constable Gunn** who had with him a Police dray and horses. Wavell obtained fresh troop horses and left Anderson's horses with Gunn to be returned. He then enlisted the services of **native tracker Noble**, and **he and the two trackers continued to follow the fresh horse tracks**. They followed the tracks for the rest of the day of the **25th**, dry camping when it became too dark to follow them.

Starting without breakfast as soon as it was light enough to see, they followed the tracks all day of the **26th, camping again at night** when it became dark. With only drinks of water to sustain them and Wavell in a rapidly deteriorating condition, they set off at daylight of the **27th**. Approaching midday Wavell sighted a horseman ahead of him and travelling towards Lawn Hill. He recognised the horseman as Joe Flick, who was alone with a loaded pack horse. When Flick saw Wavell he abandoned the pack horse and galloped off towards Lawn Hill about five miles distant.

Wavell recognised the pack horse as Police **troop horse 'Collector'**, one of his missing horses. He also identified the pack saddle and pack bags on the horse as those

stolen from the Burketown-Camooweal mailman at Gregory Downs a short time previously. **Wavell and one tracker** put spurs to their horses and galloped through the bush after Flick, and the **other tracker followed with the pack horse**.

Flick galloped up the incline to the top of Lawn Hill and when near the Homestead he discovered that Wavell, by hard riding, was close behind. Flick turned in the saddle and fired a shot at his pursuers, and **shot the horse from under the tracker**. The Police party returned the fire but Flick managed to make the remaining distance to the Homestead. He jumped from his horse and bolted into the kitchen-dining room building and barricaded himself in.

Wavell and the **two trackers (the other had arrived with the pack horse)** surrounded the building and kept up a fusillade of fire, but Flick managed to return the fire with sufficient accuracy to keep them pinned down.

In a brave show of courage Wavell then walked towards the building calling loudly upon Flick to surrender. There was no sign of movement or sound from within the building until Wavell was within twenty-five yards of it. Flick suddenly appeared at an open window

and fired point blank at Wavell, the bullet striking him full in the chest and he fell dead to the ground. Flick had now killed and there was no turning back for him.

An employee named Bird was the only person at Lawn Hill at the time. He armed himself and then despatched one of the native trackers to locate two other employees named Doyle and Walker, who were working some miles away. He then took up a position with the other tracker and together they kept up a desultory fire into the building in which Flick was besieged. Doyle and Walker and the tracker arrived at the Homestead soon after and they also commenced to fire shots into the dining room.

About sundown, Mr. F. H. Hann the Station owner, a man named O'Shea, and a black boy named Nym, who had been out on the run all day, returned to the Homestead. When Hann was informed of the situation, he decided to endeavour to get Flick to surrender. Calling on the others to hold their fire, but holding his own rifle at the ready, he bravely stepped from cover and walked towards the entrance of the dining room. Flick was well known to Hann, having broken in horses on Lawn Hill some time earlier. Hann had a very good reputation for fair treatment of both aboriginals and half-castes, and was regarded as a good friend by all the native stockmen in the area. He was counting on this reputation to get Flick to give up. He played a long shot but it failed.

Flick came to the window in response to Hann's calls and Hann pointed to Wavell's body in an endeavour to persuade Flick to surrender. Quietly assuring him of fair treatment, Hann continued to try and persuade him. Flick agreed to come out if Hann went to the door. Hann went to the door and opened it, but the renegade immediately raised his rifle and shot the station owner. The bullet struck Hann in the left breast, narrowly missing his heart. Although shocked from the point blank charge, Hann managed to raise his own rifle, and as he collapsed to the ground fired off a shot, but missed.

All hands then fired into the dining room to keep Flick pinned down whilst the wounded Hann crawled away to safety. As darkness fell, firing ceased and an uneasy quiet fell over the rocky bluff. Advantage was taken of the darkness to remove the body of Constable Wavell which was placed in an outhouse and reverently covered. A watch around the building was set to prevent Flick's escape, but at about 1 a.m. a heavy storm set in, and Flick took the opportunity to creep out of the dining room and carefully slip away into the shadows. He lowered himself over the lip of the bluff, and carefully climbed down the 120 foot rock face which drops steeply into Lawn Hill Creek.

At daybreak on 28th October, the dining room was rushed but Flick had gone. All that was left were a

number of spent rifle cartridges, several bloodstains on the floor and pieces of blood-soaked rag. It was apparent that Flick had been wounded.

The wounded station owner Hann was sufficiently recovered to lead a party consisting of the two trackers with Walker, Bird, O'Shea, Doyle, and the aboriginal boy Nym. Blood marks were followed down the bluff and across Lawn Hill Creek, and foot tracks were followed for some distance along the creek. When less than half a mile from the Homestead, a shot suddenly rang out from the thick bush along the creek bank, and the faithful boy Nym fell dead, shot through the heart.

A fusillade of shots then came from the underbrush, but the pursuing party had taken cover at the first shot. Getting back into better cover, Hann held a conference and then despatched O'Shea to Burketown with news of the death of Wavell and Nym, believing that Flick would head for a wild gorge to the north-east of the Homestead, where there was plenty of cover and springs of water, which would make it very difficult, if not impossible, to flush him out.

... NOT Lawn Hill Gorges !

After O'Shea left, the party continued to fire into the thick undergrowth where it was thought Flick was hiding. For a time there was return fire from along the bank of the creek, but it was not possible to pinpoint just where the renegade was hiding. The thick grass along the creek bank was then set on fire and Flick was smoked from his hiding place. As he ran for cover several of the beseigers fired and Flick fell. He was hit by more than one bullet, but it was not known who had actually fired the fatal shot. When the smoke of the fire drifted away on the clear morning air, three men lay dead on Lawn Hill.

The "Queenslander" weekly newspaper of 2nd November 1889 reported the killing of Senior Constable Wavell. Amongst other things, it reported that 'much sorrow was expressed at Wavell's untimely end as he was a general favourite with the community.' In reporting the killing of this officer to the Commissioner of Police, Inspector Alexander Douglas of Burketown sent the following telegram: 'Constable Wavell shot in the execution of his duty endeavouring to arrest a half-caste named Joe Flick. A steady, good officer, experienced bushman, universally liked and respected, and will be hard to replace.'

Lawn Hill Station had a tombstone erected on Nym's grave. Although Lawn Hill Station is well off the beaten track of tourists, and very few would know of or ever see the graves of these three unfortunate individuals, they are carefully maintained and tended by the staff of Lawn Hill Station.