

# ORBOST & DISTRICT HISTORICAL SOCIETY Inc.

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NEWSLETTER 176 - November 2023

## THE CLOSE FAMILY AT MURRUNGOWAR

**A story of hardship, uncommon human endeavour, and family tragedies.**

Several times in my life when out bush-walking, I've come across a stone wall, or some cooking pots, or a chimney, or some rusted bits of machinery — all evocative signs of settlement and of people's lives now gone or a place abandoned and 'gone back to bush'.

The memorial to Mary, Charles, Violet and Joseph Close at Murrungowar is truly astonishing. These four young children of John and Alice Close, three of them dying within days of each other in 1909, tells of family tragedy.

This cairn memorial was erected in 1997 by Geoff Stevenson, a descendant of the Close family, with assistance from other local people. The actual grave site was not found.

Amongst the dense re-growing forest of tall timber and tree ferns, are a few other bits of evidence of lives lived and of human endeavour — a house site marked by stones from a kitchen fireplace, an old pot, rock walls maybe from a well, and some stonework from a cheese room. Also, there are lillies. All is peaceful.

- May Leatch



Geoff Stevenson at the memorial.

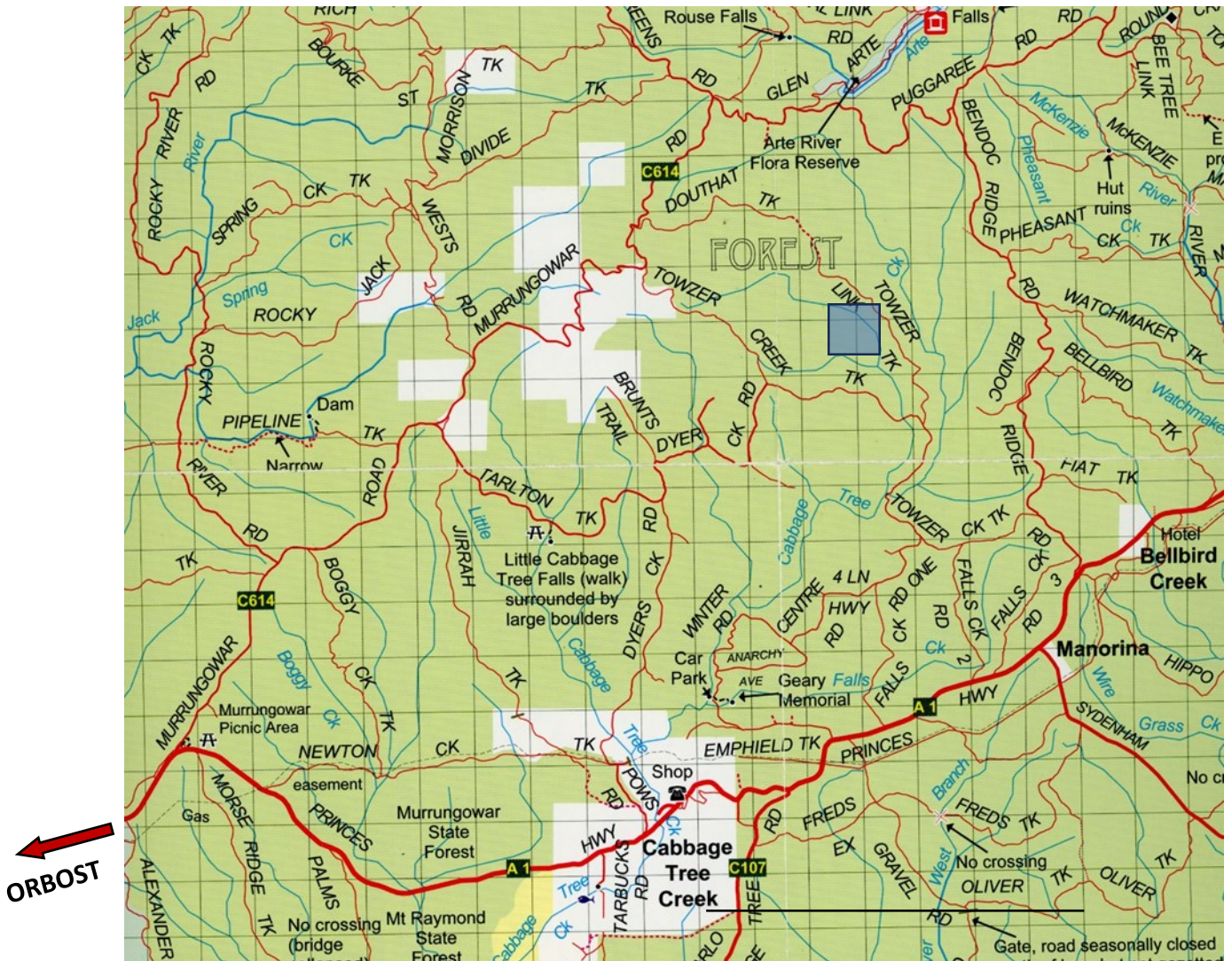
In 2000, the Close Family Allotment, Towser Link Track was listed on the Interim List of the Register of the National Estate. The Statement of Significance indicates that the site encapsulates the story of the Close family and their lives of hardship and tragedy in a remote place. It also represents the widespread farm abandonment in the Murrungowar area.

John and Alice Close selected their land in c.1891 and abandoned it in c.1915 and it reverted to Crown Land. These days, a trip through Murrungowar is an easy 34km forest drive which showcases the beauty of the great forests of East Gippsland and takes about 2 hrs. to complete. What a difference from the remote wilderness which the Close family encountered!

### IN MEMORY OF

|                        |                   |        |
|------------------------|-------------------|--------|
| <b>Mary J CLOSE</b>    | <b>1890 —1900</b> | aged 9 |
| <b>Charles E CLOSE</b> | <b>1901 —1909</b> | aged 7 |
| <b>Violet M CLOSE</b>  | <b>1903 —1909</b> | aged 5 |
| <b>Joseph R CLOSE</b>  | <b>1905 —1909</b> | aged 3 |

BURIED ON THIS SITE, CHILDREN OF JOHN AND ALICE CLOSE  
PIONEERS OF MURRUNGOWAR  
PEACE PERFECT PEACE.



Approx. location of the CLOSE farm, 295 acres, selected 1891, farmed until c. 1915. (Not to scale)  
 Grid Reference: Murrungowar 8622 540 363  
 NOTE: Tracks marked on this modern-day map do not represent tracks in the 1890s.

## WHAT ENTICED JOHN CLOSE AND HIS FAMILY TO MURRUNGOWAR?

In the 1880s, 'McCulloch Country' was the name for the heavily timbered steep ridges to the north-east of Orbost part of which became known as Murrungowar. It was a remote wilderness which, even in spite of huge challenges, began attracting settlers and gold-seekers in the 1880s.

One of these men was John (Jack) Close. Of English descent, Jack was born in Geelong in 1863 and married Alice Frost in Dalesford in 1888. It was here that the first of a series of tragedies to befall the family took place with the loss of their first child, John James b.1889 who died aged 6 months.

According to local author Wally West [*Murrungowar Memories*, 1995] the Close family shifted to Orbost in 1889 and Jack found work around the district, perhaps hoping to secure land nearby.

In June 1890, the Dept. of Lands threw open for selection 9,500 acres of land in the Parish of Kuark, and another 7,500 acres in the Parishes of Murrungowar and Purgagoolah. This land was to be divided into blocks ranging from 200—300 acres. It was described as heavily timbered.

Great-grandson Geoff Stevenson said that Jack Close selected land at Murrungowar in 1891, and shifted to his block in 1893. On the Dept. of Lands and Survey Murrungowar Parish Plan of 2/11/1925, J J Close is shown as the original occupier on lot 35A, 295 acres 1 rood, located about 1 mile [1.6 km.] to the east of the Township site. Another small area of 11 acres 2 roods 26 perches marked with J J Close is also shown adjacent. Both blocks appear to be well watered with tributaries of Cabbage Tree Creek. [1 acre = 0.4 hectare].

When they shifted to their block, the family consisted of Jack and his wife Alice and one child, Mary Jane b.1890 in Orbost. During the next 22 years while on their block at Murrungowar, 11 children were born. (Another child was added following the family's abandonment of the farm in c.1915). In total, Alice gave birth to 13 children and lost five.

We can only imagine the hardships of this growing family who were pioneering in this remote part of Victoria.

The attraction for settlers was to cultivate and farm the rich chocolate soil below the thick forests. Clearing these forests was a huge job with axe and cross-cut saws. Usually,

trees were ring-barked and then cleared and burned, with scrub-cutting a continuous job.

For people living in today's mechanized world, the determination and physical labour involved is difficult for us to imagine.

During the time that the Close family was at Murrungowar (c.1893-1915) they were able to clear and farm about 60 acres.

While these chocolate soils were definitely productive, growing huge potatoes, pumpkins, turnips, fruit trees, onions, vegetables, maize, and crops for dairy cows, transport to markets proved a barrier.

**For settlers such as the Close family and others living at Murrungowar, there was another lure for their settlement here. This was the prospect of a railway line coming through Murrungowar at some stage in the future.**

In 1888, the train line from Melbourne had reached Bairnsdale, and from that time onwards there was concerted lobbying from Orbost people for it to come to Orbost and also to be continued to the NSW border at Bombala. A likely route was through Murrungowar. This was a big hope at that time and occupied a lot of space in the *Snowy River Mail* for many years.

As we know, the train line came to Orbost in 1916 but there it stopped.

An early track from Orbost to Murrungowar was via Marlo, up to Tabbara then east of the Brodribb to where the hall and school were later built, then up Knockup Track and along ridges and across gullies. It was a very difficult 35-40 miles by pack-horse through 'dense jungle' and definitely not a proper road with bridges. (*Murrungowar Memories*, Wally West, p12).

As with all people like the Closes who selected land from the Government, they had to pay a half-yearly licence to hold the land. Also, they had to show evidence of occupying the land, build a house, do fencing, and have land under cultivation. If all requirements were met, the land would eventually be granted to the selector. How realistic were these license conditions?

A Murrungowar township was surveyed near the head of Cabbage Tree Creek with nine town blocks sold in December 1892. An early establishment seems to have been the Murrungowar Hotel operated by Anne Bruton who applied for a Roadside License in December 1891. A sports meeting was held at the hotel on Boxing Day 1892.

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Jack cleared and grassed some land, selected a house site and tapped creek water through a race from above the house to store in a stone well where it was used for the house and gardens, with the overflow being taken on to a dairy. (*Murrungowar Memories*).

Milk from a 20 cow dairy herd was used for cheese making. Cheese was the logical product due to the remoteness of their location and the inability to transport heavy and bulky goods such as cream to the butter factory in Orbost. A durable and compact product such as cheese could be loaded onto horseback or onto a slow bullock wagon and transported out.

With fruit trees, gardens, pigs, and chooks, the Close farm provided food for their table. Potatoes and maize were important crops.

It is suggested by Wally West that settlers like Jack Close also worked around the district when they could, or even went to the nearby Bemm River gold rush which started in December 1896. Wally notes that John Close's family supplied cheese and milk to the miners. Also, they could well have supplied fruit and vegetables, jams, pickles and sauces etc.

Murrungowar had no school prior to 1911, so how were the Close children educated? Perhaps there was some teaching in a home by one of the settlers, or even at the Hotel, (Wally West).

What did they do in times of sickness? The only doctor, Dr Kerr, was 30+ miles away at Orbost, a slow trip by horseback. Where did Alice give birth? Most likely at Murrungowar.

## **THE CLOSE CHILDREN**

**John James** b. 1889 died aged 6 months at Musk Vale prior to the family shifting to Orbost.

**Children whose birth was registered in Orbost. (birth dates as shown as in the Register).**

\* **Mary Jane** b.1891 died 1900 at Murrungowar  
Albert (Sonny) Henry b.1893

Alice Mary b.1895

William George b.1898

Daisy Ann b.1899

\* **Charles Edward** b.1901 d.1909 at Murrungowar

\* **Violet Myrtle** b.1903 d.1909 at Murrungowar

\* **Joseph Robert** b.1905 d.1909 at Murrungowar

Ivy Carol b.1907

Amy Ethel b.1911

Alfred Clarence b.1913

Robert Ernest b.1918

\* **died at Murrungowar; grave location thought to be near the house site and originally enclosed with a white picket fence. No signs of these graves are now apparent.**

## **THE DEATHS**

**In January 1900, MARY JANE CLOSE aged 9 died at Murrungowar.** The *Snowy River Mail* of 20 January 1900 describes her death as sudden, having '*taken ill at about ten o'clock on Wednesday and died about three hours afterwards. It was not deemed necessary to hold a Magisterial Inquiry as there was no doubt that she had died through eating unripe fruit. The deceased was buried at Murrungowar on Friday morning.*'

(Note: Geoff Stevenson, grand-son of Alice Mary Close, believes this death could have been from a snake bite.

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**In January 1909, it seems that all or most of the Close family became ill. Following is this report in**

the *Snowy River Mail* 30 January 1909.

### THE EFFECTS OF UNRIPE FRUIT. TWO DEAD AND FIVE SERIOUSLY ILL.

It was with sincere regret that Orbost residents learned early this week of the serious and subsequent deaths in the family of Mr. Close of Murrungowar, through the eating of unripe fruit.

It was on Tuesday, the 19th inst., that Alice Close, the eldest girl in the family took ill. Her parents treated her as well as they could in the very awkward circumstances, and sent over on Thursday to see if they could get advice or assistance at the residence of a neighbour, Miss Gray. Miss Rachael Gray, who has had a little experience in the hospitals, went over to render any assistance in her power. She found the patient asleep and concluded that she had got over the worst. Miss Gray subsequently left Close's and as far as we can learn nothing more was heard by Murrungowar neighbours about the illness in the family until Sunday morning, when it was reported that one boy was dead and that four other members of the family were ill. The doctor was then sent for, and he left Orbost with Constable Anstee on Sunday evening, arriving at Close's about one o'clock on Monday morning. The doctor found one boy dead, and that very little could be done for the other four children, whose illness was too far advanced to yield much to medical skill, and who are of very delicate constitution. However he attended to them and went to Bruton's for breakfast. He then returned to Close's and found that another boy had died.

Mr James, J.P., started for Murrungowar on Monday morning. He held a magisterial inquiry concerning the death of **Joseph Robert Close**, three years and three months old. The medical evidence was that death was due to convulsions caused by the eating of unripe fruit, and a verdict was returned in accordance therewith.

**On Tuesday afternoon about three o'clock the two boys, Joseph Robert and Charles Edward, were buried on Mr. Close's property near where one of his daughters was buried about nine years earlier, also from eating unripe fruit. The funeral on Tuesday was attended by nearly all the residents of Murrungowar. The burial service was conducted by the Rev. W Gray.**

According to reports received yesterday, five members of the family were still ill, including the baby, eighteen months old. Willie, one of the big boys, who was pretty well at 10 o'clock on Wednesday morning, was in convulsions by one o'clock in the afternoon, when his life was despaired of.

**On 13 February 1909, the *Snowy River Mail* had this report.**

We regret to announce another death (the third), in the family of Mr. Close, of Murrungowar. It will be remembered that the deaths of Joseph Robert and Charles Edward Close, from the eating of unripe fruit, were announced in our issue of the 30th ult. Five members of the family were then ill, and one of them, **Violet Myrtle, aged 5½ years, died on the afternoon of Friday, the 5th inst.** The funeral took place on Sunday, the Rev. W. Gray conducting the burial service. From a report that came to hand yesterday we learned that the other members of the family who were sick have almost recovered.

Note 1: At the Inquest held for Joseph Robert Close, Dr Kerr stated '*My opinion, after hearing the history of the case, the cause of death was convulsions due to severe gastro intestinal irritation brought on most probably by eating unripe fruit.*' Dr Kerr had examined the body and done an autopsy.

Note 2: John Close, the father, stated '*On Saturday 25 Jan., he [Joseph] was with me all day and he did not get any fruit that I am aware of. I am not aware of him getting anything else to eat which would do any injury.*' [This young boy became ill the next morning, took a fit and died three hours later].

Note 3: There was no Inquest nor Dr's report into the deaths of the other two children who died in subsequent days, although it does appear that they had similar symptoms. Also, there was no Inquest into the death in 1900 of Mary J Close, although 'unripe fruit' was stated as the undoubted cause of death in the *S R Mail*.

### POST SCRIPT

How did this disaster affect the family? We know that in c.1915, the family walked off the farm. At that stage, Jack Close's health was poor, and the family shifted to Orbost, later moving to Melbourne. One son, Albert (called 'Sonny') worked on farms in the Murrungowar/Quark area. Several daughters made local marriages. Wally West records that in 1922 Jack Close was still being pursued by the 'Department' for unpaid fees on his selection.

### DEATHS BY EATING UNRIPE FRUIT?

How common is death by eating unripe fruit? A survey of newspapers in TROVE provides two other reports. In 1908, a 10 year old boy in Melbourne died from eating unripe quinces. In 1915, a 10 year old boy in Cooma died of gastroenteritis after eating unripe fruit.

Could the family have had diphtheria? This seems unlikely because Dr Kerr was very familiar with this disease.

The fact that so many in the Close family became sick suggests that it was something that they ate or drank. All deaths occurred in January.

With no refrigeration and hot weather, perhaps they ate spoiled or contaminated food.

Perhaps the family was in a state of semi-starvation and ate something that they normally wouldn't eat.