
PRISON ACTION IN NSW



The Death of 'Chubby'

Max Williams.

The death of Robert Keith (Chubby) Whitfield, calls for a review of working conditions in the prison system. Safety precautions are not necessarily enforced, it seems, and worse still, the cost of burying a prisoner killed on the job (or not on the job) is left to the prisoners parents or friends. And in some cases, the way a body is disposed of depends on how much money other prisoners are prepared to throw in when the hat is passed around.

Whitfield was serving a twelve year sentence, and worked as a bricklayer for the Public Works Dept., earning \$2.00 per week, and 70c extra for Saturday. Whitfield had completed a bricklayers course and was a tradesman. Strangely enough he had been refused application to attend Technical college classes in "Building and Setting Out". He obviously wanted to further his education in that line. He had been given an **Outside Warrant** by the prison authorities, which means he was allowed to go outside of the prison proper and work on any job suitable to him. He had served six years of his sentence and was not considered a security risk. He had no parole period.

This is most remarkable because all prisoners are given a period of their sentence which is favourable to parole and to opportunities of being sent to open institutions. Why the exception? Whitfield was a popular prisoner; played cricket, soccer, and basketball. He was a good workman; a quality that can't be overlooked.

Here's the story. A work party of bricklayers and labourers under the supervision of Warden Timms, a relieving maintenance overseer, was replacing forty feet of wall on the main street. The wall had been tommed-up at one end by the regular overseer Warden Woolly, but it was not tommed-up the end Timms had the work party that Saturday morning, and at the time of the accident. The prisoners were working in a trench ten to twelve feet deep and straddled across this was the wall. The type of wall was an attached pier wall. A heavier than usual wall – the weight coming from an extra two and half brick high structure. The area the wall was being built on was sand.

A thousand bricks were dumped against the wall where the prisoners were working. It is not known if the truck driver did this on his own initiative, or if relieving officer Timms ordered the bricks to be dumped there. However the weight of the bricks did cause the wall to collapse, killing Whitfield. It also caused the trench to cave in.

No one seems to be aware of the danger that a thousand bricks could cause the wall to fall, whether it be near or on the building area. The truck driver apparently didn't know. Timms didn't know. Maybe these two men were merely filling in on the job, acting as overseers, and had no qualifications for such a responsible job, or maybe they didn't care – since it was only a job.

The further we go into this story the more questions we feel like asking. I'll leave that job to the reader. But let's look at the way Whitfield's body was disposed of.

I am under the impression that there's an automatic enquiry on the death of every prisoner. Were any of Whitfield's work mates called to his enquiry? As witnesses, I mean. I'm sure there wasn't. I do know for sure that Whitfield's parents couldn't afford to pay for his funeral, and that the prisoners at Long Bay gaol threw-in a few dollars each to see that he was buried. It seems that the authorities do not accept liability here – they do not bury their people. And although Whitfield was employed by the Public Works Department, they did not accept liability either. It's all very strange. It is alleged that most funerals are paid by a prisoner's private or bonus accounts – whatever they may be.

The Rev. Keith Mahr conducted the funeral service. Six prisoners acted as pall bearers. A group of prison officers attended the service at the crematorium, including warders Nash, Woolly, Timms, and Robertson. Whitfield was well liked.

It is also alleged that, although there is a hospital in the prison with ambulances or their like, the ambulance took thirty minutes to get to the scene of the accident – a distance of perhaps five hundred yards.

It's my belief that this matter should be made public, and that if the Unions or Associations have any conscience whatever, they should do their utmost to make changes, and to enforce safety measures for prisoners on the job.