

A Story from the Adelaide Gaol

A Case of Fraud. (*Fred, the Superintendent of Convicts.*)

Adelaide, South Australia 1853

Fredrick Wilson, alias Cohen, Reece, Waller and many other names, was at the age of 18 transported from London to Van Diemen's Land as a convict. He had a head full of ideas and needed to try them in practice.

Fred put up with being a convict and the discipline that went with it. His opportunity came one day when he quietly left Tasmania's shore for Melbourne.

In 1851 under the name of Wilson, Fred began work in a shop in Geelong. Later in the year he asked his employer for several days leave to attend to some business in Melbourne. Fred went off to Melbourne carrying several bank drafts. He went to a merchant store, Donaldson & Budge, where he presented his employer's drafts to pay for goods.

Fred told the merchant he would need extra goods for his employer and picked out various articles. He then took the goods to a nearby rooming house.

The merchant later learnt that Fred had disposed of some of the goods and, becoming suspicious he notified the police. The police called to where Fred was staying and on searching his room they located the remaining goods.

Fred was arrested for obtaining goods under false pretences. He appeared in court under the name of Fredrick Wilson. Enquiries by police about Fred's past brought to light that he was an escapee from Van Diemen's Land.

Fred was sentenced to 3 years hard labour on the road gang and was to be sent back to Van Diemen's land on completion of his sentence. For 15 months Fred worked on the roads in and around Melbourne. During that time he took mental notes on how the officials acted in their duties and prisons procedures. He thought the information would come in handy one day.

At this time in Adelaide, the Sheriff Mr Newenham, advised the Colonial Secretary that road metal broken up by prisoners at the gaol had cost the gaol 18 pounds 2 shillings. The road metal was then resold for 18 pounds 3 shillings, the department making a profit of 1 shilling for the gaol fund.

The sheriff told the secretary this small profit could be more substantial in the future. The Colonial Government advised that a position was to be created for a Superintendent of Convicts, the wage to be 200 pounds per year.

Shortly after this was announced, a man came to the Sheriff's office and asked a staff member details on the new position available. The man was later interviewed by the Sheriff and went into many details of prison management procedures.

The Sheriff was impressed by the man's knowledge and his references of experience in goals. The Sheriff advised the Secretary that he had an applicant who had been told what the conditions and pay were. The applicant had accepted the job.

A Story from the Adelaide Gaol

The new Superintendent of Convicts, Mr Fredrick Waller, took to his duties earnestly, marching in and out of the gaol and lock-ups with the air of an army major, giving orders and listening to prisoner complaints, inspecting the gaol and other outside lockups, acting like a lord of the manor.

Later that year the Sheriff notified the Colonial Secretary that he wanted to go on leave and take a holiday to Tasmania, then on to Victoria. The Deputy Sheriff would fill in for him during his absence. Fred was sent a memo that the Sheriff would be on leave. Fred dropped the memo onto his desk, telling an Office Clerk he had urgent business and would not be back until the next day.

Fred immediately headed to his room and began hastily packing. Fred headed for Port Adelaide, where he found that the only boat leaving that day was sailing to Melbourne. Fred bought a ticket, hoping that he would not be seen boarding the ship or leaving it in Melbourne.

Shortly after Fred's departure the Deputy Sheriff advised the Colonial Secretary that the Superintendent of Convicts was not to be found and that a cheque for 350 pounds received at the gaol for crushed road metal had been cashed by the Superintendent, Mr Waller.

Another cheque for 100 pounds had also been cashed.

The Sheriff was informed of this whilst in Tasmania. He immediately took a ship to Melbourne where he made enquiries with the police. They did not know of a Fred Waller.

The Sheriff was advised to call on officials at Pentridge Prison. The officials did not recognise the name Waller as having worked in the Victorian Prison system.

The Sheriff-asked if he could look at the gaol's entry books. Shown several registers, the handwriting of an entry signed by a prisoner looked familiar. The Sheriff recognised the writing as Fred's. The officials advised the Sheriff that the handwriting was of Fred Wilson, also known as George Reece, an escaped prisoner.

The Sheriff returned to Adelaide and a warrant was issued for Waller's arrest.

A police constable left Port Adelaide by ship to go to Melbourne. On arrival the policeman, with the help of Melbourne police, began tracking Fred. They found that he had only stayed in Melbourne for a few days and then in company with an unknown woman left by ship for Sydney.

The policeman from Adelaide was going to pursue Fred to Sydney, but he had no funds and had to obtain money from the Melbourne police to return to Adelaide. Particulars on Fred were sent to the Sydney police, with a reward offered for his arrest.

In January 1854 the Sydney police advised Adelaide officials that they had a man in custody known as Cohen, he fitted Fred's description.

A police officer left Adelaide for Sydney with a warrant to take the man into custody and bring him to Adelaide.

A Story from the Adelaide Gaol

In late January a small item appeared in the local papers that the man Waller (Wilson) was back in town, being held in custody. Fred, or whoever he was, waited and waited, but no one came forward to identify him as being the runaway Superintendent wanted for cashing the two cheques.

Finally, as no one had come forward, Fred or whoever he was had to be let go. Fred was not turned over to any official to be sent back to Melbourne. He made a quick departure by boat for Sydney, not to be heard from again.

In Adelaide, why was Fred (or whoever he was), not prosecuted? Perhaps no one wanted to admit that an escaped convict had taken the prison system for a ride.

oooOOooo