

## Biography

### WALTER RICHARD AH CHINN (1881-1931)



*By Dr Jan Penney, Historian, Greater Metropolitan Cemeteries Trust member*

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Wally Ah Chinn (Chinn) was born at Sago Hill in 1881, near Smythesdale, close to the Ballarat goldfields. His mother, Jessie nee Mullens, was one of the many young girls on the goldfields who were deserted by their parents, in her case, Samuel and Agnes nee Birnie.

In 1868, when only 11 years old, Jessie was charged with being disorderly on the streets of Ballarat and sentenced to four years in a reformatory, her father was ordered to pay for her keep. When she was 15 she was found by Constable Sheridan in a brothel in the Chinese Camp where she had lived since leaving the Industrial School in Ballarat

Three years later, in 1874, she married Chin Ah Chin, a much older Chinese man born in Canton, Guangdong in 1835 who had come to the goldfields to make his fortune. Chin Ah Chin was naturalized in 1883 but died the same year leaving Jessie pregnant with the last of her seven children. He was found by Constable A. Trainor lying on the Main Road of Smythesdale and was described as a "Celestial from the Flowery Land".

According to the shipping records Walter travelled to Hong Kong in 1900 when he was 19 years old, probably to visit his father's family. Over the years he made at least one other trip back to Hong Kong. Family ties were strong amongst the Chinese clans.

Trades open to part Chinese men were limited but Wally took up French polishing for the furniture trade. In 1908 he was employed by a Chinese manufacturer, Quoon Lee and Company, in Lonsdale Street in the city when the owner was charged under the Furniture Wages Board for not paying the full union rate to his workers, one of whom was young Wally. There was a strong move to exclude Chinese furniture manufacturers at the time and the items they made had to be stamped as made by Chinese workers in an attempt to limit competition.

In 1909, Wally married an Australian girl of British descent, Catherine Mary Roberts or Dolly as she was always known. Few Chinese women came to Australia and, although it was not common, some married Australian women. Dolly's father, William Henry Bruce Roberts, was a carpenter from Camberwell in London. He was a furniture manufacturer in Collingwood so perhaps that is where Dolly and Walter had met. At least he had something in common with his father in law. She was one of five children and very close to her family.

Wally passed away in 1931 in St Vincent's Hospital when he was 50 years old. All death notices asked the Ballarat papers to please copy so he had kept in touch with his Ballarat relatives, both Chinese and Australian, as well as his overseas relations. He joined Dolly, who had died earlier, in the family grave at Coburg Pine Ridge Cemetery.



Image courtesy of MHA



*Australasian Sketcher*