

The Rhynie Tragedy

The Story of Alexander Newland Lee

By Dr Samantha Battams



Alexander Newland Lee, 1920

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Being the seventh of ten children wasn't lucky for Vera Scholz. Four days before Vera turned sixteen, her mother died and within nine months her father remarried. Between these two events, the First World War broke out. Some of Vera's friends and relatives joined the Australian army and travelled the long journey to Europe. Vera's closest brother, Herbert, went away to America to avoid being interned as an 'enemy alien.' Before the 'Alien Restriction Order' of 1915, many locals from Prussian descent in South Australia changed their names. In 1918 German place names across South Australia (around 69 in all) were replaced by English, allied or Aboriginal names; Grunthal was renamed with the name of the famous French town and French-won battle of World War I, Verdun; Kaiserstuhl became Mount Kitchener after UK Secretary of State for War, Lord Kitchener; and Langmeil was given the Aboriginal name Bilyara. People of German origin lost the right to vote and the local German-Lutheran schools were closed down. The Premier of South Australia declared that no one of German background or name should be hired in the education department. The South Australian Attorney General and Minister for Industry, Homburg, was intimidated into resigning from his post in 1915 after his office was raided by soldiers with bayonets, as was his son who was a parliamentary member of the House of Assembly for Burra Burra.

Vera's great grandfather Johann Scholz had come from Prussia to South Australia in 1845, part of the group that left Prussia as religious exiles. The Prussians had established towns and industries throughout South Australia, living peacefully and gaining the respect of Adelaide's English settlers. These were self-contained communities throughout both the Barossa Valley and Adelaide Hills region, with their own churches, hospitals and schools teaching German and Lutheran religious instruction. Johann Scholz had established the first hospital in the Barossa Valley in 1883 following a donation of £500 from a satisfied and wealthy patient, John Howard Angas, son of one of South Australia's founders. Scholz passed down his experience as a bone-setter in the Prussian Army to his

son and grandson. The hospital was locally known as 'The German Hospital' and its patients included farmers, shearers and drovers in the local district, and later returned soldiers from World War I.



Photo: The Old Willows Hospital (now private residence at Willows Winery), Barossa Valley



Photo: The Willows Hospital (known as the German Hospital) cared for returned Soldiers from WW1 and prepared their own ointment solutions

Vera was fortunate to be working at as a nurse at The Willows, Light's Pass, as it was difficult for people of German origin to find or keep their jobs since the war began. She lived in the nearby private residence on the hospital grounds and started early on the wards. There was plenty to do at The Willows, now that the war was over and her mother was gone.

At their first meeting at the hospital, Alick Lee had boldly asked Vera, 'What is your name, Blondy?'

'My name is Vera.'

'I'll call you 'Dolly.'

'Dolly' was a welcome distraction for Alick, who was despairing at the loss of his livelihood in itinerant shearing and droving, after having left the Railways. He had severely injured his hand in a shearing accident and lost his ability to clench objects.



Photo: Alexander Newland Lee as he appeared in the newspaper in 1920, in his Railway Uniform – before he lost his job and became an itinerant shearer.

Two weeks after their first meeting, Vera invited Alick to visit her brother Herbert. Herbert had returned from America two years earlier, where he had learnt physiotherapy. They stayed at

Herbert's for half an hour, and then returned to the hospital together, walking through the dark property. As Vera turned towards the private residence next to the hospital, Alick said 'You're not in a hurry to go to bed, Dolly. Come and have a chat with me on the Verandah.'

Vera initially hesitated, 'Retiring hour' is 9 o'clock and 'lights out' is at 10 o'clock Mr Lee.'

'Oh, Dolly, we can at least retire on the porch. It's only 9.00pm.'

Vera made her way to the veranda with Alick. 'Fancy me, sitting here with a married man. I ought to be ashamed of myself Mr Lee.'

'Please, call me Alick.' He sat back on the bench, holding his injured right hand.

'Do you have any children Alick?'

'There are three altogether. My oldest is a girl called Amelia. I think the world of her, she's such a good kiddie.'

'How old is she?'

'She's eight, and the cutest little girl around. Then there are the younger boys, Raymond and Walter. Walter was named after my older brother who was in the war. He was the lucky one and is going to be back here real soon. It was my young brother Albert who wasn't so lucky.... Pozieres. '

'I'm really sorry to hear that Mr Lee.'

'He was only 18 when he enlisted and had to have Dad's permission to join. Dad wrote that he was glad he was joining and had his full consent. All I have to remember him is this.' He pulled out a gold ring from his pocket. Dolly took the ring.

'I had it inscribed.'

Vera read out aloud, 'B. Lee. Killed in Action, 16th August 1916.'

'It must be very special to you.'

'Everybody is after that thing,' sighted Aleck. 'Will you come out with me again?'

‘I’m not sure if I should, Mr Lee.’

‘Listen, my wife won’t be around for long, she is sick. And I haven’t been living with her happily for the last two or three years. How about we meet up again in a couple of nights?’

Vera found herself nodding. They did not set a date or time, but Dolly knew that she would see him again the next day.

The next time Vera saw Alick privately was a few nights later on a Sunday evening, when he knocked on the door of the Scholz’s private residence, adjacent to the hospital, where Vera lived. Over the next few weeks, she saw him on another four occasions.

Finally on 9th March, after six weeks at the hospital, the day arrived when Alick was ready to leave the hospital. During their last private moment together, Alick said goodbye to ‘Dolly’ giving her the ring that he said belonged to his brother. He urged her to write to him, telling her to address letters to his brother Len at his Rhynie home.

Vera resolved not to write to Alick after he left and returned to Rhynie. But after receiving and memorising two affectionate letters, each of which she immediately burnt in the fireplace, she wrote back. She signed her letter ‘with love from Dolly’ and addressed the envelope as instructed to: Mr Leonard Lee, Rhynie Post Office, Rhynie.



Photo: Nurses Cottage, The Willows Hospital (now Willows Winery Cellar Door)

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Rhynie is a small, isolated agricultural town in South Australia, with just 362 inhabitants. The place is surrounded by wide open spaces, endless sky, undulating crop fields, and occasional clusters of eucalyptus trees. The town is part of the Gilbert Valley, 90 kilometres north of the capital of Adelaide, on the edge of the lush Clare and Barossa Valley wine regions, although it has featured little in state tourism and is relatively unknown to city dwellers. When Rhynie is referred to in tourist brochures, the main attraction is the local pub, which was declared the first ‘bona fide’ hotel in the region, meaning it could serve liquor after 6 pm to people who were ‘bona fide’ travellers, of which there were many ‘local’ travellers. Rhynie once had a railway station – which the locals had lobbied for to take their produce to Adelaide – which has long since closed.



Photo: The Gilbert River Valley

On the 15th March, Alick and his brother Len Lee travelled separately from Rhynie to nearby Burra for the Welcome Home party for their brother, Sergeant Walter Lee. Walter was nine years older than Len and four years younger than Alick. Their parents, Ellen and Joseph Lee, lived at World’s End, Kooringa, Burra and greatly anticipated Walter’s return, along with that of their new English daughter-in-law and grandchild that they would meet for the first time. Walter had spent six

long years away from Australia, staying in Europe two years longer than other Australian soldiers in the search for his missing brother Albert. He was led by false information from another soldier who had reported that he had seen Albert still alive in hospital. Walter was also spurred on by his family's previous losses: there had been 14 Lee children in all, including three sets of twins, although only ten survived to adulthood. In 1915, they had lost their 30 year old son and brother Ted to pneumonia. Alick and Muriel Lee had placed a memorial to Ted in Adelaide's daily newspaper *The Advertiser* when he died:

*We did not say good-bye, dear
brother, Of your illness we did
not know;*

*We could not say good-bye, dear
brother, That was the hard and
severe blow.*

*-Inserted by his loving brother and sister-in-law, A. N. and M.
E. Lee.*

Walter's war efforts and impending return could be read about in the local paper, *The Burra Record*. The Burra Cheer Up Society and the whole community turned out at the train station to welcome the returned soldier and his new family. Afterwards, there were joyous celebrations at the Koorunga Hotel where Walter was given the 'Burra Cheer up medal.' Alick and Len shared a room at the hotel, and the celebrations lasted for days.

At 1 am on Thursday, 1st April 1920, the day before Easter, Mrs Jane Eliza Smith was awakened by knocking at her window at the Baker's Springs Hotel, Rhynie. She did not expect any more guests in their remote accommodation, but she soon recognised the voice of Alick Lee crying out.

'Send Len home! Send Len home!'

After returning from two weeks droving at Portee Station, Blanchetown, earlier that night, Alick had been drinking and playing cards with his brother Len, a boarder at the hotel, and Jane's husband Tom just a few hours earlier.

'Go home to bed Alick!' Jane yelled from inside.

'Send Len home!'

A few minutes later Jane heard a loud clunk as Alick's bicycle was dropped against the fence. She got up and opened the window. 'What's the matter, Alick?'

'Jane, can you please wake up Len, and tell him to get the police and the Doctor, it's the wife and kiddies! I'm leaving the bike here for him.'

'Tom, you have to wake up, it's Alick. He says something's wrong with Muriel and the children.'

Tom Smith muttered, got up from his bed towards the window. The publican was used to being woken up by locals who had had too much liquor. Tom often hosted non bona fide 'locals' there after 6 pm.

'Go home Alick, and don't be silly!'

'What is a bloody man to do?! Send Len for the Doctor! I'm off.'

'You better go over there and see what's happened. Go and wake Len up,' said Jane.



Photo: The Rhynie Hotel where Len Lee resided.

Len and Tom walked over to the Lee household, only a quarter of a mile away, adjacent to the school house. Len was still a teenager at only 19 years old, 13 years younger than Alick, and had been supporting Alick, his wife Muriel and seven children since his brother had injured his hand. Until just three weeks earlier he had been living with his brother's family.

They were soon met by Mr Henry Scholz, a neighbour whom Alick had called upon.

'I think you better go and get the police' Henry said to Len. 'I'll go stay with Alick.'

Len turned straight back to the hotel to get the bike. Jane was now wide awake as she and Tom walked back to the hotel, where Jane quickly got dressed. She then went with her husband to Alick's house a few minutes away.



Photo: Old Schoolhouse, Rhynie



Photo: Scholz Cottage, Riverton

‘Are you there Alick?’ called Jane hesitantly from the front door. Both Alick and Henry came to the door to let the Smiths in.

As soon as Jane entered, she saw the body of her friend Muriel lying on the bed in the front right room, face downwards. She moved closer, touched her warm skin and immediately pulled her

hand away. The Smiths moved to the back room to see two young boys and a girl in the same condition. Alick was lying across the foot of one of the boy's beds.

'The boy has just died in my arms.' He was referring to Walter, the namesake of Alick's younger brother.

'How did this happen, Alick?' asked Tom.

'God knows. I don't.'

'Come out of this room, Alick,' said Jane.

'I don't want to go in the front room. The other two girls are in there. I'm scared to look at them.'

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Len had cycled over three miles from Rhynie to Riverton along a potholed muddy road. He soon pulled into the Riverton Police Station in the early hours of Thursday morning. He knocked loudly at the door of the station. Mounted Constable Woodhead slept lightly, accustomed to being awoken at any time. He opened his door to see a familiar young man, breathlessly telling him about some trouble at his brother's house. When he made sense of the story, the constable immediately phoned Dr Edward Leslie Bartlett and together with Len Lee, walked over to the private house the doctor was staying in. The three men were soon travelling in the doctor's car along the dark country roads.

When they arrived at the house, a dishevelled Alick greeted the men on the verandah.

'What's the matter Alick?' asked Constable Woodhead.

'My God, Woodhead, it's awful. My wife and three kiddies are dead.'

'Let the Doctor and I see them.'

The three men quickly entered the house and the Smiths departed. By candlelight, in the front bedroom, the men saw Muriel Lee with her face buried in the pillow, as if asleep, with her right arm hanging over the bed. Dr Bartlett walked over to her and examined her body as the men were silent. He noticed it was still slightly warm as he picked up her arm to sense her pulse, but the limb was inflexible.

‘She is dead. Probably has been for a couple of hours,’ said the doctor.

Alick moaned from outside the room. A feeling of dread rose in Len’s chest.

‘Where are the children Alick?’

The doctor and constable were led out of the room. In an adjacent room they saw eight year old Amelia Lee and eighteen month old Alice asleep. Dr Bartlett examined both children to see that they were healthy, and Amelia awoke.

‘Are you alright little girl?’ asked the Constable.

‘Yes, thank you,’ said Amelia. The girl was wide-eyed and quiet, watching over Alice who was lying in a cradle beside her, in a deep sleep.

‘Where are the other children, Lee?’ asked the constable.

‘They’re in the back room.’ He started walking towards the back of the house.

The constable and doctor followed, and as they entered they saw the body of three year old Ina Lee. The girl’s body was rigid. The doctor then turned to six year old Ray and five year old Walter. Ray was lying face down, his head pressed into the pillow, slightly turned to the left, his body stiff. Walter lay alongside Ray on his back. A brown bubbling fluid trickled from Walter’s mouth and ran down the side of his neck. The doctor leant over to feel the warmth of the boy’s body, his pulse already gone.

Alick threw himself on the bed next to the boy and said to the doctor, ‘Can’t you do anything?’

‘No,’ said the doctor ‘I’m afraid I can’t.’

Alick sprung from the bed and moved into the kitchen where Henry was seated and Len was standing smoking and lit his own cigarette.

Len was staring into space, drawing on the cigarette with intent. He was half frozen with shock as the sight of his sister-in-law and young nieces and nephews whom he had played with only the day before. Len thought about how, only a few hours earlier, he had broken to Alick his plans to go away with Walter to the ‘Yardee’ homestead many miles away. That would be the end of the financial support for his brother.

The constable and doctor entered the kitchen. ‘Can you give us any reason as to what caused these deaths Alick?’

‘No. The only thing I can think of is that they had some mice poison in the house, and some of it might have got knocked over and fallen into the milk when the little girl put the jug away.’

Before the constable had a chance to speak again, Alick said, ‘This is the jug from which my wife and I drank some milk before we went to bed,’ pointing to a brown vessel. ‘It had a bitter taste.’

‘How much did you have?’ asked the constable, peering into the jug to see the remnants of milk in its base.

‘About half a cupful,’ said Alick. ‘I am not feeling too good,’ he added.

‘What is the matter with you, Lee?’ said the doctor.

‘My mouth is sore. I have a pain in the stomach, and my legs are stiff.’

‘Open your mouth for me.’ Alick opened his mouth and Dr Bartlett examined it with a torch. When he finished, the doctor made no comment, but glanced at the constable.

‘Where is the cup from which you drank?’ asked the Constable.

‘I don’t know where it is.’

‘Have you tried to ascertain the cause of these deaths?’ asked the Constable again.

‘No, I’ve had no time. I was running around from one to the other, and I had to go for Len who was staying at the hotel and across for Mr Scholz.’

‘Where was the mice poison?’

‘I don’t know, the wife got the poison while I was away.’

Alick likely knew of his Auntie Martha’s status as the Richmond poisoner – did he try to set his wife up by suggesting that she has poisoning herself and the children with mice poison?

The constable and the doctor moved over to the cupboard in the kitchen, looking for the poison, without finding anything. ‘Is there anywhere else it might be, Lee?’ asked the constable.

‘There’s the safe over here.’

The safe was opened, and again the search did not result in anything being uncovered.

‘So what happened when you came home, Alick?’

‘My wife awoke me about 12.30 pm, crook as a dog. I went in to see the kiddies as I could hear Walter crying out.’

Young Amelia was still wide awake, lying on the couch in the front room, privy to the conversation in the kitchen.

The doctor and constable began to make arrangements for the post-mortems, and the removal of the bodies. Constable Woodhead would need the help of Detective Nation from Adelaide. But he would have to wait, as Rhynie was ninety kilometres north of the capital, reachable by rail. He would let Detective Nation deal with further questioning in the morning.

‘Nothing is to be disturbed until further enquiries are made,’ said the constable. ‘Len, you and Henry stay with your brother. We’ll be back when the sun comes up.’

‘Yes, Constable.’

Len, Henry and Alick were left alone in the kitchen. As soon as they heard the doctor's car drive off, Len exited the house and took a deep breath of the cool morning air. His brother was soon at the front door.

'Len, could you go over to Riverton for me and send some wires.' Len looked at his brother attentively. 'I'm meant to stay here.'

'This is hard on me, I don't know where they could have got anything that would kill them' said Alick.

'Yes, it is all pretty rotten. But I think I used all of the mice poison,' said Len, staring at his brother.

Len then took Amelia to the neighbour Mrs Harris and Alice to Mrs Giles house. He thought of the newborn twins, Ronald and Dorothy, who had gone back to the Mareeba Hospital. Len then sent some wires for his brother as he was told, before heading back to the hotel to change his clothes. He was prepared to answer the questions of Constable Woodhead in the morning.

There was the matter of the letter he'd recently been sent from Miss Scholz, meant for Alick, which he would have to tell them about.



Photo: Former Lee home, Rhynie, South Australia

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Three weeks earlier, on March 11th, 1920, Len had been on the front porch playing with the children when Alick came cycling up to the gate unsteadily.

The children came towards their father. 'Hello you buggers.'

'You seem the worse for wear,' said Len.

'G'day chum.' Alick placed his bicycle against the house and went inside.

Muriel could smell alcohol on Alick's breath from yards away and threw an angry look at her husband.

'Where have you been, or needn't I ask?' She was trying to manage the twins who were crying.

'Hello you bitch.'

'Why don't you help me out with the twins.'

'Those twins aren't mine.'

'Don't be silly Alick, you ought to go to bed,' said Muriel.

Len came inside and the rest of the children followed him.

'Why don't you keep your fancy man here?' said Alick, referring to his brother.

'If he's going to sling off at me like that, I'm not stopping here any longer,' said Len. He left the kitchen and went to pack his belongings. He'd been supporting his brother's family for six months.

'How many men have you had here whilst I've been away?' asked Alick.

Muriel ushered the children outside, and Alick called Amelia back in. 'I hope to God all the others are dead in the morning. You are the only one that I want to be alive.'

‘Alick, don’t say that!’

As Len was packing, about to leave for the hotel, Muriel went to say goodbye.

‘Don’t go and blame me for anything that he said to cause you to leave.’

‘It might only be the drink talking,’ said Len.

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On 1st April, Dr Bartlett travelled to the Lee household early to perform a post-mortem examination. He was still marvelling at his misfortune of working on these tragic deaths. He was only in the region for a few weeks, relieving the regular Riverton district Doctor, Dr Robert McMahon Glynn. He went about his duty meticulously, dissecting different parts of the organs of mother and children. He was methodical in placing each of the different specimens in clean containers, labelling and sealing them, taking care in treating the bodies which would soon be prepared for burial.

Before he left, Dr Bartlett noticed a glass lying on the floor by the limp hand of Muriel Lee, astonished that the Constable and Doctor had missed it the previous evening. Picking it up, he peered at the glass closely and noticed it contained white residue. He wrapped the glass with heed and took it with him to give to the constable.

The following day, Good Friday, the deceased members of the Lee family were all buried at the Riverton cemetery, with family, friends and neighbours attending. Muriel Lee’s maiden name was chosen by her family for the headstone which simply read ‘GLEN, Muriel Estella & Ray & Walley & Ina.’ The Glen family had been enraged to see *The Advertiser’s* report of the same morning:

POISONING TRAGEDY

MOTHER AND THREE CHILDREN DEAD

Riverton, April 1

Early this morning the police were informed that a shocking tragedy occurred at Rhynie, about four miles west of Riverton, at about 12 o'clock last night, and that as the result of supposed poisoning a woman and three of her five children were dead.

The victims are: - Mrs. Lee (35 years), wife of Mr.A.N.Lee, a local resident; Ray Lee, aged 6 years, Walter Lee, aged 5 years; and Ina Lee, aged 2 years. The house was occupied by Mr. And Mrs. Lee and their five children, and the father and two daughters survive. Detective W. Nation arrived from the city by the East-West express today, and proceeded to the scene of the tragedy to make enquiries. It is supposed that the victims were poisoned, but that will not be cleared up definitely until a post-mortem on the bodies has been held. The official investigation has not been completed, but it is surmised here that Mrs. Lee, who had been worried for some months in her struggle to keep her family of young children, was unable to bear the strain, and that after poisoning three of the little ones, she committed suicide. The cause of her worry was that her husband, who was a laborer, has been unable to follow his employment since he met with a serious accident last winter.

First Class Detective Wylie 'the long fellow' Nation and Detective William Goldsworthy reached Rhynie on 1st April and stationed themselves at the Baker's Springs Hotel. Detective Goldsworthy deferred to and respected his wise senior detective as a firm but kind man. Nation, forty-three, had just returned from war service as a special investigator, where he had received a special commendation for his thorough work. Over the next two days the detectives were busy talking to Constable Woodhead and obtaining statements from witnesses across Rhynie and Riverton. Detective Nation quickly drew his suspicions when he discovered an unexplained gap in Lee's story.

‘Go and find Lee and bring him here, I want to find out where he went when he got back from droving,’ said Nation.

It didn’t take for Goldsworthy to find Lee at Charles Dempewoof’s house at Rhynie.

‘Hello Alick. I’m here as Mr Nation wants to see you down at the hotel.’

‘What for?’

‘He wants to read over your statement to you to see if it is correct.’

‘Alright then.’ Alick left with Goldsworthy, where they met Detective Nation in the parlour of the small hotel.

‘Hello Alick. Sit yourself down there; I want to read this statement to you to see if it is correct. If there is anything not correct in it, you just tell me.’ Nation read the statement.

As Lee signed it, Wylie Nation asked, ‘Where were you Alick, between Monday and Wednesday afternoon when you got back from droving?’

‘Now, look here Mr Nation, I don’t think that bears on this case at all. I’m not going to answer any more questions until the inquest.’ Alex Lee then got up and walked out of the parlour towards his house.

‘I think we better pay a visit to The Willows Hospital,’ said Detective Nation to Goldsworthy.

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At 3pm on Easter Sunday, Alick Lee was approached by Detectives Nation and Goldsworthy along with Constable Woodhead. Seeing Lee was at the front door, Nation said ‘I arrest you on a charge of murder of your wife and children, you need not say anything unless you like but anything you do say may be used in evidence at your trial.’

‘Very good Mr Nation, but for God’s sake let me see my little child, I am as innocent as she is.’

The police went with Lee to the Giles household, where Alick said good bye to his young daughter Alice. Lee was then escorted to the Riverton Police Station where he stayed until he was taken to the Adelaide Gaol.

Within days, the little town of Rhynie, with its handful of inhabitants, became a household name in Adelaide as the community discussed what the papers referred to as ‘The Rhynie Tragedy.’ Young Vera Scholz would also soon be propelled into the limelight as one of the key witnesses in what *The Adelaide Chronicle* described as ‘one of the most sensational in the history of South Australian criminal cases.’

Alick Lee was escorted from the Adelaide Gaol back to Riverton on 12th April by Constables Ford and Partridge via the Clare train. The Coronial ‘Inquisition’ of *The King against Alexander Newland Lee For Murder* was to be held at the Court house on the 15th and 16th April, 1920. The all-male jury was headed by Coroner Legoe and there were six other jurors, including undertaker and carpenter Ollie Colmer and Alick’s friend Charles Dempewoolf.

On 15th April, witnesses presenting included Charles Ray Glen, Muriel’s brother, along with neighbour Henry Scholz, the publicans the Smiths, Len Lee, Howard Ross, neighbour and schoolteacher, neighbour Emily Ellery, Dr Bartlett, and Detective Goldsworthy. A number of witnesses provided their own theories about causes of death.

Mr Howard David Ross reported being the last one to see Muriel Lee alive on the night of the murders. Early the next day he saw Alick.

‘I said to Alick “are you sure there was no mice poison about?” He said “I believe there was some but I don’t know where it was, I haven’t handled poison for over two years, the only thing I can think of, it was in the cupboard when the little girl put some dishes away and it capsized and some fell

into the milk jug.” I said “if it fell into the jug the packet would not dissolve and if it’s not there, it ought to be in the cupboard.””

On the evening of 15th April, Alick Lee called Mounted Constables Woodhead and Partridge to his cell.

‘I want to make a statement’ he said to the Constables. Alick then proceeded to make the following statement:

My wife said to me after I lit then candle when she was in a bad way, on the night she died, and just before she died “Darling, I hadn’t enough to do them all, I have only left you little Alice, as I could not face the twins coming home again. I can’t afford to keep any help, as they nearly killed me before, don’t let it leave your lips dear, while my mother lives.”

I said to her “Where did you get the stuff?” She replied “I got it from Mr Nelson’s house one day while you and he were in Langhorne’s Creek I tipped some strychnine out of a bottle into an envelope” and her last words were “Darling forgive me my sins.”

I can remember the day when Mr Nelson said “Billy Borritt must have been here and took some of my poison.” I have never heard any more about it – this was somewhere about last August.

On the 16th April, young Amelia Lee sat nervously in front of Coroner Legoe. The evidence of the child witness might convict her father and result in the death penalty.

‘Do you know what it is to tell the truth Amelia?’

‘I know what it is to tell the truth. I know that if I tell stories I will be punished.’

‘How old are you?’

‘I am eight and a half years old.’

‘Where are you living?’

‘I’m living with my grandmother in Riverton. Before that I was living with my father, mother, brothers and sisters at Rhynie.’

‘Can you tell us who the man is sitting in the dock?’

‘The man sitting in the dock is my father.’

‘When did you last see him?’

‘I saw him this morning.’

‘Can you remember the last time you saw your father before today?’

‘It was on a Wednesday, after dinner.’

The Adelaide Chronicle reported on the case, indicated that it was a letter from Vera Scholz that had caused turmoil in the house that Wednesday evening:

Riverton, April 16th, The Rhynie Tragedy

Local interest in the proceedings had increased, and the evidence was followed in almost breathless silence...The first witness called was Muriel Amelie Lee, aged 8 ½ years, a pretty little girl, who appeared quite undisturbed and gave her evidence clearly and without faltering. She said –

My father (Alexander Lee) came home a little after dinner [lunch] time on Wednesday, March 31. We were out in the washhouse when he arrived. He had dinner. At tea time Alice and Ina had an egg each, and the rest of us had bread and butter. I remember seeing

mother with a letter, and I think mother showed it to father. There was a meat-axe on the cupboard, and dad got hold of it and held it up. My mother started to cry. I and the other children went outside.

The Adelaide Chronicle, April 1920

After weighing up all of the evidence, Coroner W. Legoe and the six male Jurors declared that Alexander Newland Lee ‘feloniously, wilfully and of his malice aforethought did kill and murder the said Muriel Estelle Lee against the Peace of our Lord the King, his Crown and Dignity.’

The Adelaide newspapers featured the story on a daily basis in the lead up to the Supreme Court case in Adelaide.

The remarkable set of circumstances brought to light in connection with the awful tragedy that happened about March 31 last at the little village of Rhynie...made it certain that the trial in the Criminal Court of the arrested man, Alexander Newland Lee, would be among the most sensational in the history of South Australian criminal cases. Public interest, which was deeply stirred at the time of the coronial enquiry at Riverton, had increased with the approach of the first day of the trial, and it was not surprising that a large crowd awaited the opening of the doors of the court on Tuesday morning, or that the large majority of people could not gain admission. Every available seat for the accommodation of the public was filled.

...Prior to the opening of the afternoon session the crowd of would-be spectators had considerably swelled, and so anxious were some of them to gain admission that they scaled the iron gates at the front entrance. Only a limited number, however, were admitted to the court.

The Adelaide Chronicle, June 12, 1920

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Judge Poole presided over the Alexander Newland Lee case in the Supreme Court of South Australia. The lead prosecutor for the King was Mr Shierlaw, whilst Mr Povey acted for Alexander Lee. There was a jury comprised exclusively of men, and there were twenty-two witnesses.

Vera ‘Dolly’ Scholz told of her illicit meetings with Alexander Lee and how he had given her his deceased brother Albert’s ring. She revealed that Alick said that his wife was ill, and that they lived together unhappily. Vera said that she had spent the evenings of 29th and 30th March with Alick, and that on their last meeting, he said that he expected his wife to die soon. He asked her, ‘If my wife dies, will you marry me?’ The courthouse could be heard gasping at the question.

The evidence was largely ‘hearsay’ and despite all of the witnesses the case still largely rested on the evidence of poor Amelia Lee, and the pressure on her was palpable. She matter of factly told of how she had bread and jam for dinner the night of the murders.

All eyes were turned upon the next witness called – Muriel Amelia Lee, a charming little girl, 8 ½ years of age. It was not deemed necessary in her case to administer the oath, and she was given a seat beside the judge. Looking towards the dock she said her father was in court. Her father came home in the afternoon on March 31. The family had stew for dinner. At the evening meals she had bread and butter and jam, Alice and Ina had an egg, and her father and mother and Wally and Ray had bread and butter.

The Adelaide Chronicle 12 June 1920

Amelia reported to the Court the events which occurred the night her father returned from home, on 31st March, repeating how her parents had an altercation and that her father had raised a meat axe to her mother.

The Court heard that on 22nd March, the letter from ‘Dolly’ Scholz arrived at the Lee household. Alick was in Adelaide having treatment for his hand at the time, staying at his older sister Florence’s house. Like her brother, Florence’s first husband had also died in the war, just three years earlier. Alick had taken his favourite daughter Amelia to Adelaide with him, where she enjoyed seeing the acrobatics of the pioneer aviator, Harry Butler. Meanwhile, Muriel was struggling at home with the children, including the newborn twins, Ron and Dorothy, as well as Ray, Wally, Ina and Alice. The twins, who had been born prematurely, had not settled down upon leaving hospital, and Muriel wrote to Alick about her difficulties. The Court was presented the evidence of the letters that Alick wrote back to his wife:

Sunday night

Dear Wife, & Family

Just a line to let you know we are all well down here. I wrote to Rose to-night to let her know Amelia is coming up Thursday night to stay with them until Sunday as she wants to go there for a time. My hand is still improving but the wrist is still dropped. I wish I could get home. I am sick of this. Well dear I want you to go to Dr. Glynn and see if you can get a order to take those to [two] kids to the Mareeba Hospital or give them a dose of poison or they will have our home ruined for life. I am just full of hearing about them been [being] so cross as there is not one of your letters that you have not said how cross they are I wish they were in their

grave months ago. I am having Amelia's teeth out on Tuesday if all is well, she is having a real good time and is quite ready to go back, she has seen Butler flying 8 times or more, good night,

Your hubby, A.N.Lee

Dear Wife,

Just a line in answer to your letter I got last night. Well I don't know if you are trying to make me do for myself which I would like to do, you have been complaining of something in every letter since I had been laid up and now you say I have broken your heart. Well mine was broken with my accident and the suffering, aggeney [agony] and helplessness I have had to put up with and every letter of yours with complaints what am I to live for I don't know. Well I think I am going to give up my treatment next week so will be home for a day or 2. Tell Len if he hears of any droving at all to put in a word for me. I think I will go and see Bagot's firm tomorrow as I may get some long trips and that will be a few pound coming in. I can't get Amelia boots as the members were not there to sign the cheques and I only got 1/6 to me name, and I think they are getting tired of me staying at Flo's¹ so I am one of the lucky sort that ought not to be in this world. I am going up with Amelia in about 1/2 hour. I saw Mrs Giles yesterday,

Good bye, your hubby

¹ His Sister Florence Lee

A.N.Lee

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In a surprise turn of events, Len Lee challenged the evidence of his young niece Amelia and claimed that he had heard his sister-in-law say that she ‘ought to do away with herself’ a few days after she saw the letter from ‘Dolly.’ Len also pointed out that his brother’s injured hand meant that he could not grip anything, suggesting that his brother could not have properly held up a meat axe to his wife.

Another witness, William Nelson, claimed that Alick had once asked him for strychnine poison which he had refused to give, whilst another, Mr Copeland, who met Alick when staying at the Kooringa Hotel for Walter’ Lee’s ‘welcome home’ party, had actually given Lee some strychnine. According to Copeland, Alick claimed that he was a police officer, and asked for some poison for some dogs hanging around his house. A third witness, Lee’s sister-in-law, claimed that Lee had asked for a small bottle whilst he was staying at Kooringa for his brother’s party. Alick then went away droving directly from the party, before spending a couple of nights visiting Miss Scholz at the Willows private residence, and finally going back to his home at Rhynie on the 31st March, whereupon he had an altercation with his wife over ‘Dolly’s’ letter. He then went to the Rhynie hotel where he discovered that his younger brother Len, his livelihood, was going away to ‘Yardee’² with their older brother Walter.

Following a chemical analysis by Government Analyst, William Hargreaves, strychnine was found in the stomachs of the victims, in addition to being on Mrs Lee’s nightdress, pillowslip and sheet. Hargreaves described how the children had well over the lethal dose of strychnine. Walter had the highest dose of strychnine in his body, and by all accounts he was the one to die last. Muriel Lee

² Yardie homestead was in northern Western Australia.

had less strychnine in her stomach, suggesting that she had eaten little at dinner and that her body had absorbed the strychnine quicker or that she was poisoned before the children.

Dr Edward Johnson, medical practitioner, described to the Court how the deaths of mother and children would have been extremely painful, and caused by suffocation and paralysis:

Assuming that a person took a lethal dose of strychnine the first thing noticed would be an intensely bitter taste. After a time, according to the dose and the quality of the poison, there would be restlessness almost immediately and a feeling of suffocation. Twitching and jerking of the muscles of the neck, body and limbs which increase in severity till they become markedly convulsive in character. All this could take place approximately within 10 minutes. These seizures last from 1 to 2 minutes followed by a period of calm. The seizures recur with greater severity. Blueness of the face and lockjaw and the abdominal and chest muscles become very firm, which causes asphyxia. The special senses are in no way interfered with, in fact they are increased, and there is arching of the back of the body. There is insufferable pain. Hands clenched, feet turned inwards.

Dr Edward Johnson

At the end of the Supreme court trial in Adelaide whilst in jail, Alick desperately pleaded his innocence through yet another written statement prepared for the Judge and Jury:

Your Honor and Gentleman

I declare to you that I shall answer my maker in the great day of judgement that I am innocent of this awful charge; I now make the following statement the facts contained in which are true in every particular. I realise that my present position had its origin in the Willows Hospital and the fact that my folly had become known to my wife. She wrote to me about it but I did not receive the letter until after my arrest and when I returned home on the 31st of March she was very upset about it and justly upbraided me for my inexcusable conduct. Although we drank the bottle of beer together after leaving Mr Ross my wife continued to denounce me and declared that she would not tolerate such a position.

We then went to our bedroom and I undressed and got into bed. My wife proceeded to undress. She was crying at the time and would not be reconciled. She left the bedroom after I got into bed and when she returned I heard her moving about the room. As I was very tired and my wife would not listen to any explanation I thought it best not to say anything more until the morning so I turned over and went to sleep. I do not know when she came to bed. The first thing I remember was my wife waking me and saying that she had taken poison. She told me that I was entirely to blame for it and she immediately fell across the bed. I jumped up and shortly afterwards she was seized with convulsions. She seemed in great pain and at her request I prepared some salt and water which she drank. She was quite unconscious and asked me to go for the Doctor. I ran up to the Hotel and told Mrs Smith to send Len. When I got home my wife was worse. Between convulsions she told me she had taken strychnine which she had obtained from Nelson's house. I asked her why she had done such a thing and she said 'you have only yourself and that girl to blame for it. I hadn't enough stuff for all of them. I couldn't face the twins coming home. They nearly killed me before. Don't let this leave your lips while mother lives. God forgive me

my sins.' I tried to make her sick. I then heard crying from my children's room. I found Ray was ill [inserted here: and the others crying I woke Scholz, asked him to go for Mrs Giles. When I returned Ina was ill.] and went to the kitchen and mixed some tea which I found in a pot with salt. When I came back Ina was quiet but Amelia was awake.

I then gave Ray a drink after which I returned to my wife's room and picked her up in my arms. Immediately afterwards she expired. I heard further crying from the children's room and went back and found Wally ill. I sent Amelia up to the sitting room to get her out of the way. [inserted here: She appeared quite right.] Ina became worse and I gave her and Wally the last of the tea and salt. I then carried Alice in the cradle to the front room. I went back to the children's room. Ray and Ina seemed to be dead. I was distracted and rushed up to the hotel on my bike called out to Smiths to send Len for the Doctor.

Just as I got back I heard someone passing and went out and saw Mr Scholz. I told him the wife and two children were dead. He came in and looked at my wife and the 3 children. Wally was just dying. Scholz then went out. I went to the sitting room and found Alice and Amelia sleeping and quite well. I then went to the children's room again. Wally was very ill and I felt I must do something.

He was in convulsions. I picked him up in my arms where he remained until he died. The next thing I remember was hearing someone at the front door. I went up and saw Mr and Mrs Smith and Mr Scholz. I told them that my wife, Ray and Ina were dead and Wally had just expired in my arms. I told them I did not know whatever could have made my wife do it. Some time later the Doctor and Mounted Constable Woodhead arrived. Realised that what had happened was the result of my relationship with Miss Scholz I determined to deny the truth and put forward the suggestion of accidental poisoning and this is the reason for my untrue statements which I at first made. Upon reflection however I realised that to suppress the truth was impossible. I realised also that suspicious would fall upon me and so I told the truth namely that my wife had killed herself and the children.

Even then I would not persuade myself to admit my shameful relations with Miss Scholz.

Many untrue statements have been made to you one of which I will mention namely the statement of Mrs Ellery. I did not return home until some days after my wife and the twins returned home. Nor is it true that I ever received strychnine from Copeland. Mrs Seal is mistaken. I was not in Burra on the morning of Wednesday the 17th of March later than 6am as I left by the train which leaves at that hour for Riverton and left Rhynie the same day on the droving trip to Portee [at Blanchetown] at 11.30am. I know nothing about the broken bottle found by the constable. I did not put it there. Nor do I know who did. What I have stated now is true in every detail and I most solemnly declare to you that I am innocent of this awful charge.

A.N.Lee

Justice Poole felt the weight of responsibility in summing up all of the evidence for the jury. It was his first murder case, and he took four hours to direct the jury on the evidence. He highlighted how, although the evidence was primary circumstantial, such evidence could be more reliable and valuable than unreliable witness evidence. He pointed the jury to the question of whether Muriel had died before the children or not, in particular Walter, and how long beforehand she had died. These questions were linked to determining if she was capable of administering strychnine to the children if she had herself had taken it. Justice Poole also made reference to the insinuation of Mr Povey that Vera 'Dolly' Scholz was a prostitute, and that her brother Herbert was a pimp involved in the deal, and highlighted the credibility of Vera Scholz. He also suggested that her evidence that Lee had said

his wife wouldn't live long was crucial, and that Lee had not demonstrated genuine grief after his wife's death.

The jury deliberated for an hour and a half. After nine days of evidence, there were one thousand people waiting outside the full court to hear the verdict of the jury. When the jury returned to the court at 9.45 pm on the evening of Thursday 17th June, they were met with 'a painful silence in court when the verdict of guilty was announced.'

The date set for the hanging was 15th July 1920, 28 days after the verdict, according to law. This was a day when the HRH Prince of Wales would be in Adelaide. The Premier expressed his regret that the hanging was to occur on this day. An impassioned public debate on the case ensued. Many letters were sent to the daily newspapers, for and against capital punishment, with it being declared a 'relic of the dark ages,' 'barbarism' and the 'most ghoulis, ghastly and inhuman law that was ever placed in our statute books.' Some letters were more personal and asked the state government to consider the plight of the accused's mother, Mrs Ellen Lee, and of his daughter Amelia Lee (and presumably the other children), and the effect the hanging would have upon them.

From W.M.Thain

26th

June 1920

I, having been asked to visit Mrs Lee, the mother of the condemned man, and having seen the awful suffering of a mother placed in such a position, I would like to remind those who are adding more to the suffering of that poor woman. No doubt if the law takes its course it will shorten the life of that poor woman, who told me that she was the mother of 14 children, and had a lot of trouble. I for one would like to see a reprieve,

and not altogether for Lee, but for his dear old mother. Let him who is without sin be the first to cast a stone.

From the Rev D.J. Wellington, Murray Bridge

26th June 1920

The shocking nature of Lee's crime would make it difficult for the most tender-hearted of men to put in a plea for mercy on his behalf, but I am thinking of that dear little child, Amelia, who had to give such crushing evidence against her father. If the death penalty is carried out Lee will be out of his earthly troubles in the course of a few days, but that bright little girl has her life before her, and God knows that there has been tragedy enough in it without adding another awful and ghastly one to the list. To go through life with the thought of mother, brothers and sister cruelly murdered by father will be terrible enough, and I think that she might be spared this further dreadful thought of father dying a violent and shameful death. I note that the Premier, when interviewed the other day, said it was much to be regretted that Lee's execution would have to take place at the time of the visit of the Prince of Wales. That is certainly so but it is a thousand times more regretful that Lee should be put out of his troubles and the dear little child's life should be saddened and blighted with terribly bitter memories. The ends of justice will be served if Lee is imprisoned for the rest of his life, and, having to be alone with his conscience, hearing the thought of this terrible crime throughout many long and weary years, will entirely be a punishment much greater than death. I plead not for Lee, but for the child whose life is so early clouded by terrible sorrow. I hope that some other adequate form of punishment may be inflicted upon him and the child spared the torture of the thought that her father had to die on the scaffold and that circumstances compelled her to witness against him.

The Secretary of the Australian Building Trades Employee's Industrial Union wrote to *The Advertiser* on 26th June, 1920, in response to a letter from 'Horried' of 20th June, which reacted against the Union members' opposition to the death penalty. 'Horried' was an advocate of the death penalty who assumed that its abolition would increase crime, be costly to the state, and require larger prisons. The Labor Party also protested against the death penalty being imposed. Protests against the hanging were to no avail, and the date was fixed.

Lee's father visited him a few days before the hanging and his mother Ellen just the day before. Alick Lee was also visited by Reverend W H Hanton daily. The hanging was to fall on the Reverend's birthday, 15th July.

*

As Lee was led on to the drop at the Adelaide Gaol, he was asked, 'Is there anything you wish to say?' Alexander nodded and simply said 'Goodbye Jim,' to a prison warder. The death occurred quickly. Lee was 31 years old, the same age as his Auntie Martha Needle was when she died. The day after the hanging, *The Advertiser* reported that as the executioner was preparing him for his doom, 'he winked at one of the officials and unflinchingly walked to the gallows.'

In contrast to the previous hype about *The Rhynie Tragedy*, the newspapers barely remarked upon Lee's death due to the Prince HRH's visit to Adelaide. The day was, however, marked by the first protest on capital punishment in the state. A meeting of the Building Trades Union met on the day and resolved to create what *The Observer* called a 'Proposed Execution Holiday.' The union meeting said:

That this body recommends to all unions that a general stop work holiday should be called on any day upon which an execution takes places, as a protest against capital punishment.

All of the surviving Lee children were sent to different households within Muriel Lee's family. Amelia Muriel Lee married at age 23 to 35 year old Lyal Johnstone Sturt-Smith, and settled in the affluent Eastern suburbs of Adelaide, having her children at private hospitals. Two of Alick Lee's brothers entered local politics and became local government councillors for the West Ward of Burra.³

Within a year, on 6th April, 1921, Vera Scholz was married to Walter Beneke, a returned World War I soldier of German descent. The Willows Hospital continued until 1960 and is now a winery.

Alick's mother Ellen Lee went on to live another nine years. She was a stoic woman who had given birth to twelve children, of which there were three sets of twins. She had now survived a number of her children and siblings, and tragedies over many years, including the infamous life and death of her sister Martha Needle, 'The Richmond Poisoner,' her son Alexander Lee and the three adults and five children who died by their hand, including two nieces and three of her own grandchildren.

³ Walter Robert Lee, who had served in WW1, and William Joseph Lee were both Councillors for the West Ward of Burra.

Sources:

Newspapers via Newspapers Trove

Lee Trial Transcript, via Tammy Martin (descendant of Ellen Lee)

All photos S.Battams except for photos of Alexander Newland Lee

Further Reading:

Article on The Rhynie Tragedy and Pictures of Walter, Ina and Raymond Lee:

<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/73356765?searchTerm=walter%20lee%20%20%20%20%20%20%20%20%20%20%20%20%20%20%20%20%20%20%20&searchLimits=1-decade=1920||1-state=South+Australia||1-year=1920>