

## New Zealand's first bushrangers

John Tully

Joseph Thomas Sullivan left Victoria and became a member of New Zealand's first bushranging gang. For New Zealand this gang was the country's most bloodthirsty. He was probably also Victoria's most murderous bushranger but as he never got caught in Victoria he doesn't even get mentioned amongst the Victorian bushrangers. Here then is the story of a new Victorian bushranger.



*Sullivan in 1866*

Sullivan was born in Ireland about 1815. He moved to London where he worked as a baker and was paid as a prize fighter before being convicted of burglary and sent to Tasmania in 1840. After receiving his ticket of leave in 1845 he absconded to Victoria where he married and had two sons. Sullivan was recaptured and sent to Port Arthur for breaching the conditions of his ticket of leave. Released in 1853 he again headed for Victoria. At Bendigo he opened a grog shop and boxing saloon, which was also a place where drunken or unconscious patrons were robbed. Sullivan was supposed to be a friend and companion of the bushranger Black Douglas. Fearing he had come to the attention of the police Sullivan kept moving. He was at Korong (Wedderburn), Fiery Creek, Ararat, Inkerman near Dunolly and then back to Wedderburn. Here he opened a dubious hotel on the outskirts of town.

He has been a difficult character to research as he used so many different names.

These include :-

Joseph Thomas Sullivan

John Joseph Sullivan

Thomas Sullivan

Flash Tom

Mr A Gillies

Mr Williams

Mr McGee

Mr Morrison

Mr Gately

Frank Clark

In September 1856 Sergeant McNally of Ararat was shot and killed whilst trying to arrest the bushranger Gipsy Smith. A few weeks later, Gipsy Smith and his gang held up and robbed a number of travellers at Moliagul where the road from Wedderburn

crosses the spur of Mount Moliagul<sup>1</sup>. The other men involved in this gang at Moliagul were William Twigham, German Jack and Joseph Thomas Sullivan. Gipsy Smith and William Twigham were captured a few weeks later. As Sullivan's name was not connected with the robbery at the time he returned quietly to his hotel at Wedderburn.

Sullivan moved to a better location in the main part of Wedderburn. He purchased three blocks, two under the name of Joseph Sullivan and one by Thomas Sullivan.



*Sullivan's land in Wedderburn between High, Kerr and Wilson streets*

In December 1861 the New Zealand goldrushes were at a peak. Joseph Thomas Sullivan travelled to Otago in New Zealand on the Alma under the name of John Sullivan. On board were some ex-convicts that he had probably known in Tasmania and Victoria. They formed a bushranging gang. In March 1862 the police raided their hideout and charged them with a mixture of assault, robbery and shooting at police with intent to kill<sup>2</sup>. The gang consisted of Richard Hill alias Burgess, Thomas Hannan alias Kelly, John Russell alias Spratty, J Davies and John Sullivan. For some unspecified reason the charges were dropped against Sullivan. The others all received 3 or 3½ years hard labour. Left on his own, Sullivan returned to Victoria, back to his wife and hotel in Wedderburn.

Three years later when Richard Burgess and Thomas Kelly were released from prison Sullivan again went to the New Zealand. He arrived in Hokitika on 10<sup>th</sup> April 1866 on board the S S Albion<sup>3</sup>. Sullivan travelled under a false name. The only single passenger in his age group was a 50 year old Mr A Gillies<sup>4</sup> so this must have been him. Sullivan made contact with the former members of the gang. They were planning to rob a bank but needed more firearms. In a rather blazon act, on 13<sup>th</sup> May they entered the police camp at Hokitika and stole two revolvers. The police, being

<sup>1</sup> Dunolly, James Flett, 1988, p53-54 & Victorian Police Gazette 23<sup>rd</sup> Oct 1856.

<sup>2</sup> Otago Witness 15<sup>th</sup> March 1862.

<sup>3</sup> West Coast Times 11<sup>th</sup> April 1866.

<sup>4</sup> S S Albion passenger list – PROV.

suspicious, raided Burgess' hut, found the revolver cases and arrested him. Sullivan wasn't in the hut at the time and the police never connected him with being a former member of the gang. He called himself John Joseph Sullivan in 1862, this time he was Joseph Thomas Sullivan. He said that he was a respectable new arrival in the colony and the police believed him. So when Sullivan gave evidence that he saw Burgess find the revolver cases discarded in the street the case was dismissed<sup>5</sup>.

They appear to have left the court, picked up the hidden guns and gone straight to Okarita where they robbed the Bank of New Zealand. Sullivan and Banner (Hannan?) were recognized but the whole gang managed to get away with the substantial amount of £2,300 in gold<sup>6</sup>. Another member of the gang at this time was Philip Levy, a well known storekeeper at various rushes on the West Coast.

Only a week later there was a needless bloodletting act. The Burgess gang, as they were known, robbed a surveyor, George Dobson of only a few pounds then decapitated him. Another member of the gang at this time was James Murray.



J O S E P H   S U L L I V A N .

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<sup>5</sup> West Coast Times 24<sup>th</sup> May 1866.

<sup>6</sup> Daily Southern Cross 10<sup>th</sup> July 1866.

After selling a small portion of the gold, and possibly burying the rest, they thought it wise to leave the district, purchasing a passage on the S S Wallaby bound for Nelson on the other side of the country. Sullivan's ticket being in the name of Mr Williams<sup>7</sup>.

They intended robbing another bank but on hearing that some storekeepers would be bringing gold into town, the gang headed for the bush and lay in waiting. On 13<sup>th</sup> June 1866 on a quiet road at Maungatapu near Nelson they robbed and murdered James De Pontius, Felix Mathieu, Jim Dudley and John Kempthorne. Soon after they were arrested and held for murder. Sullivan turned Queen's evidence on the promise of a pardon for the murders. He described how he watched the road while the other three did the murders. Despite inconsistencies in his story the other three were found guilty and hanged. During the trial Sullivan thinking he had indemnity spoke freely about how they had killed an old farmer, James Battle, the day before. This man hadn't even been reported missing. Being a totally separate offence, Sullivan was then tried for this murder and found guilty. He also stated, whether it be true or not, that the gang since its inception had killed 23 people. One of those that he claimed the gang had killed was their own gang member James Murray. Murray was wanted for murder and Sullivan hoped that by saying he was dead Murray would have a better chance of getting away.

Initially Sullivan was sentenced to death, but this was commuted to life in prison. Strangely he was pardoned. This was on 11<sup>th</sup> March 1874. Why New Zealand's worst murderer should be released after only eight years must be an interesting story in its own right.

His story up to this point was in all the newspapers. In England, Arthur Conan Doyle heard it and used it as the basis for his novel "My Friend the Murderer." Yet the story was to become even more intriguing.

Using a false name, false moustache and a wig Sullivan took a passage to London onboard the Hindoostan. He was recognized by the ship's doctor. On arrival detectives from Scotland Yard interviewed him but had no cause to arrest him. Instead they followed his every move. Sullivan then travelled to France touring the countryside before taking another passage on a ship to Victoria. Where he got the money from is unknown. He was using the names Thomas Sullivan and Frank Clark<sup>8</sup>. There may be some irony in this as Francis Clarke was an alias that had previously been used by the well known bushranger Frank Gardiner.

Sullivan took a passage on the Parramatta arriving in Sydney in November 1874. From there he boarded the Barrabool for Melbourne. He then intended shifting back in with his wife and two sons at Wedderburn. This was after an absence of eight years. Having previously lived in Wedderburn for about ten years he was recognized. Sullivan was immediately arrested by senior constable Francis Thomas Colvin of Wedderburn under the charge of having been in an Australian colony within three years of the expiration of a sentence<sup>9</sup>. Perhaps he didn't even realize that he was breaching such a condition. Legally it was complicated and he was remanded to

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<sup>7</sup> Nelson Examiner 4<sup>th</sup> Aug 1866.

<sup>8</sup> Grey River Argus 26<sup>th</sup> Dec 1874.

<sup>9</sup> Grey River Argus 26<sup>th</sup> Dec 1874.

Melbourne. The judge saw two options, gaoling him or deporting him to New Zealand. Choosing the latter, Sullivan was held in custody pending an available ship.

The New Zealand government refused his entry and shipping companies refused to carry him. He remained to Victoria.

After 18 months in prison on remand he was freed after the Government realized they could no longer legally keep him in gaol.

Sullivan returned again to Wedderburn stopping on the way at one of his old campsites. This time he went straight to the police station showed them a pocketful of sovereigns and said you can't arrest me for vagrancy. Had he dug these up from an old stash of his? His wife was now with another man, some of the Wedderburn locals threatened him, shopkeepers refused to serve him and the police watched his every move.

He determined to leave Wedderburn and go somewhere where he would not be recognized. He is believed to have gone to Deniliquin, then South Australia before coming back and working as a barber at Newbridge. Later in 1877 he took a passage to London on the Loch Ryan, again under a false name. He was back in Victoria the following year.

It was 1879 so he decided to join the Kelly Gang. Sullivan went to Wangaratta, then the Warby Ranges<sup>10</sup>. He may have met Ned Kelly but Kelly was not interested in being involved with such a notorious murderer<sup>11</sup>. Later, when the Kelly Gang was at Glenrowan one of the captives was named Sullivan. Ned Kelly mistakenly accused him of being the Maungatapu Murderer. He then said to the people in the Glenrowan Inn "£8,000 has been offered for our capture. I promise to give you a similar amount if you tell me where that Sullivan is to be found."<sup>12</sup>

Sullivan kept moving. The following year an unidentified old man died in the Wagga Wagga hospital<sup>13</sup>. It was assumed but never confirmed that this man was Sullivan.

One thing is for certain, his notoriety. Joseph Thomas Sullivan was a bushranger in Victoria and New Zealand for about twelve years and was proven in court to be involved in five murders. However, the actual number of murders might well be 23 in New Zealand and at least nine in Victoria.

In 2003 Barb Humphrey wrote a series of articles in the Wattlebark Newsletter titled 'The supposed murders at New Bendigo.'

Barbara's original piece covered the deaths of two Jewish hawkers, Raphael Caro and the boy he had working for him, Solomon Levi. They disappeared west of Charlton in January 1858 and their bodies were discovered in June of that year. Initially it was

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<sup>10</sup> Argus 14<sup>th</sup> Jan 1880.

<sup>11</sup> "I have seen you somewhere else" Kelly to Sullivan in Argus 30<sup>th</sup> June 1880.

<sup>12</sup> Argus 30<sup>th</sup> June 1880.

<sup>13</sup> Maitland Mercury 17<sup>th</sup> Mar 1881.

assumed that they had died of thirst and they were buried nearby. Rumours were circulating that their deaths were suspicious and a petition from Maryborough was handed to the attorney-general. As a result a magisterial inquiry was ordered to be held.

Mr Templeman held this inquiry at West Charlton in early August. The bodies were not disinterred, no new evidence was forthcoming and Templeton concluded that the men had died of thirst. Julius Vogel was a Dutch-Jew and also editor of the Maryborough & Dunolly Advertiser. He wrote about the inquiry “*extraordinary that they should have the obtuseness to suppose that two men with a horse and cart could die of thirst, when they were on a beaten track, only eleven miles from an inhabited station.*”

The next event was when Detective John Williams from Melbourne arrived at Avoca and with Jacob Caro, brother one of the deceased. They retraced the hawkers’ original journey and collected statements from people on the way. It was apparent that Raphael Caro was carrying about £300. The bodies were disinterred and brought to Maryborough for a post mortem by Dr Robert Dunn. Dr Dunn was not able to conclude a cause of death. Some of the evidence given stated that at their last camp there were two others, Joe & ‘Walk-about-Murray’ who gave the hawkers wrong directions before disappearing themselves. This inquest recommended a large reward be offered to solve the mystery. The Victorian Police Gazette of 7<sup>th</sup> December 1858 announced a reward of £100.

This was basically where Barbara’s article left off. The reward money was never collected.

On 4<sup>th</sup> January 1875 the West Coast Times in New Zealand printed an account by an anonymous person who claimed to be an acquaintance of Joseph Thomas Sullivan a convicted murderer in New Zealand and implicated him in the West Charlton murders of 1858. If so, it would appear that he was the Joe that disappeared with ‘Walk-about-Murray’ after the murders, and ‘Walk-about-Murray’ was James Murray the gang member in New Zealand. Furthermore, Sullivan in describing one of their New Zealand murders said he was strangled and left sitting against a tree to look as if he had died of exhaustion. The Jewish hawkers at West Charlton were also found sitting against a tree and it was first thought that they had died of thirst.

In 1863 William Selby and John Bennett were robbed and murdered<sup>14</sup>. They were also Jewish hawkers and had left Pleasant Creek for Wedderburn before being murdered in the bush. These murders were very similar to the other Jewish hawkers that had been murdered in similar country five years earlier. In this case Sullivan was seen nearby on the road but again not connected with the crime<sup>15</sup>.

The Bendigo Advertiser ran the following news item in January 1864. “*Korong – Mr Thomas Sullivan is erecting a new Half Way House on the new surveyed line of road between here and Inglewood, he having purchased a site there, at the last sale of 20 acres. He purposes, I believe, in the course of time, making a pleasure garden there,*

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<sup>14</sup> Victorian Inquest Index Nos 1189 & 1190 held at Carrs Plains 1863.

<sup>15</sup> West Coast Times 4<sup>th</sup> Jan 1875.

*so as to afford the inhabitants of Inglewood and Korong an opportunity of being able to occasionally to spend a pleasant day.”<sup>16</sup>*

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<sup>16</sup> Bendigo Advertiser in Grey River Argus 27<sup>th</sup> Jan 1875.

## **Murders**

### **Victoria**

Raphael Caro and Solomon Levi, West Charlton 1858

William Selby and John Bennett, near Donald 1863

### **New Zealand**

James De Pontius, Felix Mathieu, Jim Dudley & John Kempthorne, Maungatapu 1866

James Battle, Maungatapu 1866

George Dobson, Grey River 1866

Watts, Grey River 1866

Cook, Saltwater Ck 1866

unidentified body at Arahura 1866

Andrew Donald, Hokitika 1866

James Murray, Grey River 1866 - probably just a story to help Murray escape the police

story of several men poisoned at Wedderburn and buried in Sullivan's backyard