

The Search for Helen Carnegie Continues

This blog post first appeared as part of the Unlock the Past brick wall solutions series in 2010.

In my Brick Walls blog post Finding Helen Carnegie at Last, I first wrote about my search for my gg grandmother Helen Carnegie. We left the story with my believing that Helen was an alcoholic prostitute who had probably died in an asylum. I had finally found a reference to her death under the name of Helen Chick, and I was eagerly waiting to receive the death certificate.

Due to my mother's illness I had to go to Brisbane in early December, so it was not until my return to Melbourne in early January that I finally got to see the certificate which had arrived while I was away. I first looked to see where she had died and was surprised to see the Brisbane Hospital and not an asylum. I wasn't too surprised to see that her sister Clara Bishop was the informant but did wonder why it wasn't her son James. Helen was buried in Toowong cemetery, so she wasn't with her son who was buried in Bulimba cemetery.

The next bit of information I looked for on the certificate was had she married again and yes to Charles Wadmore Chick at the age of 64 years. Why had she married so late? I already knew that she was using the Chick name as an alias in 1904 when she was 42 years old, why had she waited so long to marry him? I then remembered her husband Alexander Miller Ferguson did not die until 1925 so she must have been aware that he was still alive. She married Charles in 1927 but I can't help wondering why not closer to Alex's death. Perhaps they weren't aware of his death until then.

I then looked to see if there were any other children, even if Charles and Helen weren't married but there were no children listed, not even her son James who had been born in 1880. That was odd because her sister Clara, the informant, knew about James.

The cause of death was also a puzzle – cerebral thrombosis and secondary cancer of the liver possibly from the stomach at the age of 84 years. This was strange – how could someone who was classed as an alcoholic in the early 1900s live for another 40+ years before dying of a stroke and cancer? As a prostitute how did she avoid sexual diseases? How could she have lived that long? Did she 'go straight' after she met Chick? Did he look after her? Who was he? So many questions and the certificate was not going to tell me the answers.

I felt incredibly let down by the death certificate because what I had imagined for so many years was just so different from the reality. After thinking about it, it is nice to know that she perhaps didn't have quite the hard life that I had always imagined.

There were many avenues to follow up and I quickly established by a search of World Vital Records Australasia that there was no tombstone for her in Toowong cemetery. A similar quick search of the Brisbane City Council's Gravefinder established that she was buried alone. There were also no entries for Charles Wadmore Chick either. So where did he die?

I then searched the Queensland BDMs online for a death record for him but came up blank. Surely, he hadn't lived that long or had he been much younger than her? I couldn't find a birth record for him either so that means a search of interstate records or shipping – why couldn't it be simple?

Back to World Vital Records Australasia and a search of electoral rolls listed them in 1910, 1913, 1915 and 1922 in Sapphire, near Anakie although sometimes Charles' middle name was given as William or Wadmore and not Wadmore. He was a miner and Helen was either a laundress or domestic duties.

I am going to have to purchase the marriage certificate for some more clues. Another wait but at least I am on the trail now.

Chick was an unusual name, so I thought a Google search was in order. Nothing was really coming up and I was starting to feel that it was there, but I just wasn't doing the right searches. I then went into Rootsweb because sometimes I have successfully found references in the mailing list archives.

Charles Chick came up in 17 of 46 databases, with most of the references American. However, there were multiple references to World Connect which I remembered was a website people could submit their family trees to. My partner's relatives have put all his family in there, so I decided to have a look and entered Charles Wadmore Chick.

No hits so I went back to Charles Chick and entered Helen Carnegie. Up they both popped, and I was simply flabbergasted, and I don't usually use that expression, but I was simply floored. It doesn't come up under a Google search and I would never have found it without going into World Connect. I wrote about this discovery in my SHHE Genie Rambles blog '[Is My Family Already on the Internet?](#)' on 8 Jan 2010.

Charles Chick had died in Sydney in 1929, just two years after he and Helen had finally married. Had she been in Sydney with him and then returned to Queensland? Had they split up after waiting so long to get married? Where had she been all those years – I need to go back to electoral rolls for both NSW and QLD.

I need to get Charles' death certificate as well for any further clues.

Then as my mind was spinning in so many directions, it occurred to me that someone had entered this family into World Connect. A click on the link gave me an email address which I promptly responded to with fingers crossed. The person responded equally quickly and said they were related to the Chick family not mine but had noted the information as they found it. My new contact remembered that Charles was a miner and that he and Helen had been at Lightning Ridge in NSW at one time. They weren't currently at home and wouldn't be back till March but were happy to share information then. They couldn't remember all the details without looking them up. Roll on March.

In the meantime, I will go back to the start and do basic research, get marriage and death certificates, check electoral rolls and directories, look for probate files and so on.

While I finally know when my gg grandmother died, I don't know about the last 40 years of her life, years that I never thought she would have had, given the life she had led prior to meeting Charles Chick, who was obviously her saviour.

As I thought about those missing years, I started to do the maths – my father was 12 years old when she died, my grandmother 35 years old, my grandfather, Helen's son James died in 1954, just eight years after Helen – why didn't my father and grandmother have any knowledge of her? My father was never interested in the family history and my grandmother always said she didn't know any of her father's family. Even after I told her James was illegitimate and Helen had spent time in gaol, she still said she didn't know anything.

While James Carnegie listed his grandparents as his parents on his wedding certificate, his wife Mary listed Helen Carnegie as his mother on his death certificate. So Mary knew the truth, but did James? Helen's sister Clara certainly knew the truth so why didn't she list James on Helen's death certificate? Clara was also the informant on her parents' death certificates and James was not listed

as a son. What role did James have in the family? How much interaction was there between them all?

Stay tuned for an update in April when I hope to finally demystify this brick wall.

Brick Wall Tips

- Search surname possibilities. Was there another marriage – especially after a husband/wife dies.
- Check other States – people moved around especially if they were miners
- Buy BDM certificates because different or conflicting information on each might just be the clue you need
- Be flexible with spellings and even names - Charles middle name is either Wadmore, Wadmore or William and I have listed the variations for Helen in earlier blogs
- Check all available family databases online – even though the information is submitted by individuals and may not be totally correct, the information can still provide clues for you to confirm
- Try and get living relatives to tell you as much as they can, although if they are trying to hide a family secret this can be difficult
- Persevere and keep revisiting the research as more records become accessible and online
- Tell others how you did it – inspiration and clues for researching their own brick walls