

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Driving east from Kununurra towards the WA/NT border late last year, Tom Stephens, former Member for Central Kimberley-Pilbara, was surprised to find what, for him, was a new road sign at one of his favourite creek crossings. He had first come that way in January 1977 and had used that crossing quite often; but, no longer a regular on the Victoria Highway, he didn't know when this crossing had picked up a new name!

The name "Philchowski's Crossing" had stood for many years as a road sign on the ground-level crossing of 8 Mile Creek. With this new sign reading "Phil Okowski's Ck, Northern European heritage had suddenly turned Celtic! Now Tom is a near full-blood Irishman, so his sense of grievance about the change did not spring from any "old-country" sensitivities.



Tom's understanding was that this crossing was originally named to refer to the association of the location with Rudolph Philchowski (a business partner with Joe Fegan in Spring Creek Station), who was for a number of years the mailman between Wyndham and Ord River Station. He was aware that there are a number of references to this man amongst the Durack Papers held at Battye Library in Perth; as well as a detailed reference at pages 287–290 of Mary Durack's *Sons in the Saddle* (Constable & Co., London, 1983).

When the Geographic Names Committee office team in Perth told Tom that this crossing does not have any name officially recorded, he wrote to request the Shire of Wyndham-East Kimberley initiate the process available to it to formally support the naming of the Crossing as "Philchowski Crossing". The intent was to reflect its historical connection to a man who was killed near this location in June 1913.

Tom felt that there could be a local Miriuwung Aboriginal name for the creek crossing that could be included alongside the "European" name. His letter to the Shire suggested that help with that might be obtained from the Kununurra Aboriginal language centre or the many Miriuwung people who live in various communities and outstations nearby.

The *Sons in the Saddle* account dovetails somewhat with what Tom knew from his discussions with Aboriginal people from 1977 when he was resident in Kununurra. Specifically he was told by both Alfie Deakin and Bulla Billinking that the killing led to the conviction and sentencing to death of an innocent Aboriginal man whose name was Jillambin.

Local people told Tom that the man who had in fact killed Philchowski was Woolambine, who was wounded in the violent reprisals that were taken against Aboriginal people in the area following the discovery of Philchowski's corpse. They said that Philchowski was killed by Woolambine in response to a serious grievance that developed between the two men. Also, that Woolambine lived on into his old age, largely in his homeland country, the area that became the Newry Station pastoral lease holding. One of his descendants said that for the remainder of Woolambine's life he wore, tied around his neck, the bullet that had wounded him during these reprisals.

On being presented with this information, the Shire of Wyndham-East Kimberley drew to the attention of Main Roads the mistake that has slipped into the signage, and Main Roads are in the process of having it replaced. The matter of having the crossing formally named, and of whether to explore dual naming, is much more involved. New geographic names require endorsement by the local authority and then by the State Geographic Names Committee, which has strict [policies](#) for nomenclature. The Council will be considering a recommendation to proceed with the formal naming, and possible dual naming, as this newsletter goes to print.

When Tom first met the author Mary Durack (later Dame Mary) in early 1977, she told him a little more about Philchowski. It was from her that he first learnt that Philchowski had set up a camp from which it was possible (but not legal) to buy alcohol; a “sly-grog” camp. Station workers and droving camps returning east from Wyndham were reputed to be often delayed by this access to grog; much to the annoyance of the station managers awaiting their return. Mary also told Tom that, at the time Philchowski was killed, there was a local Aboriginal woman staying at his camp who was related to Wollambine. Her presence there, the way she was said to have been treated by Philchowski, and her interaction with the passing station workers, increased Wollambine’s sense of grievance and anger and was said to have led directly to the murder.

Having progressed this far with the various accounts, Tom wondered if others had found something amongst official or other records, or from any other source since, that would throw further or corrective light on his recollections.

Cathie Clement, who works as an historian as well as editing our newsletter, has long had an interest in the matter and was aware of work done by Bruce Shaw (an anthropologist). Bruce’s main informant was Johnny Walker, who was also Mary Durack’s Aboriginal source for her account. Bruce integrated details from Mary’s writing (1983 and 1931) with the oral history he had recorded in the 1970s with Johnny Walker, Banggaldun Balmirr and Jack Sullivan. He wrote up his results as ‘The tale of Wallambain and Philchowski’ ([Aboriginal History](#), vol. 11, part 1, 1987, pp. 58–76) and he included a transcript of Johnny Walker’s account.

Cathie’s research indicates that the dead man’s full name was Richard Augustus Pilchowski and that he was born in Prussia in the 1860s. He was Polish but likely to have been seen as German. After spending time in Queensland, where his work included droving, he headed west. He was in the East Kimberley by 1903, droving, carrying and doing other work. His partnership in Joe Fegan’s small station officially extended from mid-1906 until shortly before the murder at 8 Mile Well. The well was a place where travellers regularly stopped to rest at mealtimes or overnight. The records of the time document the police pursuit of the Aboriginal people said to have been involved in the killing. The man convicted of it was identified as Jellabine (Jillambin in oral history transcripts). He was tried in Wyndham, sentenced to death, sent to Roebourne, and had his sentence commuted to imprisonment for life.

Some questions about the events that took place at 8 Mile Well will never be answered. Where the name of the creek crossing is concerned, the matter of whether the dead man’s name was Rudolph Philchowski or Richard Pilchowski is largely irrelevant. Local usage has it as Philchowski’s Crossing, and both Tom and Cathie believe that the commonly used spelling of his surname should prevail. And, with naming policy dictating that no possessive apostrophe is to appear in a name, they would prefer to see the formal name of Philchowski Crossing put forward.

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