



## A lucky encounter for Hepburn descendant

**S**OMETIMES you need to be in the right place at the right time. And Faye Pryer was.

It was a Monday and Faye had flown from Perth to try and find out more about her family history.

Her grandmother had left her home in Hepburn and gone to Kalgoorlie to marry. She later moved to Perth and named her house Hepburn. Faye often wondered about the connection.

She took the airport bus to Creswick and was picked up by the owners of Central Springs Motor Inn. The hospitality of the region had already found her.

The following day she headed to Cricket Willow, by taxi, but then called into the Daylesford Information Centre, where as luck would have it, Denise Robinson was working her usual Tuesday shift. Denise, whose own connection with the region goes back to her childhood when she would visit her grandfather, saw an opportunity.

She took Faye outside, around the corner and down the yard to the back entrance of the Daylesford Museum, where, and once again luck played a part, Jan Smith was working. (You guessed it, the volunteers only work on a Tuesday.)

Faye said she was keen to find out anything about her great-grandfather, Michael Tognini, and Jan said, "I live in his house".

And that was the start of Faye's remarkable visit.

A search of newspapers of the time found that Michael, who came from Someo in Switzerland and married Eliza Davidson of Spring Creek at Daylesford's Christ Church in 1867, died in the 1906 Hepburn bushfire.

He was the only person to perish in the fire, which swept down Western Avenue to West Street and on to Kidds Gully, affecting many families.

Michael managed to save his house but was found dead of heat exhaustion inside. He was 67.

Jan then contacted Jack Walker and Marj Green who gave Faye a tour of Christ Church. Jan took her to Yandoit to look at some of the old miners' cottages and then back to Michael's, now Jan's, home.

"The only remnants are the cellar and the mine shaft but the kitchen is where the house was and still has the gable shape. Faye was speechless, to be standing in his home," Jan said.

The following day, Jack Walker was giving a talk about his boyhood in Daylesford at Stone and Straw at Mt Franklin, which Faye attended before heading to Lavandula to sign the Swiss Italian descendants visitors' book – before she was taken back to Creswick, again by the Inn owners.

Jan said Faye was very grateful for the generosity and hospitality of all those involved in her five-day trip. "She got so much out of it. She might have been descended from a house owned by a weekender. So she was very lucky, and for me, I always wanted to meet a Tognini."

Jan said the museum had two other interesting visitors that day. One was an older couple with the man descended from Margaret Graham's widower. Margaret was murdered in the Daylesford gold fields in 1864. David Young was hanged for her murder in 1866, the first person hanged at Castlemaine Gaol. But many believed he was innocent and the newspaper of the time, *The Daylesford Mercury*, reported Margaret's husband George allegedly confessed to her murder on his deathbed.

Another man, in his 40s, also came in asking for material on Fred Wissing, who owned many hotels in the region. Jan said museum curator Gary Lawrence looked at the man and said "you are the dead spit of your great-grandfather" and got a photo up on the computer screen.

"And he was the spitting image. I was totally knocked out that day."

Meanwhile, Denise Robinson, who started it all, celebrates 20 years as a volunteer at the information centre this week. She said the Tuesday event was just one of the things that kept her excited about volunteering.

"You can make connections for people and draw them into the web and excitement of living in this town and its connection to history.

"It's been 20 years, but it still feels fresh. I am working with a great team at the moment, tight-knit, and we are going in a good direction with Julie (manager). She is a breath of fresh air to work with and seems to have some really good support from the council.

"It's always a pleasure to come in and there is always a story to share. Visitors are getting older and they are up for a chat and the person at the counter is, more often than not, an older person who is also up for a chat and a story and that's a really good thing."

Denise said she would recommend volunteering to anyone who has the time to share what they know. "It's a great part of your week."

*Above, left, Faye Pryer at her great-grandfather's house, right, volunteer Denise Robinson at the information centre*

Words: Donna Kelly | Images: Jan Smith & Kyle Barnes