



## FREMANTLE HISTORY SOCIETY

Established 1994

The Secretary, Local History Collection  
Fremantle City Library, PO Box 807,  
FREMANTLE WA 6160

Winter Edition  
1998



Lionel & Fanny Samson  
and their five children, c1859  
Fremantle Local History Collection

### THE OLDEST FAMILY BUSINESS IN AUSTRALIA

A chance meeting in 1828 between Lionel and William Samson and Captain James Stirling in a London street was to lead to the formation of what would become Australia's oldest family business, Lionel Samson & Son of Cliff Street, Fremantle.

Stirling was promoting the prospects of the Swan River settlement, and the Samson brothers were still young (Lionel was 29 years old, and his brother William 26) and bored with the monotony of the financial world of London where Lionel had just inherited his father's seat on the Stock Exchange. A contemporary, J B Montefiore, had just resigned his seat and gone adventuring in New South Wales, and the Samsons were seriously contemplating a move to Canada. Stirling's enthusiasm about Swan River changed their minds, and they decided to emigrate to the new colony.

The brothers arrived on the barque *Calista* in August 1829, only two months after the *Parmelia*, which was still at anchor in the Sound. They must have got a considerable culture shock. Nothing had been prepared for the arrival of settlers: baggage, furniture, tools and food were simply left exposed to the elements on the beach near Arthur Head, and the only shelter was such tents as the new arrivals had brought with them.

However, Lionel and William seem to have taken their new circumstances in their stride, and within days had set up shop on the beach. They had brought with them a wide range of merchandise, including wine, spirits and groceries. Lionel took up a land grant

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in the Upper Swan area and purchased two town lots in Fremantle for a store, while William was appointed Government Auctioneer.

In 1830 Lionel and William bought a stone cottage in Cliff Street as their residence, and in the same year Lionel was appointed Postmaster in Fremantle, his store doubling as a post office. This was not a lucrative appointment: when mail ships arrived, settlers often borrowed money from the postmaster to pay for postage due on their letters, and would expect free tots of brandy while waiting for the mail to be sorted.

The Samsons battled through the difficult years of early settlement and managed to buy another two town lots in Fremantle in 1833 for a second store. They were fortunate to have wealthy family connections in England, and so could afford to await more prosperous times. In the meantime Lionel's standing in the fledgling community was demonstrated by his appointment to the Board of Directors of the newly formed Bank of Western Australia in 1837.

In 1842 Lionel travelled to England to marry his cousin Frances (Fanny) Levi, daughter of a wealthy banking family connected with the Rothschilds. A romantic family tradition has it that he was in love with Fanny's mother when he was a young man, and that she told him she was too old for him and that one day he would marry her daughter. As indeed he did - on one of his several trips home to London he fell in love with Fanny, who was then 19 years old. Lionel was 42, but apparently Fanny was very willing to become his wife.

Lionel and Fanny returned to Swan River in 1843, and for the next ten years Fanny was the only Jewish

woman in Western Australia. Her sense of isolation can only be guessed at. However, she produced six children for Lionel - Michael (1844), Caroline (1845), Adelaide (1847), Louis (1849), Elizabeth Mary (1850) and William Frederick (1855). Two of them (Michael and William Frederick) were destined to become Mayors of Fremantle. As also was Michael's son William Frederick 'Fred' Samson, who served in this capacity for a record 21 years (1951-1972) and became known as 'Mr Fremantle'.

The Samson presence on the West Australian political scene was felt early. Lionel became a member of the WA Legislative Council in December 1849, the first Jew ever to sit in an Australian legislative chamber. He served in this capacity for two terms, 1849-1856, and 1859-1868.

In 1867 Lionel went into partnership with his son Michael, William having left the colony for Adelaide in 1846, and the firm of Lionel Samson & Son was born. Ten years later Michael entered the Public Service, and was replaced by Lionel's youngest son William Frederick.

Lionel died in 1878, and the business passed to William Frederick. It has remained in the hands of direct descendants of the Samson family until the present. The Lionel Samson & Son building in Cliff Street was rebuilt after being destroyed by a fire in 1895; the old cottage was fortunately saved, though some damage occurred. The two-storey cottage was restored in 1978, with the upper floor housing a museum and the ground floor being converted into a theatre with the appropriate name 'Fanny Samson Cottage Theatre'. During the restoration a locket, no doubt a cherished possession of Fanny's, was found containing photos of Lionel and William Frederick as a young child - it had slipped between the living room floorboards.

The history of the Samson family is the history of Western Australia. The family showed its awareness of this during the Sesquicentennial, when it planned a range of celebrations culminating in a family party at the Round House, with all its members dressed in period costume. Some of the Samson men even grew beards especially for the occasion!

**Sample the rich history of the family and explore the restored old cottage at the Fremantle History Society Annual General Meeting - see Meeting Notices**

J S Levi & G F J Bergman *Australian Genesis: Jewish Convicts and Settlers 1788-1850* Rigby, 1974, Chapter 20; Desmond A Lambert 'The Lionel Samson Story: a Brief History of Australia's Oldest Family Business' in *Early Days*, Journal & Proceedings of the Royal WA Historical Society, Vol 9 Part 4, 1986, pp 74-85; Lois Anderson 'Sir Frederick Samson, the mayor' in Lyall Hunt (ed) *Westralian Portraits*, University of WA Press, 1979



**COMMITTEE MEMBERS**

The following were elected as members of the committee of the FHS at the last annual general meeting.

Dianne Davidson	9430 6096
Elaine Berry	9336 1906
Anne Brake (wk)	9335 9473
Sally Rodgers	9339 7922
Ron Davidson	9430 6096
Helen Brash	9387 7453
Gina Wright	9331 3314
Kath Jordan	9335 8974
Alison Gregg	9432 9739

Elections for the committee and the executive will be held during the Annual General Meeting. Nominations will be called from the floor. Those who would like to become members of the committee should ensure they are present on the night. This is your

chance to make a contribution to the ongoing success of the Society.

Fremantle History Society's committee meets the 2nd Tuesday of each month. If you have something you would like discussed at a meeting, please contact one of the members on the numbers indicated.

General meetings of the Society are generally held on the 4th Tuesday of the month. Details of these meetings are found in your newsletter and reminders are placed in the local press. As we have started to have Sunday afternoon meetings occasionally, please be sure to check details.



**COMING EVENTS**

**Sup at Samsons - AGM**

The venue for this year's Annual General Meeting is the premises of the Samson family business.

Following the business of the meeting, which will be speedily concluded, members will have the opportunity to view the Samson's private museum. The museum is housed in the restored home of Lionel and Fanny Samson, who began their business interests in 1829.

Displays focus both on the day to day life of the various generations of the Samson family and the development of their business interests over the years.

As befitting the importance of the occasion, wine and nibbles will be served.

The meeting will be begin at **7.30 pm** at the **Samson's Building, Cliff St, Fremantle on Tuesday 25 August.**

## **A walking tour of Notre Dame University**

Many looked with sceptical eyes when the Catholic University began to buy up large portions of the significant and sensitive West End area of Fremantle. Now, following works under the supervision of a heritage architect, the University operates in its recycled heritage buildings.

Geraldine Byrne, Promotions Officer at Notre Dame, will take us on a fascinating tour which will illustrate graphically how an innovative approach to the reuse of old buildings can ensure their continued presence in our streetscapes and memories.

The tour will begin at the main reception area of Notre Dame on Mouat St on Tuesday 22 September at 6.00 pm.

## **Fremantle Studies Day**

The Fremantle History Society's *Fremantle Studies Day* has now become a regular event on Fremantle's calendar.

The papers presented at this year's Studies Day will reflect the International Year of the Ocean – a most fitting topic for this port city.

The Studies Day will be held on Sunday 17 October in the meeting room of the WA Maritime Museum, Cliff St Fremantle on Sunday 17 October. Included in the program of activities will be a visit to the soon to be completed *Duyfken*. A flyer detailing the days activities will be distributed closer to the day.

The Studies Day activities are supported by the City of Fremantle and the WA Maritime Museum.

## **MEETING REPORTS**

### **Boom ... goes the gun**

The Fremantle Tourism Association (FTA) secured money, earmarked for new initiatives by the WA Tourism Commission, to fund their timely Round House Precinct project, including the firing of the one o'clock gun and the dropping of the time ball.

At our May meeting, Susannah Bessell Brown, Chief Executive Officer of the FTA outlined the development of the project including the impressive amount of sponsorship and support they have been able to attract.

Around 50 guides, co-ordinated by Alastair Shaw, staff the Round House every day of the year except Christmas Day and Good Friday. As well as giving visitors information about the historic Arthur Head area, they undertake the cannon and time ball duties.

The Fremantle Tourist Association's activities have ensured there is a continuous day time presence at the Round House which not only provides valuable information to locals and visitors, but assists in the security and conservation of the site. It is hoped their efforts will continue to raise the awareness of the significance of the Round House and ensure both the state government and the City of Fremantle remain committed to its long term care.

### **New eyes look at our local history**

At the Fremantle History Society's 23 June meeting in the Local History Collection at the Fremantle City Library, new Local History Librarian Alison Gregg talked about the role of local history collections and gave members an overview of her plans for the Fremantle Collection, emphasising the need for

better and freer access to materials contained therein. In a very interesting and informative talk, Alison praised Lorraine Stevens' initiatives and reassured everyone that staff would continue to give expert help to individuals and local historians searching for sometimes obscure material. She hoped, however, to gradually index and catalogue items held in the Collection so that they could be readily accessed by computer. This is likely to prove a lengthy and arduous task - perhaps Alison needs a 'Friends of the Fremantle Local History Collection' formed to assist in this!

### **The old His Majesty's Hotel is the new Phillimores Café and Bar**

Phillimores (alias His Lordship's Larder, alias His Majesty's Hotel) was abuzz when more than 50 members and their friends came to lunch on July 26<sup>th</sup>. It was one of our most successful events to date particularly as we had many new faces at the gathering.

Before lunch members were taken on a tour of the upstairs/living section by John O'Byrne, part owner of the historic hotel. A feature of the tour was appropriate choice of colours used in the corridors and rooms. The special bedroom was much admired: it is very grand with a fine pine floor. The room has been enhanced by an elegant alcove with a fireplace, which was only discovered when asbestos sheeting which had completely hidden it was removed in the restoration process. The tour was followed by a delicious lunch served in the beautifully restored main bar and dining room. Members greatly appreciated the warmth of the fireplaces on a particularly cold winter's day, and more than one person suggested that we should make this an annual event!



### **Royal WA Historical Society Tour to Toodyay Valley**

The RWAHS is organising a tour of the Toodyay Valley on Sunday 30<sup>th</sup> August, to be led by well-known historian Dr Rica Erickson. On arrival at approximately 10 am there will be a welcoming morning tea at the Anglican Church Hall, after which there will be a tour of the valley stopping at various places of interest, including 'Hawthornden'. There will be a stop at Bolgart before continuing to Wyening House and Winery for a Country Style lunch and tour. After lunch there will be a detour to see 'The Byeen', a stone and mud cottage built in 1841. Estimated arrival back in Perth is 5.30 pm.

Pick-up points for the tour will be Stirling House, 49 Broadway, Nedlands (at 8.45 am) and the Tourist Bus Stop, Wellington Street, Perth (just west of William Street) (8.55 am). Cost is \$35 for members and \$38 for non-members.

Anyone interested in joining this tour should contact the Executive Officer of the RWAHS on 9386 3841.



### **Jigsaw Column**

It might be appropriate at this time of the football season to delve into the origins of this popular sport. Thomas Wentworth Wills, a New South Welshman, is credited with evolving the rules, because he felt Australian cricketers lacked stamina. He wanted to teach them Rugby, but decided it was too rough for Australia's hard ground. We now know he was wrong.

The first reported Australian Rules match was played between Melbourne Grammar School and Scots College in 1858; there were 40 to a side and the goal posts were half a mile apart. Later, a cousin of Wills,

HC Harrison, modified the rules and helped establish its popularity.

CJ Dennis saw the games' supporters or "one-eyed barrackers" this way:

*I didn't want to see a game, nor see no justice done,  
It never mattered wot occurred as long as my side won  
The other side was narks an' cows an' roppers to a man  
But mine was all reel bonzer chaps. I was a partisan.*

Folklore Australia, 1980



The City of Fremantle and Murdoch University have been working on a sustainability project which, despite its awkward name, will be an important element in Fremantle's planning process.

The aim is to establish markers against which the development of the city may be measured, so that the best qualities of the city may be enhanced. Already a number of Fremantle groups have met to discuss the project and there is considerable enthusiasm for it.

Members of the Fremantle History Society have been asked to co-operate by being interviewed briefly about those features which might be retained and other issues, by Murdoch honours student Nicole Hodgson. The historical perspective will be important one, along with the environmental ones.

Ms Hodgson wrote to say that there will be benefits for participants in gaining an understanding of the project and how they can be further involved in it.

Anyone who would like to participate should ring Ms Hodgson at home on

9335 8662 or at Murdoch University on 9360 6266.



## NEW MEMBERS

Beres Coley  
Gregory White  
Gwenyth Dunlevy  
Margaret Matthews



## FREMANTLE LOCAL HISTORY COLLECTION

### New Initiatives in Oral History

Oral History is alive and well at the Fremantle Local History Collection. Topics covered this year have ranged from the Shell Oil Company to shipping, and from shipping to shopping at Pellews. Contract interviewer Margaret McPherson started the shopping series by recording stories from people who worked at Pellews in the 1920s. Members of the Local History Collection Oral History Group have since added interviews covering each decade of Pellews' long history as a universal provider.

The affection in which the store was held can be judged by the immediate, enthusiastic response to Phoebe Freeman's recent call to the Graham Mabury Nightline radio programme. Phoebe, a member of the Oral History Group, invited listeners to call in with their reminiscences of Pellews. Several phoned the station direct; others contacted the library in the following days. One woman told of starting work in the dressmaking section after she left school in the 1920s, and of the great time she had there. Another remembered the thrill

MEMBERSHIP FEES ARE NOW DUE

of receiving mail order parcels from Pellews after the family moved to the country in the 1930s. Experienced staff chose garments to match the size, style, cut and colour specified in the order - or, when details were not specified, they simply made their choice based on their knowledge of family preferences. Very often only size and a general idea of the garment were given. The family had such faith in the judgement of Pellews mail order staff that further details seemed superfluous. The caller remembered that the store would always exchange willingly anything that didn't suit, and would keep on exchanging until the customer was completely satisfied. Further, Pellews paid the forwarding costs both ways. Now, that really is service!

The Oral History Group is busy now following up on all these calls, but would still like to hear from anyone with more Pellews stories or anecdotes to offer. They would welcome calls to the Local History Collection on 9432 9739.

### **New Equipment: a Mini Disk Recorder**

The Oral History Group's task will be made easier with the move to a stunning new recorder that is not much bigger than a pack of playing cards. It has all the standard cassette player/recorder functions, but uses a mini-disk (imagine a half-size CD) instead of a tape cassette. The sound is clearer with much better definition, and the disk can be stopped, started, marked for indexing, labelled or programmed with push button control. Because the disks are tiny, storage is simpler. Disks are also more durable and better able to withstand adverse conditions. The Local History Collection will keep the disks as master records, making copies on standard cassettes for library use.

The move to mini-disk technology comes in response to advice from the Oral History Unit at Battye Library and the experience of the Bunbury Oral History Group. The mini-disk recorder is so portable and unobtrusive that it can be used on almost all occasions. Bunbury interviewers sat that it is ideal for gathering a range of interviews on occasions such as family or school reunions. It's so easy that everyone can have a turn: just the thing to give a lively 'snapshot' of an event and all the people who contributed to it.

### **Capturing the Past: an Oral History Video**

For anyone just embarking on an Oral History project, a new video produced by the Oral History Association (WA) in association with the National Trust and the WA History Foundation will provide a trusty guide. Although it is designed for school use, the 25-minute video will be just as helpful for novice interviewers of any age.

The programme shows Stuart Reid, head of the Oral History Unit at Battye Library, running a workshop for Year 11 students who want to find out more about a nearby Settlers' Cottage and the people who lived there. He and the students discuss and demonstrate a range of techniques and strategies, and the finished video shows both interviews in progress and the participants' delight in the final product.

'Capturing the Past' is available on loan from the Fremantle City Library. An accompanying Teachers' Guide includes lesson plans and blackline masters for classroom use - but don't be put off by that. Just on its own, the video is entertaining and instructive for any viewer who wants to know more about getting started on Oral History.

Alison Gregg

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### For Your Diary

**Tuesday 25 August – Sup at Samsons - AGM** The business of the meeting will be followed by refreshments at this historic venue, **Samson Building, Cliff St, Fremantle, 7.30pm.**

**Tuesday 22 September – A walking tour of Notre Dame University**– Join Geraldine Byrne as she explores the redevelopment of some of Fremantle's oldest buildings into a modern university. **Notre Dame University, Mouat St, 6.00 pm.**

**Saturday 17 October – Fremantle Studies Day** – the third of these fascinating days, focusing on the International Year of the Ocean. **WA Maritime Museum.** More details on this fabulous day later.

a chairman of the Hospital Board and Cemetery Board, a member of Technical School Board and the Consular Agent for Italy.

The other early residents deserve a more extended reference than can be given here. It must suffice to say that all acted well in their parts, and in the times in which they lived, fought against odds to make the town the flourishing place it is today. Happily descendants of most of them are numerous amongst us and are worthily following the footsteps of their forefathers. With the exception of Major Humble, J.P., V.D., who is now in his ninetieth year, all the old-time bearers of the patronymics mentioned have crossed the Great Divide. Of them it may be truly said -

Life's work well done,  
Life's race well run,  
Life's crown well won,  
Now they rest.'



From J K Hitchcock *The History of Fremantle, 1929:*

'In the middle period of the (19<sup>th</sup>) century many names could be mentioned of men who devoted their time and talent to the service of the city. One, Elias Solomon, deserves mention here because of his excellent record. He was a councillor in 1877 and was afterwards mayor on six occasions. He was a member of the Legislative Assembly between 1892 and 1900, when he retired to enter Federal politics as the first member for Fremantle in the House of Representatives. He was the first chairman of the Tramway Board and was president of the Literary Institute,

### MEMBERSHIP FEES ARE NOW DUE

If you joined before May this year, your membership fees are now due (except of those few who paid at the last meeting that is).

Fees have remained the same since the Society started. You continue to get a quality publication four times a year, 9 general meetings and the Fremantle Studies Day for your small contribution to our coffers.

As well as all this, you can sleep easy at night knowing you are doing something to promote a continuing interest in and support of the study of Fremantle history.]

**PAY UP NOW!!!**

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# FREMANTLE HISTORY SOCIETY

1998-99 MEMBERSHIP FEES ARE DUE

Please complete and return to  
Anne Brake  
Treasurer, Fremantle History Society  
C/ Fremantle Prison, The Terrace  
Fremantle WA 6160

Name:.....

Address:.....

..... Receipt      Yes      No

Membership type:

Ordinary membership	\$10	Organisational membership	\$20
Family membership	\$15	Student/pensioner/unemployed	\$5

