

Anna and the King of Siam

By Sue White

Did you know that Anna lived in our midst at Port Gregory (Lynton) in the 1850's prior to her stint with the King of Siam? She walked the same valley as many of us have walked and slept under our same Southern Cross. AMAZING AND VERY TRUE!!!

Anna Harriet Emma Edwards was born in India in 1834, the daughter of Thomas and Mary Ann Edwards, nee Glasscutter, but sadly she never knew her father as he died just prior to her birth. Her mother remarried an Officer in the Engineers and with her sister Eliza, Anna lived in barracks across the country. As a teenager she met her future husband while in the Middle East with Rev. Percy Badger. Thomas Leon Owens (later it became Leoneans), a civilian clerk, was Irish-born but India-raised and he married Anna in 1849.

Anna and Thomas produced a baby girl, Selina, in 1850, but she died aged 17 months, so in 1853, they sailed to Australia via Singapore on the "Alibi" with her Uncle William Glasscutter. It was a calamitous voyage as her first born son named Thomas was born on the voyage and then the ship foundered on a reef to the north of Fremantle, staying stuck fast for eight days with little food and water. Finally in Fremantle, Thomas found employment as a clerk in the colonial administration and was soon a member of the Swan River Mechanic's Institute acting as auditor becoming well-known in the new colony.

There is no death recorded for the little Thomas, but he did die aged 13 months on the 16th of March 1854 and a small newspaper notice gives this information. Now Anna had said goodbye to two babies.

On the 25th of October 1854, Anna (known as Harriet) gave birth to a daughter, Avis Annie. In the new colony, Anna tried to start a school for young ladies but there is no information as to its success or failure. Anna may have had a good education in India especially knowing

that her Uncle William Glasscutter was the Master of the Indo-British Boy's School.

When the Leoneans family sailed for Port Gregory on the "Perseverance", the 4th of October 1855, the passenger list states there was only one child. Thomas was appointed the Commissariat Storekeeper at Lynton. Oh my..... what sort of place did he take his wife and child to? The Lynton Depot was now two years old with stone and timber buildings having been erected for the jail, lime kiln, blacksmith shop, commissariat store, hospital, bakehouse, tool store, quarters and small cottages and a well sunk, all with the convict labour. Even earth closets (toilets) had been completed. Ticket of Leave men and Pensioner guards with their families lived in tents until their homes were built.

When Port Gregory received its first influx of Depot inmates aboard the "Leander" – a Sergeant, 5 Privates of local Pensioners, 3 Sappers and 30 Ticket of Leave men (nearly 80 souls including women and children) – in May 1853, they were given the task of building this new Depot at Lynton, 10 miles from Port Gregory, and providing workers for the Geraldine Mine. Within a month, Joseph Lucas Harrick's, a convict who arrived on the Marion in 1851, had undergone an examination by the Medical Board and given the task of doctoring at the Depot. Within two months it was obvious that many more convict men were needed at the Depot as most of the original number had been absorbed into private labour. There was a dire need for stores to be landed by coastal boats as the new Depot and its new infrastructure were struggling and now that the lead from the Geraldine Mine was on the beach ready for export there were more ships arriving and more Captains who were navigating the harbour with efficiency and safety. But it was not the sparseness or the isolation that was the greatest hindrance... it was alcoholic beverages introduced for profit by private individuals and the resultant behaviour was to become quite disastrous.

As the population grew with extra Ticket of Leave men being sent to the Lynton Depot, it was imperative that single women were also sent to this place. Of the first five sent, three were married within the first month. 6

Captain Henry Ashford Sanford, the Superintendent of the Depot, had a two-storey mansion built on the side of the hill facing the ocean and his energy generated the first harvest of good grains for hay and sheep for meat, a whaling industry and salt marketing from the nearby pink salt lakes. The town of Parkham was gazetted and blocks pegged for sale. Whalers now used the Port as a safe harbour and a place for rest and recreation during the whaling season and Port Gregory became a busy little outpost.

It was to this raw and rough community that Thomas took his wife and daughter - hot in summer and fly-ridden in the spring, mosquitos too and throw in a few deadly snakes - so I can only take my hat off to the fortitude of the women who lived in this place where the lifestyle was certainly not idyllic. The romantic notion of gazing across a pristine blue sea over the blissful white sand hills or strolling along the verdant banks of the Hutt River would have been splintered very shortly after arrival. The occurrence of liquor intoxicated males and females involved in brawls and even a shooting were cause for much concern.

I wonder how did Anna fit into this life? Did she assist at the little school established there with about 20 students? Did she mingle with the other wives and women? Did she have a neat and tidy vegetable garden to supplement the family diet? (Scurvy was prevalent due to a lack of fresh produce.) Did they walk to the ocean and collect oysters which were abundant along the coast and build sandcastles decorating them with shells? Did she witness any ships coming into harbour or know about the several ships wrecked on this part of the coast? With her husband at work during the day and a small daughter to care for, her time could have been spent in any endeavour. *Washing, cooking, cleaning, walking, drawing, chatting, gardening**oh, to be a fly on the wall!*

As the Commissariat Storekeeper, Thomas Leonowens was responsible for the housing and distribution of much needed supplies. Tenders for supplies such as flour, fresh meat, rice, sugar, tea, pepper, salt, soap, hops,

potatoes or other vegetables, fuel wood, lamp oil and cotton wick were advertised for and the supplies brought to Port Gregory by ship and carted to the store. Von Bibra who had taken over Captain Sanford's estate as a leasee was granted a spirit licence so hogsheads of beer, casks of rum, cases of whisky and casks of ale were shipped to the Port.

A year later on the 22nd of October 1856, a son, Louis Gunnis Leonowens was born at Port Gregory (Lynton). Who attended his birth? Dr Horrocks had now moved into Wanernooka and was engaged in mining and operated a store there. I suppose one of the women acted as a midwife and just as nature intended, the little boy was born.

In December 1856, the Lynton Hiring Depot was closed. The expense of maintenance at this outpost was too great to sustain its benefits. Those remaining Ticket of Leavers were sent to Geraldton or to the Wanernooka Road Party whilst Pensioners were allocated allotments at Greenough.

Thomas and Anna Leonowens must have returned to Fremantle for a short time as I then found them leaving on the 5th of April 1857 per "Lady Amherst" for Singapore with two children. They then moved to Penang where Thomas operated a hotel but died suddenly from apoplexy in 1859 leaving Anna quite impoverished. Three years later, Anna accepted a post in the Royal Court of Siam teaching King Mongkut's 39 wives and concubines and his 82 children a modern Western Education.

..... And the rest is history recorded with embellishments in the movies and stage performances that we all remember – *The King and I* followed by *Anna and the King*. But I bet she told all Mongkut's children about the life she knew at Lynton and how far removed it was from her English/Indian lifestyle and that of Siam.

