

## The Exchange Hotel West Wyalong

Inquest on the Fire at the Exchange Hotel.

The above inquest was opened in the Oddfellows' Hall on Wednesday, December 6, before Mr. R. A. Collie, J.P., Coroner, and the following jury:-

Messrs. J. A. Griffiths (Foreman), W. Jack, F. T. Ward, J. Stephenson, W. Brighton, W. H. Clements, F. Channon, D. West, W. Rae., T. A. Crowe, F. Hancox, and C. T. Sharman.

Mr. Coonan appeared to watch the case on behalf of Agnes Kennedy.

Mr. W. Farmer, adjustor for several fire insurance companies, was also present.

The jury, having been sworn in, proceeded to view the scene of the outbreak, after which the following evidence was adduced; —

Agnes Kennedy deposed—Am a single girl, and reside at West Wyalong. Have been staying at Gregson's Hotel for four or five weeks, as a boarder, waiting till I got a situation. Did not take any particular pains to get one. Have no means of my own, but was waiting for a situation at Junee, which my sister wrote about. I was to pay 16s. per week. Have no money at all.

Mrs. Gregson selected the room I was to sleep in No. 4, Gertle Ortle occupied the same room. After that I had the room to myself. There is a ceiling lining of boards. Could not say what there is between the linings of the two rooms.

On Wednesday evening I went out after 8 o'clock with Mr. Hill. We were sitting on a box in the back yard about the time that Woods' fire broke out. This may have been about half-past 10. Returned with Mr. Hill to the Hotel when the fire was almost out and sat on a box in the yard at the side of the kitchen. Mr. Gregson came out and said he was very well and would get a drink of water. I suggested he should get something out of the bar, but he went up the ladder to the stable loft. Mr. Hill left, and Will Post was talking to one of the girls, Gertie Ortle, at the bedroom door. Thought the back door was locked, and asked Mr. Post if it was. He replied, 'No.' At the time we were sitting on the box I saw no one else in the yard. Asked Post what time it was, and he said it was 25 minutes to 2. In going from where we were sitting I had to pass the back door. Could not say how far it is from the kitchen to the back door. It may be about 12ft. Post was talking to Gertie Ortle. She was standing in the doorway. went straight to my room. Lit the candle with some matches which were in the candlestick. Had some in my pocket which I put there when going out at 8 o'clock. Blew the candle out after I went to bed, and did not get up till I heard the alarm of fire at Basha's next morning. Did not have any breakfast or do up my hair. Went to the fire, and helped Lee, the photographer, to shift his goods. There were others there, but I don't know who they were. Returned to the hotel about 9, washed my hands and went back to the fire, and then came back and had my breakfast. Know Walter Strange. Met him shortly after breakfast near Gough's shop. We walked up to the end of the ruins. We were looking at the ruins near Woods' when we heard the cry of fire at Gregson's. We ran down the street, turned off at the Office, came in the back way and saw it was Gregson's place which was on fire. The crowd was running towards Gregson's, and we went in by the Post Office to avoid the rush. We judged by the crowd assembled that it was Gregson's place which was burning. Did not notice who was there. Told Strange my box was in my room, and asked him to get it out. Think I was in before Strange, but we got separated in the crowd. Strange and some other man carried my box. Don't know who the other man was. Strange told me not to go the room. Don't know what my losses are. Was getting a cab to get my box away. There were a lot of things lying about the room. I was arrested that day, and had no further opportunity of finding what was destroyed. My sister, got a dress belonging to me. My box was taken home that evening, but I did not pack it. The dress I am wearing is the one my sister, sent to me. I heard that Mr. Green, of the Royal Hotel, procured it from Gregson's. Knew that my box was in charge of the police. Stayed most of the time about Green's till I was arrested; but went to see Mr. Coonan, because Mr. John Gregson had accused me of setting fire to the place at the dinner hour. He said. "Well, Agnes Kennedy, I am going to give you in charge for setting fire to this place; you are in league with the people who cut the mare's throat, and now they are trying more cursed vengeance by setting fire to the house. You have been led, and more fool you; you were with Strange last night; I saw you come out of the loose box with Strange at 8 o'clock this morning.' I told him it was a lie, that I was not with Strange, nor near the loose box. Told him it was more than he dared do, and I would make him suffer for accusing me. Gertie Ortle and Alice George heard me make the last remark. Went for a drive, after Gregson's first fire,

with Walter Strange. He asked me to go, and I asked him to drive me to the top town to see my sister. Saw her at Schneider's boarding house, and went from there to Gough's battery to see my brother and Mr. Hill and tell them about the fire which had occurred. Saw Mr. William Hill in the engine room. He is the Mr. Hill who lived at Yalgogrin. Am engaged to be married to him. Told him Basha's had been burnt, that Gregson's had been on fire and that the fire appeared to have been caught near the top, between the girls' room and mine. Never said anything to him about kerosene. When I left my room after breakfast noticed odour of kerosene there. Never use a lamp there.

Did not mention this to anyone but the Sergeant when at the barracks, when asked by him if I saw or smelt kerosene. Saw Strange again about dinner time at Miss Donohoe's fruit shop in Sharp's buildings. Met him accidentally but knew he would be there, as he was keeping company with one of the girls. Went there to tell him what had been said about the fire and about my being in his company. May have been there about half-an-hour. Don't remember telling Strange that Gregson had accused me. Remember making a statement that day to Serjeant Peterswald in the presence of Senior-Constable Quail. Will not swear whether I told the Sergeant that I told Strange I smelt kerosene. Refused to tell the Sergeant why I went to see Strange, but afterwards did give my reason, namely because Gregson had accused me of setting alight to the room, and that I was in league with those who cut the mare's throat. Strange's name was mentioned. When I spoke to Strange I don't remember what he replied, but he laughed at the idea of me being accused. Think I did most of the talking. Know Gertie Ortle, a servant at the Exchange Hotel, since before last May. We had a row on or about last Saturday week. I spoke to her after the fire. Was sitting for a few minutes in another room than my own while waiting for my dinner. There was an easy chair and I sat in the doorway till there was a vacant seat at the table. When the second fire started I was talking to Jack Connors under Helyar's verandah. I ran to go into the Hotel, but was stopped by Denny Minehan, who said it was no place for me and to go to Green's. After the second fire Mr. Gregson ordered me out of the hotel. I had been asked by Senior-Constable Quail to go over, as the Sergeant wanted to see me. On the night of Wood's fire I parted from Hill at the west of the kitchen. The bathroom is on the west side of the dining room. Was not at the bathroom that night. When I came back from "top-town" Mrs. Gregson said she wanted to speak to me, and we went into her bedroom. Jack Gregson was there. Mrs. Gregson said, "I want you to tell me the truth, did you ever use kerosene in the room for bugs?" I said, "No, I never had kerosene in my possession or used it in any way all the time I was there." Gregson said, "You know Aggy, we don't suspect you, but we want to find out who did it." I had told someone that I intended leaving on Wednesday. Have tried to buy poison lately at Reay's, weeks before the fire, but he refused to sell it. I went to two other places. Caspersonn asked me what I wanted it for. I said I wanted laudanum to make me sleep. He told me to come next morning, and he would give me a draught to make me sleep.

Was in my room with others long after the fire, but not while it was on fire. Was on good terms with Mrs. Gregson, but don't know whether I am now. Was on good terms with Jack Gregson till he accused me. Was not speaking to the housemaid, Alice. Mrs. Gregson did not ask me for board money or to leave the house. Never was in the stable, but was in the wash-house, which is also is a general lumber room, and I believe kerosene is kept there, as Mrs. Gregson told me so after the fire.

Was there the first Saturday night after I went to lodge, for an hour or two, talking to Mr. Hill. Never worked about the house. Don't know whether the place is insured or not. Have always been in the habit of carrying matches. Had a half dozen when the Sergeant come to me. A box in which there was face powder was on the table at the time of the fire, and it got wet. I put it in my pocket and it wet the loose matches. Never filled the lamp for Mrs. Gregson. Am not related to Strange.

Have not been in any trouble which would prevent me from sleeping. Never locked my door. The girl did up my room. The inquiry was then adjourned till 2 p.m. On resuming, the witness was recalled, and further deposed. The cause of the quarrel between myself and Gertie Ortle was yarns, and, possibly, jealousy about Mr. Hill. Don't know, of my own knowledge that Miss Ortle was keeping company with Mr. Hill, but had heard so. Asked for strychnine at Reay's and Duncan's, and for laudanum at Caspersonn's. Never used sleeping draughts.

Senior-Constable Quail deposed— Remember the fire at the Exchange Hotel on the 30th ult. The fire had been in No. 4 bedroom, but was extinguished before he got there. The pieces of board

produced were handed to me by Sergeant Peterswald; and they smell strongly of kerosene. There was also kerosene on the ground underneath the corner of the room. Heard others remark about the kerosene. There was another fire a few hours later. The bedding was on fire, and the wall lining was charred. About 2 p.m., I saw the bathroom floor the paper and rag (produced) soaked with kerosene, and a quantity of loose matches. They were under the floor of the house. Produce condensed milk tin and funnel smelling of kerosene, which I saw outside the servant's bedroom. My attention was drawn to them by Gertie Ortle, who remarked that the funnel may have been used to pour, kerosene from the top of the wall. The lining in the servants' room does not reach the ceiling. There is an opening. Do not think it would be possible for the kerosene to be put in from the servant's room. Had two conversations with Agnes Kennedy on Friday. What she said was taken down in writing. Sergeant Peterswald asked her why she went to see Strange, and, after some time she said — 'It's nothing to be ashamed of; I went to him in consequence of what Jack Gregson said.' Do not remember her saying anything about telling Strange that I smelt kerosene. After the second fire, I saw Denny Minehan pushing Agnes Kennedy out of the hotel. Saw the boards produced broken off. The distance from the backhall door to the kitchen is 13ft. From the west corner of the kitchen to the bathroom is 18ft. From the stable to the servants' bedroom; is 64ft. The boards produced have been in my possession since they were out off.

To Mr. Coonan— Heard that Agnes Kennedy was under lock and key on Friday.

I was at Gregson's on Friday morning, and walked to the Post Office. About three minutes afterwards a fire broke out in the loft at Gregson's stable. Agnes Kennedy was then in gaol. Have heard other names mentioned by Miss Kennedy in her evidence in connection with this fire, but none of them have been locked up. There was no odour of kerosene in the stable fire.

Zelphy E. Gregson deposed— Am the licensee of the Exchange Hotel, where the fires the subject of this inquiry, occurred. Have been there since September 25 last. Paid £725 for house, furniture, and goodwill. The building and stock was insured in the Lion office, for £850. Took out the policy about three weeks after went in. It had been previously insured. On Thursday there were about 10 people staying at the place. Agnes Kennedy had been about a month at my place. She asked me to let her stay one week, as when Mrs. Phillips came to the Globe, she would get a place. I said we may manage. She was to pay 16s. per week. She afterwards said that she wanted to go to June. She paid in advance the first week, and next week gave me 10s., but that was all. Never spoke to her about leaving. Gertie Ortle has been with me since November 6. She was boarding there when Agnes Kennedy came, and when another servant came, I put her on to cook, John Gregson, up to the last few nights, slept in the stable loft. Post sleeps in a hut at the back of the stables. The plan produced is fairly correct ground plan of the buildings. Remember the fire at Wood's, but did not go there till it was fairly under control; that was about 1 a.m. Post was in charge of the house, and Jack Gregson went with me. When the fire broke out on Thursday morning I was going through the hall, and heard a man named Kitt calling out "Fire!" I ran after him. He went to the servants' room and forced the door. I saw the smoke coming out through the partition of the two rooms. I called for help and tried to get my trunks out of my room. I went into No.4 room, but did not notice kerosene till my attention was drawn to it by Constable Brennan.

There was a second fire at about 2 or 3 o'clock. Smelt the fire. Gertie and Alice the two servants and a lot of other people were in the taproom. I went down the hall and went to my own bedroom then to No. 4; then to the kitchen. Went to the bathroom to call Jack Gregson and Ryan to help to find where the fire was and they went right through the hall opening the rooms. Then I heard someone say "' Here it is," meaning the servant's room. Don't remember who was the last I saw in the servants' room. 'Don't remember telling anybody that I saw Agnes Kennedy sitting in that room. Don't know that I have any enemies in the town. Know Walter Strange. Know Mr. Mills, the undertaker; May have said that the fire was the outcome of a grudge in connection with the horse-killing case. Saw Strange at the house on several occasions. It may have been in consequence of this that I associated the horse killing case with the fire. Have seen him talking to Miss Kennedy a week or so before the fire. Mr Hill has been in the habit of coming to see her. He was there on Wednesday night. Don't know that Miss Ortle has a young man. Mr Halbish used to come to see Alice George, but he is away. A white dress was left after Agnes Kennedy's boxes were taken away. The kerosene was kept in a loose box which we use as a washhouse. Never saw Agnes Kennedy there nor did she ever ask me where the kerosene was kept. Did not tell anybody about

wet matches being found on the tank. I found some kerosene on the bathroom floor, and through a crevice in floor I saw some muslin soaked with kerosene. Called Jack Gregson and I also sent for the Sergeant. Constable Keegan came. The rag produced is the same. Don't think it was ever used on the windows but may have been used for cleaning the windows. Dirty articles were generally kept in the bathroom. Alice George does the house work. Don't think there are many bugs in the house. Scalded the rooms and got some stuff from Dr. Caspersonn to use, but it did not grease the walls at all.

To Mr. Coonan — Agnes Kennedy was an ordinary boarder. When she went there the house was pretty full, and I told her that if she liked to sleep in the same room with Gertie she could do so. Asked Agnes Kennedy if she used kerosene for bugs, and the two servant girls also. When I saw the rag under the floor, I suspected a plot.

John Gregson is my brother-in-law; he stays at the place, but does not get regular wage's. Heard him, after fire say that possibly the girls had been using the kerosene for bugs.

Senior-Constable Quayle; recalled, deposed -Remember Mrs. Gregson saying to Sergeant Peterswald, after the second fire on Thursday, that she had seen Agnes Kennedy sitting in the servants-room about 20 minutes before the fire broke out This was before she was arrested. John Gregson deposed— Am in the employ of Mrs. Gregson grooming. Sleep in the stable loft. Remember Woods' fire. Went to bed about 9 o'clock. When I first went to the fire, Mrs. Gregson went with me. I went up again between 12 and 1 a.m. to find out if there was any further risk, and returned. I went up again. After I came back I saw Agnes Kennedy and Hill sitting under a skillion attached to the premises. One of them, coughed, and I said, 'It's you, is it?' Don't remember saying about feeling ill. Afterwards went over to Green's Hotel, and stayed there till about half-past 3, then sat under the Exchange verandah for about a quarter of an-hour. Then went into the yard and saw the form of a woman close to the stable, and to the best of my belief it was Agnes Kennedy, and she was walking from the direction of where the kerosene is kept towards the house. I was about 24 yards away. It was just dawning day. The woman was in light clothes. Did not see where she went. I went to my bed in the stable loft. After breakfast a fire broke out in Miss Kennedy's room, between 9 and 10 a.m. I was about the third to get to the fire. Think Kitt was the first man in the room. After the fire was got under I took Jack Ryan with me to see if we could find where it had started. We found a piece of waste board underneath where the fire occurred. It was saturated with kerosene. I saw oil on the boards in No. 4 room. Some of the boards were charred on the inside. Before the second fire I had a conversation with Agnes Kennedy at dinner time. We went into the room together, and I asked her if she knew anything about the kerosene on the wall. She replied ' No.' I asked her if it was possible to for anyone to go into her room and throw kerosene on it. She said that it was not, and there was none there when she got up. I told her that she must know something about the fire, and to make a clean breast of it and clear herself; and if anybody had been making use of her for the purpose of burning the house? She replied that she knew nothing about it. Did not say any anything about Gregson's mare to her I saw the rags and matches under the bathroom. Mrs. Gregson showed them to me.

Remained to watch the place till the police came. Another fire afterwards broke out in No. 1. The doors were not opened along the passage before the fire was discovered in the servant's room. Mrs. Gregson said to me that the cellar would be the next place they would try to fire.

After the second fire, I told Miss Kennedy that she had better get her box out of the house quickly as she could. Did not say anything to her about being out till 4 in the morning. It was not unusual for girls to be out as they go to band socials and other dances. Never saw her in the wash-house or stable. Knew before the fire that the place was insured, but not for what amount. When Mrs Gregson heard a man underneath the house she made the remark about the cellar. This was in the night. (Sergeant Peterswald here explained that the man under the house was a policeman.) When the man was heard, Post went down the cellar with a light, and, on returning, said he saw a man under the floor, and I sent for the police. Don't, remember anything being said about kerosene being used for bugs. I think rags, such as that produced, were thrown into the kerosene room to clean lamps.

By Mr. Coonan — I stayed up on Thursday morning in order to see if any further outbreak of Woods' fire occurred. Did not speak to the police about seeing Agnes Kennedy till they began to make enquiries.

Did say something about kerosene having been put on by the girls to destroy bugs. James Howard who was in the room said it was absurd. Post told me during the forenoon after the first fire that the kerosene had been shifted. Don't think I was in Mrs. Gregson's bedroom when Agnes Kennedy was called in and questioned. I did not say "we do not suspect you Aggie, we only want to get the truth." Constable Quail was present when I told Agnes Kennedy to shift her box, and he gave me the office to hold my tongue.

Thomas Rouse, deposed — Am the agent for the Lion and Imperial Insurance Company, in which the Exchange Hotel and contents are insured. The totals are £850.

The policies were taken out on Oct. 20<sup>th</sup> last. The place was previously insured for over £1000 when Lindsay held it.

The Court was here adjourned till 7.15 p.m..

William Post, deposed— Am a barman at the Exchange Hotel, and nephew of Mrs. Gregson.

Remember Woods' fire. Went there about 11p.m and was there on and off till half-past 1 a.m. on Thursday. Put out the lights, went out to the back and saw Gertie Ortle, and sat on the box with her for some time, near the servant's room. Did not see Miss Kennedy and William Hill about. They might have been there. Gregson sat on the box alongside us for awhile and then came through the lane towards Green's. It was about a quarter to 3 when I left Gertie Ortle. A man named Williams came out when Gregson was there and walked close by the bark shed. Was talking to Gertie Ortle at her bedroom door for a while Agnes Kennedy came and spoke to me; she quite close to me before I saw her. She said she could not get in as the door was locked. I said it was not, and opened it for her, and she went to her room. The door requires a bit of a lift to open. After that I came into the Main-street and met Alice George. I went to bed soon afterwards. Was at Basha's when I heard of the first fire. Started to run down and someone said "False alarm" and I went back to Basha's. A man then told me there was a fire at Gregson's and I came down. The fire was then pretty well out. Heard Mr. Howard say "There is kerosene on those boards." I look after the lamps. The kerosene room is locked every night. One key is in the possession of either Mrs. Gregson or Jack Gregson and the other in the possession of Jack Akehurst, cabman, who puts his harnesses in there. Used the funnel produced on Wednesday morning. Never gave anyone kerosene to destroy bugs; Have seen Walter Strange several times lately about the hotel. Was always on friendly terms with him. So was Mrs. Gregson, though not with his brother, as there had been some trouble over a lost book and a killed horse. Know Hill slightly. Saw Agnes Kennedy in the place where the kerosene is kept once, I was filling lamps. Never had any row with her. Never used the piece of art muslin produced for cleaning lamps. There are two funnels in use; It was about five minutes to 3; when I saw the light in Agnes Kennedy's bedroom as I passed the window.

Gertie Ortle deposed— Am employed at Mrs. Gregson's. Have been there about three month. Aggie Kennedy and I went there the same day and occupied the same room. We have not been friendly for the past-fortnight, owing to yarns. There was a George Wells in the affair. Never heard Miss Kennedy say anything about poison. Remember Wood's fire. Went to bed at about quarter to 3 next morning. Went to the fire with Alice George. Did not lock our room. Was sitting with Post on a box near the tank. When Gregson went away she went through the hall. Did not see anybody else about. Agnes Kennedy came while we were there. She seemed to come from between the bathroom and kitchen She asked if the doors was locked, and Post said 'No' - He did not open the door for her to the best of my belief. Did not notice which way Post went when he left me.

When I heard the alarm of the first fire I ran to my room to get my box. Saw the flames coming through the top. Did not see Agnes Kennedy about at the time. I was not in No 4 room till after the fire there occurred. Did not smell any kerosene. Agnes Kennedy did not speak to me on the day of the fire. Never troubled my head to look if there were any of Miss Kennedy's dresses about after the fire. Only know of Miss Kennedy being once in the kerosene shed. She was there with Mr. Hill. We were on speaking terms then. Never saw her there when Post was there, The milk tin was on my window sill; and the funnel on the ground alongside the tank. This was on the morning of the fire. Can't say how they got there. Saw it in the kerosene shed the night previous. I was the first to notice the second fire. I noticed a smell of rag burning. Mrs. Gregson and I came

back into the hall. Just then some boys said where the fire was. I opened the door and found the room in flames, but shut the door again. Jack was still down the yard. Mrs. Gregson and I left together to see where the fire was, William did not have breakfast or dinner with me on the day of the fire. Do not remember hearing anyone say they wished the whole place was burned down. Never said it myself. Never told anyone that I saw Walter Strange in Aggie Kennedy's bedroom. When Mr. Gregson sat on the box with us he was in the best of health and perfectly sober. He sat with his back to us and said nothing. He remained about ten minutes. On the night that Miss Kennedy was in the kerosene room Edie McDermott got the key from Mr. Post.

[The inquiry was continued from 10 a.m. yesterday till 10 p.m. last when it was adjourned till Saturday morning. The balance of the evidence, and the decision arrived at by the jury will be published in our next issue.]

Inquest on the Fire at the Exchange Hotel. (1899, December 8). *The Wyalong Star and Temora and Barmedman Advertiser (West Wyalong, NSW : 1894 - 1895; 1899 - 1906)*, p. 2., from <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article145091967>