

JAMES POOLE

Centenary Of His Death

By WILKIE THOMSON

A NOTABLE South Australian centenary which occurs next Monday is that of the death of James Poole, Sturt's first assistant.

Captain Sturt tells us that as he watched his expeditions into the interior commence the second stage of its journey under James Poole, he wondered if all the men would be permitted to return to their homes. He had a premonition that he himself would not return, but it was Poole, who on the 16th July, 1845, died from an internal haemorrhage following months of dire suffering from the dreaded scurvy.

Very little is known about Poole, apart from what Sturt tells us of him. Our archives preserve records of his position as surveyor in SA from July, 1840, to June, 1842. One of the letters written at this time in a bold, clear and excellent hand is a request for the State to care for an aboriginal who had been with, and faithfully served, the surveyors, during that time. The latter reveals something of Poole's considerate nature. In 1845, the year the expedition left, he was one of the census collectors.

From Sturt's narrative we learn that Poole was of stature short, stout, and personally much like Sir Thomas Mitchell. Added to this, he wore a blue foraging cap such as Sir Thomas had worn. We get this little pen picture because a tribe of Darling River natives thought he was Mitchell, and showed some hostility. It took a good deal of explanation on the part of Sturt and the native Nod-buck to assure them that he was not that explorer. "at which," wrote Sturt, "they expressed much satisfaction." All were not convinced, however, even when Poole changed his cap for a straw hat.

It was Poole who surveyed Lakes Bonney and Victoria, and he it was who first ascended the hills and gazed across Broken Hill and the plains, beholding that strange fantastic mirage as of water, from which the distant hills reared as islands, a mirage that was to deceive many a later traveller not

islands, a mirage that was to deceive many a later traveller not looking for an inland sea such as Sturt's party hoped to find. To James Poole, too, must be given the credit of discovering Rocky Glen, where there was sufficient water to sustain the expedition, using at least one thousand gallons of water daily for six months, the only spot in that desert where their wants could have been for so long supplied.



The beefwood tree at Depot Glen, with the inscription "J.P., 1845"

Photo by courtesy of the Archives.

Poole and Browne, the surgeon, were the first to show signs of scurvy. Browne exercised on low branches daily to keep his muscles from becoming rigid, but Poole was too sick to do this and complained of excessive pain. Much of their first few months of exploring had been spent away from the main camp, and at such times they existed on a meagre ration of flour and bacon, drinking from waterholes that were often mere mud puddles, and sometimes far from good, whilst the men with the main party had fresh mutton and

better water. As Poole gradually became worse, Sturt thus described his condition:—"All the skin along the muscles turned black and large pieces of spongy flesh hung from the roof of his mouth, which was in such a state that he could hardly eat."

Poole suggested the building of the cairn on Red Hill, later known as Mount Poole. To give the men occupation the cairn was erected, being 21 ft. square at the base and 18 ft. high. "I little thought," we read in the narrative "that I was erecting Poole's monument, but so it was. That rude structure looks over his lonely grave."

Following upon an attack of inflammation, Poole became restless and desired to be moved into an underground room. As this was very cold at night a chimney was built into it. But preparations were already being made for a party to return to Adelaide when the hoped-for rains came. A swing cot, with a flannel hood for shelter at night, together with pulleys so that the patient could change his position, was built into a dray. Poole was loath to leave and wept bitterly when Sturt said good-bye to him. The letter which the latter sent back to the Colonial Secretary, dated June 17, highly commended Poole as having "done his duty to the utmost," and that his state of health was produced by his "zeal and perseverance alone." Two days after the party's departure on July 16 Cowley returned to say that Poole had died at about 3 o'clock. He had raised himself to take some medicine, but remarked that he was dying, and falling back, passed quietly away. Under a gravillea, now known as beefwood, he was buried, and cut in the tree is the brief epitaph—

"J.P., 1845."

The beefwood tree was still alive in 1936, but near it, about 1883, was erected an obelisk. Even in death Poole would have remained a little unknown, for the engraving read, "To the memory of John Poole, second-in-command of Sturt's exploring party, who died here on 16th July, 1845." The "John" has, however, now been erased and the rightful "James" substituted.
