



# the CITATION

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE NORTHERN TERRITORY POLICE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## EDITORIAL

Due to recent newspaper articles relating to the suggested name-change of Willshire Street in Alice Springs to something that does not "honour a murderer", I believe other members of the N.T. Police Historical Society who live interstate may like to know what is happening. That is the reason for producing this special edition of the Citation. My thanks to Iain Morrison for his assistance and advice.

Mounted Constable William Henry Willshire carried out extensive patrols of Central Australia and the Victoria River region in the late 1880s. His main objective was to offer protection to the early settlers and miners in remote areas and by all accounts, he was very effective in his duties.



Mounted Constable Willshire

with wife and son at Cowell, Eyre Peninsula, 1904

It is over one hundred years since M.C. Willshire patrolled the Northern Territory and in that time, the manner, ideals and progress have changed dramatically - no doubt for the better. One hundred years ago, the Northern Territory was a wild, untamed land with M.C. Willshire taking up his post at "the springs" just ten years after the explorer Ernest Giles passed through the region. In those times, laws were fairly basic in contrast to what is required today and unfortunately, some of

the public in favour of changing the name seem to lose track of this fact.

A large amount of settlers owed their very existence and survival to the likes of William Henry Willshire and many others that followed him. He does not deserve to be vilified in this manner. Indeed, what can be said of the street names in Darwin honouring Tuckiar and Namarluk - were they not murderers? It can also be said their atrocities were committed at a much later time ( in the 1930 -1940s) compared to an era fifty years before.

The bottom line is, our history has been paved by men and women of strong will and character who, whether it was the correct decision at the time should not be judged by today's standards.

Governments of the day made the laws and men like M.C. Willshire had to enforce them. That part of it hasn't changed, only the guidelines.



\* The book Willshire of Alice Springs by Austin Stapleton.....'Is available in local bookshops and presents another side to Willshire".

Several photos reproduced from the above book.



**“Don’t feel guilty.  
just understand and change it”.**

**Street named  
after  
savage  
killer.**

Teacher asks for  
new name to aid  
reconciliation.

*By Jacqueline  
Shandley.*



Vince Forrester and the offending street name.....

*Reproduced from Centralian Advocate June 1, 1999*

Vince Forrester wants the name of Willshire Street changed.

He says that the short street near Traegar Park is named after a man who spent ten months late last century murdering Aborigines in Central Australia.

The grandson of William Liddle and Luritja woman Jintawarra, Mr. Forrester believes Alice Springs needs to know its history before reconciliation can happen.

“We’re not asking people to feel guilty,” he said.

“It’s not their fault. It’s the fault of the murderers of the past - but I am asking them to understand.”

Mr. Forrester, a cultural history teacher, said stories about people like Mounted Constable William Willshire were well known to local Aborigines.

“Most of the people who have been born in Alice Springs in the Aboriginal community have heard about people like Willshire...it’s all part of our local history,” he said.

“They were responsible for hundreds of deaths.” Most people did not know the history of the Centre. Lobbying to change the street name would change that, Mr. Forrester said.

“Willshire went on a ten-month shooting spree up and down the Finke River.”

“Old Gillen charged this Willshire bloke with murder, so they sent him to Port Augusta to be tried.”

“When the Aboriginal people tried to give evidence, the court wouldn’t allow it, so he got off.”

Mr. Forrester said many of his ancestors were killed, and old Aborigines called the massacres “rifle times.”

Many killings occurred because Aborigines were killing cattle during the drought.

“The policy at the time was pacification and, of course, the best pacifier is a Henry Martin .44.” Aboriginal oral history had provided him with many gruesome stories, including the bodies of Aboriginal people who were rounded up, put in neck chains and shot.

### **Buried**

They were buried under the Girl Guide building in Stuart Terrace, Mr. Forrester said.

“If they changed the name of Willshire Terrace that would be cool, but the most important thing is education. Alice Springs people don’t know their history.”

“If we are to go through a process of reconciliation, we must understand why we are reconciling.”

Education should reflect society, and Aboriginal people are more than 50 percent of the permanent population.

“We are born here, live here and die here.”

### **Offer**

Mr. Forrester said Aboriginal people had a lot to offer other Australians, and his motivation was to get Aboriginal history taught in schools.

“It’s a shame on Australians they don’t know their own history,” he said.

“It’s a shame on the system...it’s a shame on the country and its forbearers.”

“I’m pretty sure they all know the European history..Richard Lion Heart, and all that.”

*Reproduced from Centralian advocate June 4th, 1999*

**Mounted Constable was no hero, says historian, but Willshire case hard to prove.** *By Jacqueline Shandley.*

Mounted Constable William Willshire may have been considered a hero by some people, but not by Central Australia’s most respected historian. Dick Kimber believes Willshire murdered hundreds of Aborigines at the end of last century. Speaking after a call was made to retitle a street named after the man in Alice Springs, Mr. Kimber said



Willshire was a murderer, although it was hard to prove.

**Command**

“The circumstantial evidence suggests to me that he, the station hands he swore in as special constables, and the native police under his command probably shot over two hundred Aborigines in Central Australia....perhaps hundreds more” Mr. Kimber said.

However, there were many difficulties in proving Willshire’s crimes.

He did not act alone, the evidence was circumstantial, and his superiors found his reported acts to have been carried out on duty.

Willshire arrived in Alice Springs in August 1882 when he was 30. He left in 1895.



Local Historian Dick Kimber

In 1890 he was taken in chains to Port Augusta and charged over the murder of two men by the native constables under his command. But he had a good lawyer and the financial support of many people, including Centralian pastoralists, and was acquitted, Mr. Kimber said.

**Complexity**

Mounted Constable South arrested Willshire under the orders of Frank Gillen, the postmaster and Justice of the Peace.

But Willshire was not the only murderer, nor did he work alone.

“What you have is a great complexity because he didn’t work alone, and yet has come almost solely to represent the murderous behaviour of scores of people,” Mr. Kimber said “Among these scores were Mounted Constable Wurmbrand, pastoralists, and a pastoralist and hotel owner called Bently.” There were unpublished records of an incident when in reality seventeen were shot.

**Assume**

“Wurmbrand and Benstead deliberately used the expression dispersal rather than shooting because as Benstead recorded, it sounded better, “It was reasonable to assume it was the “practice of the day “.

It was “almost certain” Willshire used shooting

kangaroos as an “understood cover up reference” to the shootings of Aborigines. Mr. Kimber said. Conversely, he believes some people, such as Mounted Constable Cowle, had an undeserved notorious reputation.

“He was undoubtedly a hard man who was prepared to shoot a criminal, Aboriginal or otherwise in the execution of his duty.

“But on no recorded occasion did he (Cowle) do so.”

Instead, Cowle lived a hard life in the range country to catch Aborigines who were spearing cattle. When the Aboriginal murderer of Glen Helen Station owner Beattie was shot by Cowle’s native constable after smashing Cowle over the head and trying to escape, Cowle nursed the man until he died.

*Reproduced from Centralian Advocate June 8, 1999  
By Max Cartwright Alice Springs.*

**Willshire : Jury acquitted him**

SIR. I write in pure disgust at your headline news Street Named After Savage Killer (Advocate, June 1).

Mounted Constable First Class William Henry Willshire has been dead for 73 years and cannot defend himself.

He was arrested in 1891 at the whim of Frank Gillen JP, chained and sent south for trial over the death of two Aboriginal men at Tempe Downs, namely Donkey and Roger.

He was proven innocent and “honourably acquitted” by jury.

By “gutter journalism, racial and political intrigue” the *Advocate* has chosen to put M.C. Willshire on “media trial”, 108 years after being proven innocent.

To back up your nefarious journalism, you followed up on June 4 with further racial articles, and also added another article on Page 9 which gives rise to “a guessing game” of how many Aborigines were killed by the said M.C. Willshire, if any.

The article also adds that when Willshire recorded shooting “kangaroos” he meant Aborigines; also the term disperse sounded better than shooting Aborigines.

One historian claims Willshire shot “1000 men, women and children” (page 49 *Willshire* by Austin



Stapleton), while Friday's article on Page 9 guesses at 200)

The article even includes our pioneering pastoralist brethren and bush workers as murderers, along with Willshire!

Keep guessing and some day some one might come up with the truth.

If we are to maintain our proud history of Centralian progress and achieve a form of reconciliation, these perverted "activist" abhorractions must cease to allow a true historic reference to emerge.



Max Cartwright

Willshire gave thirty years of commendable service as a police officer, ten of them in the Northern Territory.

He left us with four books of irreplaceable and valuable Northern Territory history.

I am against replacing Willshire and other street names in Alice Springs, as suggested by a minority group.

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*Reproduced from Centralian Advocate June 11, 1999*

### **The victim of vicious slander.**

*Iain Morrison N.T Police Historical Society.*

SIR: In my thirty years in the Northern Territory I have frequently heard the name of Mounted Constable 1/ Class W.H. Willshire, mostly from people who are willing to believe, embellish and then pass on "a good story" regardless of fact. I find it disappointing and alarming that "Central Australia's most respected historian would state, "That he, the Station hands he swore in as special constables, and the native police under his command probably shot over 200 Aborigines in Central Australia.... perhaps hundreds more" on evidence he readily admits is circumstantial.

Have Willshire's detractors considered that the greatest of the "many difficulties in proving Willshire's crimes "is that he may be innocent of them? There is considerable evidence that Willshire has been the subject of deliberate slander

both during his term of duty in the Northern Territory and after his death.

### **Distortion.**

Myth, revisionist history, fashionable ideas and social change have been responsible for considerable distortion of history.

The book "Willshire of Alice Springs" by Austin Stapleton is readily available in local bookshops and presents another side to Willshire. The publication has been criticised by some as a biased version of Willshire's life and deeds, however it does make reference to contemporary accounts in both the Commonwealth and South Australian Archives. The criticism seems not to be directed at Stapleton's research and writing but rather his failure to satisfy a revisionist's misconception of the truth.

Historians, the new intelligentsia and the media will, no doubt, continue to apply current moral standards to past actions or reflect upon them their new philosophic viewpoint, however they should not create history adjusting it to suit their own vision of what it ought to have been. The current outcry is a typical example of how recent creation can distort history and be accepted by the uninformed and thoughtless solely because it fits fashionable prejudice.

In the interests of accuracy it should be further pointed out that Willshire served in the Alice Springs District between August 1882 and his suspension and conveyance to Adelaide in April 1891.

In regard to the headline article, "Street Named After Savage Killer," the Northern Territory Police issue firearm at that time was not a "Henry Martin .44" but the 450-577-500 Martini Henry Rifle.

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### **A dedicated and competent officer:**

*By G.T. Macpherson N.T. Police Historical Society.*

SIR: In response to comments by Mr. Vince Forrester's reference to a "Savage Killer". *Centralian Advocate*, Tuesday June 1 1999 and Mr. Kimber's "Willshire case hard to prove." in *Centralian Advocate*, Friday June 4 1999, I feel the matter requires some clarification.

Mounted Constable W.H. Willshire was charged with the murder of two natives, "Donkey" and



“Roger” at Tempe Downs on February 22 1891. He was brought before Mr. F. J. Gillen, J.P. who committed him to trial at the July sittings in Port Augusta.

He appeared before His Honour Mr. Justice Bundy and Jury. Mr. J. M. Stuart appeared for the Crown and Mr. T. Fepp for the Defence. At the conclusion of the evidence given, Sir John Downer addressed the Jury and argued the case for the Crown was mostly flimsy. The Jury retired for a quarter of an hour and returned a verdict of not guilty adding there was not a tittle of evidence to criminate Willshire, who was duly discharged and returned to his duties as a Mounted Constable.

Sir John Downer brought the matter before the South Australian Parliament and questioned the powers and conduct of Mr. Gillen J.P. in his investigation of Mounted Constable Willshire.

The above information is from officially recorded documents.

*Reproduced from centralian Advocate June 11, 1999*

**“Condemned by his own words.”**

People need only to read Mounted Constable First Class William Willshire’s own books to know he was murderer, according to local historian Ted Egan. And Mr. Egan said he had been suggesting Willshire Street in Alice Springs be renamed for some years because of this.

“His own writings condemn him as a fallacious murderer, more than anything else...more than Dick Kimber (local historian) or I ever could.



Ted Egan



Mounted Constables Willshire (standing), Mounted Constable Wurmbbrand (reclining) with trackers, Alice Springs, about 1884.

(Picture taken on formation of the Native Police Corps.)

History has been recorded from past events and is here to stay. It should not be changed for the sake of political correctness or belief. Nothing is mentioned of Mounted Constable Willshire’s skill in recording the languages of natives in both the Gordan Creek and Lake Amadeus areas of the Northern Territory. The fact, is Mounted Constable Willshire was a dedicated and competent officer who was required to patrol large tracts of land on his own. It is very easy to sit in the comfort of one’s modern home or office and pass judgement on departed Territorians as a means to their own personal opinion or preferences.

**Quote**

Willshire wrote three books, published between 1891 and 1896, including *The Land of Dawning: Being Facts Gleaned from Cannibals in the Australian Stone Age*.

“There’s a very well known quote where he says there’s only one way to speak English to a native - with a Martini Henry,” Mr. Egan said.

In the same book, Willshire noted that he saw a young Aboriginal woman “arrayed in her native modesty” with “the bust of juno, and hands which would delight any sculptor.”

The unusual part about the description was he saw the girl while in the middle of shooting Aborigines he had been following who were suspected of slaughtering cattle.

Mr. Egan has a Masters in history, has written about the Top End Caledon Bay killings between Aborigines, Japanese fishermen and policemen in the 1930s, and worked throughout the remote Territory for twenty seven years while working for the Native Affairs Branch.

Mr. Egan said the “awful thing” about Willshire was that he was highly regarded, and his actions applauded by many of his contemporaries.



### Eradicate

And while Willshire did not like Aboriginal men and was intent on eradicating them he was fond of giving the "best looking" young Aboriginal women to his staff as rewards Mr. Egan said.

"He was what would be described now as a perve. But probably his grandchildren thought he was a great bloke."

Darwin - based historian and writer Peter Forrest said there was no doubt Willshire killed Aborigines, but his actions had to be judged in context.

"The fact is Willshire is a very important figure in Central Australian history, and whether he was right or wrong we can't change that. " Mr. Forrest said.

While he did not condone or defend Willshire's actions, he was doing a job which was expected of him and would have been supported in his actions by "virtually the entire white community of the Centre."

### Advocate

The killings were also the "inevitable result" of settlement, Mr. Forrest said.

While he agreed Willshire was a killer, he could not advocate changing the street name.

"I certainly don't think we should be sanitising history," he said.

"What we need to do now is not change street names but step back and reflect maturely on the reality of settlement."

Framed Large photograph presented to Mounted Constable W.H. Willshire and inscribed:  
Presented to  
W.H. Willshire by the residents of Franklin Harbour as a mark of respect and esteem on his departure from the District 22/4/04.



However the "very well known quote" so dramatically misquoted in that same edition, refers to a hunt for cattle killers in the area of the Victoria River and reads.

"They (Aborigines) scattered in all directions, setting fire to the grass on each side of us, throwing occasional spears and yelling at us. It's no use mincing matters...the Martini Henry carbines at this critical moment were talking English in the silent majesty of those great eternal rocks."

Contrary to the allegation that "...he was fond of giving the "best looking" Aboriginal women to his staff as rewards "Willshire's writings indicate that on several occasions young Aboriginal women came to his Aboriginal trackers and Native Constables for protection. Willshire accepted this but was concerned for their welfare and on one occasion warned his man..."If you ever lay your hand upon her or abuse her in any way whatever I shall take her from you and send her back to the bush."

The description of the young Aboriginal woman so gleefully related as having occurred "in the middle of shooting Aborigines." In fact referred to one such refugee upon her acceptance of Willshire's boss trackers attentions the day after the fight. The description was written in the flowery literary style of the times and could only be interpreted as the writings of a "perve" by a biased mind.

The majority of so-called "evidence" trotted out against Willshire with such monotonous regularity consists of uncorroborated statements made by Hermannsburg Missionaries, the Rev. Messrs. Schwarz, Kempe and Schultz during the Parliamentary enquiry conducted by H.C. Swan, S.M. Stuart and Mr. C.E. Taplin, who was himself a missionary.

The enquiry examined charges and counter charges involving police, pastoralists and missionaries. The subsequent report found that the "statement of (police) shooting blacks is entirely unsupported by the evidence..."

There is no doubt Willshire killed a number of Aborigines. Peter Forrest's comment that his actions should be judged in context *and the prevailing circumstances* (italics mine) is valid.

Iain Morrison N.T. Police Historical Society.

### AGAIN, IN THE INTEREST OF ACCURACY.

SIR: Thank you for printing my letter re M.C. W. Willshire (11.06.99), I regret seeking your indulgence yet again.