

The Mystery Photograph

by Jim Fleming

I have had a mystery family photograph in my possession for over thirty years with, I thought, little chance of ever identifying who it portrays. But, after giving it a “red-hot go”, I reckon I’ve cracked it!

My late grandmother (Ena Ruby Kessey nee Murphy) left behind a collection of family photographs that she had stored for decades in a tin box. Most of the photos relate to her childhood, but the collection also includes a wedding photograph of her parents (George Charles Reed Murphy and Ellen Ruby Bowen); a portrait of her grandmother (Alice Clarkson Bowen nee Poulton); and a family portrait of the Bowen family of Bourke NSW circa 1892. Also, there are elaborate photographic Memorial Cards for her late mother and her late grandmother (Frances Reed nee Heazel). And there is the mystery photograph, about which we know nothing. This article describes my efforts to identify the people in this photograph.



Picture 1: The mystery photograph

Source: Ena Ruby Kessey collection

The mystery photograph is a formal portrait of what seems to be a large family group posing in three rows in front of a building with a wide doorway. The ten people in the front row are all seated. Most of them are on a long bench, but the three people (on the ends of the row) have wooden chairs. The six people in the middle row are standing on the ground, while the three people in the back row are standing in the doorway of the raised building. The building is clad with vertical weatherboards and has a roof of corrugated iron that is edged with guttering.

The youngest person seems to be about 15 years old; while the oldest could be late 70s or more. Those in the middle row rest their hands familiarly on the shoulders of those in the front row. Two of the men have their legs crossed in a fairly informal manner. The oldest man rests his bowler hat on his knee.

All of them are wearing formal dress, mostly in dark colours. All the men sport boutonnières (flowers in their buttonholes) perhaps signaling a wedding occasion. The immediate impression given by the photo is that this is an extended family group that has gathered to celebrate a family occasion in the building behind them. They are all wearing clothing that is best-suited to the cool weather of Autumn and Winter.



Picture 2: The mystery photograph with improved exposure and contrast

First step

The first step in my efforts to identify the people in the photo was to circulate it among members of my extended family in the hope that someone knew something. But that drew a complete blank. So, I decided to have a “red-hot go” at identifying the people; I would gather as much evidence as I could bring to bear in an endeavor to solve the mystery once and for all.

Dating the picture

It would be very difficult to identify the people without being able to date the picture, so this was my starting point.

It is printed on very good quality paper stock with “professional” curved corners; but it is not a studio portrait, there is no studio named anywhere and the picture is over-exposed. So, a gifted amateur may have taken the picture.

The photograph is slightly smaller than the cabinet card that was widely used by professional photographers from 1866 to 1900; it is the right width but about an inch shorter than the standard 6.5” cabinet card. On the other hand, it is slightly larger than the photo postcard that was popular from about 1898; it is the right length but is half an inch wider than the standard 3.5” photo postcard.

According to Phototree.com (http://www.phototree.com/Downloads/Cards_Ch5.pdf), while the cabinet card dominated until 1890, “*photographers offered a wide range of new card formats in the 1890s ... Most of the new cards were only different in size from the cabinet card. The photographic technology and fashions were usually the same as if it was a cabinet card. Therefore, it should be noted that if you have an odd sized card, it is most likely from the 1890s.*” The illustrated example given (pictured right) is an 1895 card that measures 5¼ inches wide by 4¼ inches tall – almost exactly the dimensions of my mystery photograph. Interestingly, like my mystery photograph, it is not a studio picture.



While this is very good evidence that the mystery photograph is from the 1890s, I note that the new card formats were sometimes used to duplicate older photos. For that reason, I also examined the hairstyles, clothing and accessories of the people pictured to obtain additional dating evidence.

I could rule out the 1850s and 1860s on numerous grounds. Women’s hair almost always featured a central part in the 1850s and men were usually clean shaven. Moustaches and bowties were not in vogue in the 1860s; while women generally displayed lots of jewellery (not seen in the mystery photograph).

The fashion for an extreme upsweep of women’s hair was introduced in the 1870s, as were moustaches, bow ties and watch chains for men. But women’s skirts were very elaborate affairs; not like the plain ones in the mystery photograph. Skirts were elaborate in the 1880s too.

The most striking fashion feature of the mystery photograph is the sleeves on the women’s dresses. They are puffed up hugely from shoulder to elbow in a style that was known as “leg-o’-mutton” or gigot sleeves. This is very helpful, because this fashion began in about 1892 and lasted until about 1900¹.

A mid-1890s date is also indicated by other fashion features that are evident in the picture, including the plain tulip bell shaped flared skirts; and the fact that fancy trim was placed mainly on the bodice. The women's hairstyles, too, are typical of the 1890s where the fringe (also called bangs) went out of fashion and hair was piled on top of the head. Furthermore, four of the women in the mystery photo are wearing a small bar pin on their collar at the neck – an 1890s fashionⁱⁱ.

The men's fashions also indicate an 1890s date. Short hair was not in vogue before that; nor were narrow tubular trousers. It was popular in the 1890s to have short jacket sleeves to reveal the shirt cuffs, as shown by several of the men in the mystery photograph. And bowties were very fashionable in the 1890s.

In conclusion, there is a large amount of evidence pointing to a mid-1890s date for the mystery photograph.

Who could they be?

Given that the photo comes from the collection of Ena Murphy, it is very likely that the family portrayed must be from her side of the family. The Ancestor Chart below reveals that the possibilities include the Murphy, Shea, Reed, Heazel, Bowen, Seage, Poulton and Clarkson branches (her eight great-grandparents).

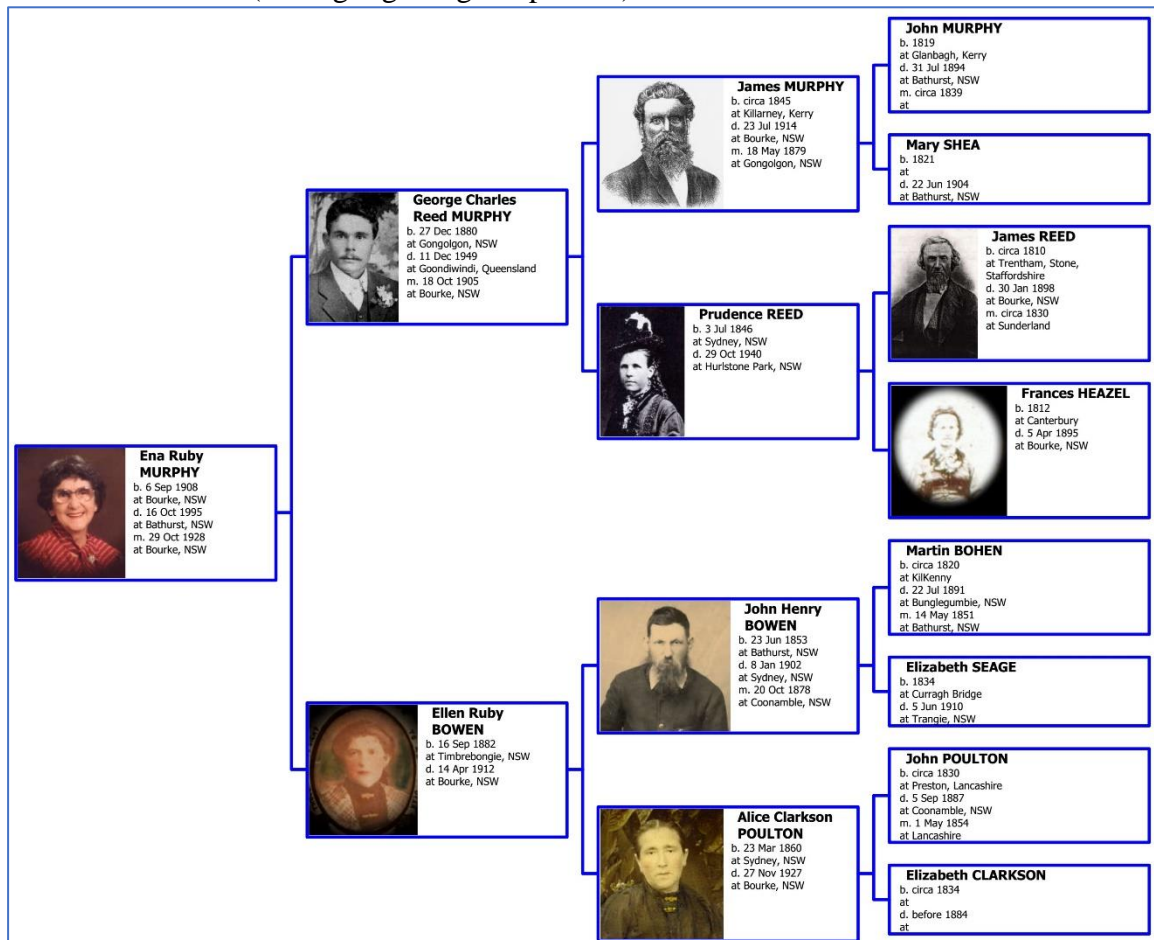


Chart: Ena Ruby Murphy's ancestors

Another possibility is the Whye brach of the family. Joseph Whye was the first husband of Prudence Murphy nee Reed (Ena's grandmother).

My next step was to consider each of these possibilities in turn, in a process of elimination

Heazel, Clarkson, Poulton and Whye

I immediately ruled out Heazel, Clarkson and Whye because only one or two people from those families ever came to Australia. I also ruled out Poulton, because that family had only one child survive to adulthood.

Shea

Mary Shea (Ena Murphy's great-grandmother) married John Murphy in about 1839. They came to Australia in 1853 with five children. Her father (Dennis Shea) had come to Australia as a convict in 1834 and her mother Mary had also emigrated to Australia. Since Dennis Shea was born in the 1790s, he would have been nearly 100 years old when the mystery photograph was taken (and his children all over 50). Therefore, the family in the photo cannot be the Shea family.

Seage

Elizabeth Seage was born in Ireland in about 1834 and married Martin Bohen in 1851. Her father would be about the right age to be the old man in the photograph (born circa 1810) but I don't know if he ever came to Australia. I do know that Elizabeth Bohen (nee Seage) lived in Bathurst, Orange and Dubbo before she died in Trangie in 1910. It is possible that a photograph of her Seage family could have passed from her, through her son John Henry Bowen, his widow Alice Clarkson Bowen to her grand-daughter, Ena Murphy. Nevertheless, I consider this scenario to be highly unlikely.

The remaining candidates

That leaves Murphy, Reed and Bowen (with Seage less likely). In endeavouring to tie the mystery photograph to one of these candidate families I focused on the oldest person in the photograph. If it was taken in 1895 and he is aged between 75 and 85, then his birthdate would be around 1810 to 1820. The candidates are:

- John Murphy (1819 – 1894)
- Martin Bohen (1820 - 1891)
- James Reed (1810 – 1898)

Martin Bohen

Since Martin Bohen died in 1891, it is very unlikely that he could appear in this photograph. The fashion for “leg-o'-mutton” sleeves on dresses started in 1892 – and probably took a little longer to reach NSW.

Martin Bohen's wife (Elizabeth nee Seage) died in Trangie NSW in 1910. In 1895 she would have been 61 years old, but there is no-one of that age group in the picture.

Furthermore, one would expect a photo of the extended Bohen family to include John Henry Bowen (Martin's eldest son) but he is not in his picture. Nor is his wife (Alice Clarkson Bowen nee Poulton).

I conclude that it is very unlikely that the family pictured is the extended Bohen family.

John Murphy

John Murphy died in July 1894. In that year, his wife (Mary nee Shea) would have been 73 years old, but there is no-one of that age in the picture. It is very unlikely, therefore, that the family pictured is the Murphy family.

James Reed

James Reed was 85 years old in 1895 when his wife died. At that time he had at least 3 sons and 5 daughters still living. Most of his family lived in one town: Bourke NSW (or in nearby Gongolgon). It is likely, therefore that this extended family gathered together frequently for special events such as weddings and funerals.

It is, therefore, quite conceivable that this is a photograph of a Reed family gathering in Bourke sometime after Frances Reed died in 1895 and before James Reed died in January 1898. Since most of the men are sporting boutonnières, it may have been a wedding. If so it was probably the wedding of one of James' grand-children because (as far as I have been able to establish) all his children's marriages occurred before 1895. The wedding of Henry J Reed and Ann E Lawler took place in Bourke in 1897. It may be that Henry was James' grandson, but that is only speculation at this stage.

So, based on the dating and genealogical evidence, it seems likely that the mystery photograph depicts a gathering of the extended Reed family in Bourke between 1895 and 1898.

Corroborating evidence

While the evidence supporting this conclusion is solid, it would be nice if other evidence could be brought to bear that could strengthen the case (or contradict it). I looked for as many photographs as I could find that could shed some light on the matter.



Picture 2: "Reed family of Bourke", circa 1875
Source: *Western Magazine*

I was not able to find any photographs of Martin Bohem, John Murphy or anyone from the Seage family. Fortunately, however, I have located several Reed family photographs that can assist.

Firstly, there is the widely-circulated picture of the “Reed family of Bourke” that was published in the *Western Magazine* about twenty years ago, (see previous page).

In this picture, James Reed appears with a high forehead, a pointy beard and his collar-length hair hangs in waves over each ear. Three places to James’ left sits a man that looks as though he could be a son. He also has a high forehead and sports a trimmed, rounded beardⁱⁱⁱ.

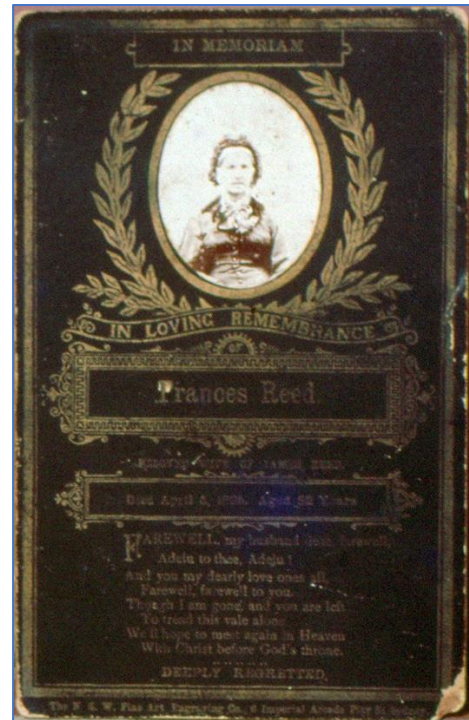
The date of this picture is not given but, based on the appearance of James and his wife Frances (both born in 1810), it seems likely that the picture was taken in about 1875.

The oldest man in our mystery photograph does resemble James Reed in the 1875 picture – if one allows for 20 years of ageing.



**Picture 3: Frances Reed, her son and his wife
circa 1885**

Source: Biles family, Ancestry.com



**Picture 4: 1895 Memorial Card for
Frances Reed**

Source: Ena Ruby Kessey

My research discovered a studio portrait of Frances Reed with her son and daughter-in-law that probably dates to about 1885 (see above). The identification of Frances Reed in this photograph is confirmed by comparison to her memorial card (also pictured above). The picture used for the memorial card has been taken from the larger picture with her son and daughter-in-law.

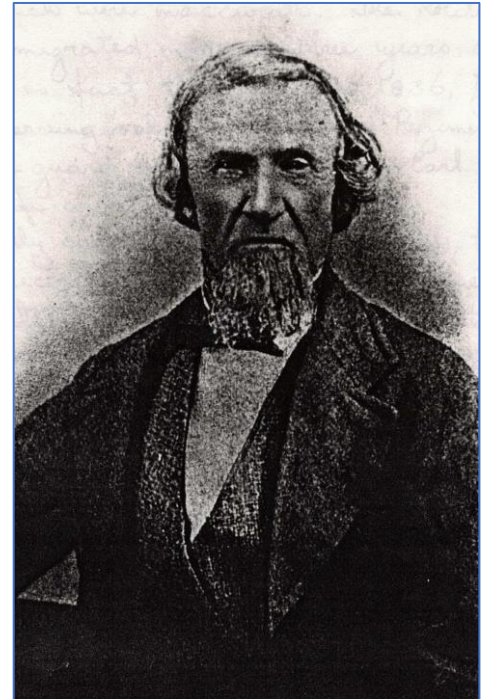
It seems that this son and daughter-in-law are the couple seated immediately to Frances’ left in the 1875 picture (Reed Family of Bourke). While two of the men in the front row of the mystery photograph both bear a strong resemblance to Frances’ son in this 1885 picture, it is difficult to say definitively that they are the same person.

The best result of my recent research was finding a portrait of James Reed himself. He appears younger than the other pictures. The beard without moustache dates the picture to probably the mid 1860s. It is noteworthy that his hair style is very similar to the style that he sports in the 1875 photo, the *Reed Family of Bourke*.

Unfortunately, the 1895 mystery photograph is so over-exposed that it is not possible to discern the facial features of the old man very well, although the “improved” version does assist a little. From what we can see, there is a strong resemblance to James Reed in both the 1860s and 1875 pictures, including the shape of his head; the ears; and the slope of his shoulders.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I am almost completely convinced that, based on all of the evidence outlined above, the mystery photograph features the Reed family of Bourke in about 1895. It would include some sons and daughters of James and Frances Reed along with some son- and daughters-in-law and several grandchildren.



Picture 5: James Reed, c 1865

Source: Debbie Campbell, Ancestry.com

The case for the mystery photograph being the Reed family circa 1895 could be clinched if we could identify any of the other known Reed family members in it. One way of doing so would be to find additional photos of Reed family members from around 1895 for comparison to this picture. Nevertheless, in the absence of such further evidence, I have a strong conviction that the mystery photograph is the Reed family of Bourke circa 1895.

Endnotes

Women's sleeves in the 1890s

One of the most notable features of our mystery photo is the exuberant sleeves on the dresses of all the women. This is very helpful in dating the photo to the 1890s, as explained by the clothes dating experts at the University of Vermont. The following explanation of 1890s sleeve styles is taken from their website here –

http://www.uvm.edu/landscape/dating/clothing_and_hair/1890s_clothing_women.php

The sleeves are one of the most distinguishing features of the 1890s costume. In 1890, the sleeve was very tight on the upper arm, and a puff was set vertically, high on the shoulder.



Early 1890s High Puff Sleeve

Image courtesy of Joan L. Severa

After 1892, the puff expanded around the upper arm. Leg-o'-mutton (or gigot) sleeves, characterized by their extreme fullness and puffiness from the shoulder to the elbow were fashionable at this time. Prior to 1895, sleeves were drooping.



1890s Leg-o'-mutton Sleeves

Image courtesy of Joan L. Severa

By 1896, the sleeve extended almost horizontally from the shoulder without any drooping lines. A range of other shoulder-enhancing trim was seen on the bodice.



1896 Full Sleeves

Image courtesy of Joan L. Severa

By 1898, the sleeve was tight, with a small, full, ball-shaped puff set very high on the arm.



1898 Tight Sleeve with Small Puff

Image courtesy of Joan L. Severa

The bishop sleeve (a full sleeve extending from shoulder and gathered at the wrist) still remained popular, although not as stylish and contemporary.



1890s Bishop Sleeve

Image courtesy of Joan L. Severa

See also: [http://www.phototree.com/gallery.asp?cat=shoulders&f0=90s Shoulders](http://www.phototree.com/gallery.asp?cat=shoulders&f0=90s%20Shoulders)

ii **Women’s fashion accessories in the 1890s**

The women in our photograph display remarkably little jewellery, even though jewellery was fashionable in the late 1800s. Nevertheless, four of them are displaying a small bar pin at the neck. This was a feature of women’s fashion in the 1890s. The following explanation is taken from the website of the University of Vermont:

(http://www.uvm.edu/landscape/dating/clothing_and_hair/1890s_accessories_women.php)

Both women also wear a small bar pin on the collar; this appears to still have been a fad at the time.



1890s Watches and Pins

Image courtesy of Joan L. Severa, *Dressed for the Photographer: Ordinary Americans and Fashion, 1840-1900*, 1995

Hairstyles at the start of the decade were simply a carry-over from the 1880s styles that included curled or frizzled bangs over the forehead as well as hair swept to the top of the head, but after 1892, hairstyles became increasingly influenced by the Gibson Girl. By the mid-1890s, hair had become looser and wavier and bangs gradually faded from high fashion. By the end of the decade, hair was often worn in a large mass with a bun at the top of the head, a style that would be predominant during the first decade of the 20th century.

From - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1890s_in_Western_fashion#Hairstyles_and_headgear

iii The couple to James’ right is his daughter (Sarah Ann) and her husband (Michael Brennan).