

#52 Ancestors 2020 Week 28 Multiple

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Week 28 - Multiple

All family historians are familiar with the perils of childbirth in the 19th century. We all have ancestors who died too young, and families where many children did not live past infancy. Multiple births were particularly fraught – for twins (and their mother) to survive birth was a rare achievement.

Twins are more likely to be born prematurely and to have birth complications which further imperilled the mother if she was living at a distance from medical care, as so many of our forebears did.

When my great grandmother Charlotte gave birth to twin boys in 1878, she was 36 and already mother to seven children. The babies were born on the family property “Lowestoft”, several miles from the nearest town. I understand from family stories that her daughter Jenny, who would have been only 10 at the time, was at the birth, and there may only have been one other woman to assist her.

The boys were born alive and named Richard and Joseph, but Richard died only three weeks later. Joseph lived to celebrate his second birthday but died shortly afterwards. According to family legend, they are buried in the orchard at Lowestoft.

Charlotte recovered and went on to have four more children, the last one when she was 43.

Charlotte’s sister Phoebe also had twin boys who died. Phoebe was the second wife to Stephenson Moore, who was more than 20 years her senior. He and his first wife had married in Ireland and already had three children when they arrived in New South Wales as assisted immigrants in 1841. There were four more births between 1843 – 1851, but the last baby died, and so did the mother.

When Phoebe married Stephenson she was only 20, and she became an instant stepmother to six, the oldest two of whom were just a few years younger than she was.

She and Stephenson went on to have 13 children, but four of them died in infancy. When the twins were born in 1871, Phoebe was still recovering from the birth and death of a baby boy the previous year. Born on 8 September 1871, David lived for two weeks, dying on September 22. His brother Robert died the following day.

These are tragic stories, but in my search for multiple births in the family tree, this one, from my husband’s tree, is both tragic and shocking.

Ruby Vera Lee was another of the many grandchildren of convict Agnes McMillan of whom I have written before. Born in Lismore in 1905, she was married at 17 to Henry Gill of Byron Bay. By the age of 29, Ruby had 8 children and was pregnant again.

This birth made the National newspapers. On 15 September 1935, Ruby gave birth to conjoined twins, also known as Siamese twins. The babies, both girls, died. Ruby died the following day.

In 1935, Lismore was a town of about 10,000. It's doubtful that any hospital in Australia could have coped with such a birth in 1935, but in a small country town it must have been a cause of panic. There were no ultrasounds to predict such an occurrence, and I doubt if there was even a specialist obstetrician. Ruby was young and had already delivered 8 children, so the birth was probably predicted to be routine.

Twins are much more common now than at any time in history. One reason is that women are having their families when they are older, and older women are more likely to have twins. Another is that Assisted Reproduction Technology has increased the likelihood of multiple births. Technology has also given us the ultrasound for early detection of in utero problems. Even conjoined twins now have a chance at a normal life – in recent years there have been several successful attempts at separating twins.

For hundreds of years, pregnancy and birth were both painful and dangerous. Before reliable contraception, a woman who married in her early twenties could expect to give birth every two or three years until her mid-forties. Every birth carried the risk of complications and possible death from excessive bleeding, prolonged labour or infection. And even if the mother survived, the baby may not. For a multiple birth, the odds were worse.

I look at the women in my past with admiration for their strength and fortitude in triumphing over these difficulties.

"SIAMESE TWINS"

AT LISMORE

Still-born; Mother Succumbs

LISMORE, Sunday.
Of normal size, with only one body between them, female twins were born to Mrs. Ruby Vera Gill, wife of Mr. Ernest Gill, of South Lismore. The twins were still-born, and the mother died 27 hours later, in the Lismore Base Hospital.

There were two heads, four arms, and four legs attached to a single trunk. The children were joined from the shoulders downwards, the heads being attached to separate necks.

Mrs. Gill is survived by her husband and family of eight young children. She was in normal health when admitted to hospital on Thursday. Mr. Gill has been a resident of Lismore for about five years, and previously resided at Grafton, Byron Bay, and Coraki. At present he is engaged in emergency relief work at North Lismore. The children's ages range from 13 to 2 years.