

A fugitive from

# *justice*





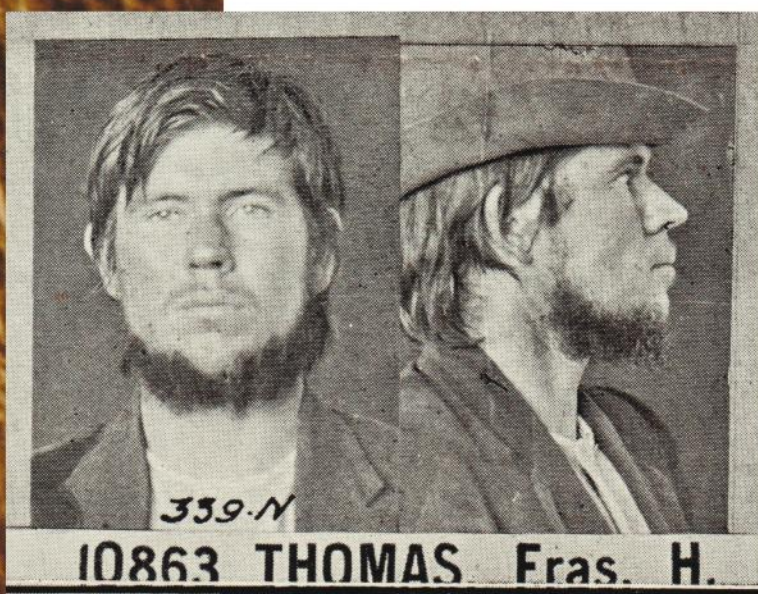
In the early twentieth century, the Mid West region of Western Australia was home to a lesser-known bushranger with a taste for a challenge and a knack for daring escapes.

**Andrew Bowman-Bright**, historian at the Carnamah Historical Society and Museum, reports.

*The career of the Kelly gang and their decline and fall, is a memorable episode in Australian history, but the chronicler of Australian bushranging may find almost equally excellent material in the exploits of Francis Henry Thomas. On May 23 this man effected a dramatic escape from the Geraldton Gaol, where he was awaiting trial on charges of theft. As soon as he was clear of Geraldton Thomas, who is a brilliant horseman, executed a number of raids on camps pitched at various points between the Wongan Hills and Midland railway lines, stealing valuable horses and considerable quantities of stores.*

*On Friday last he was recaptured by the police at Perenjori, and was being escorted to Geraldton when he again escaped custody, near the township of Buntine. Chief Inspector McKenna has now received information that Constable Wreford has followed the man's tracks to a point eight miles from Perenjori, and that police parties from Three Springs, Goomalling and Mingenew are searching the district in the hope of discovering the hiding-place of the fugitive.*

*– The West Australian,  
15 November 1922 ►*



**Above** Headshot of the young Frank Thomas, taken in 1921 and published in the Police Gazette of Western Australia. Images courtesy Carnamah Historical Society and Museum unless otherwise stated.





**Opposite A**  
re-enactment of a  
bushranger robbing  
some travellers on  
a country road,  
c.1898–1918.  
Courtesy State  
Library of Victoria,  
ID H33027/10a.

This story began in 1897 when the youngest son of **Beulah** and **Frank Thomas** was born at Greenough, an agricultural district 400 kilometres north of Perth. They named their little boy **Francis Henry William** and, like his father, he was soon known as Frank.

A few years after his birth his parents moved southward to Coorow and took over the remaining remnants of Coorow Station. This once large pastoral station had been established by the Long family in 1862 but bankruptcy and ownership changes had seen it diminished to a handful of small blocks surrounding waterholes. Frank took up residence with his parents in the old mud-brick Coorow House and their contribution as early and respected farmers was immortalised with Thomas Street in Coorow being named in their honour.

After about eight years, Frank Snr fractured the old property further by selling most of it to a Perth businessman. The family then moved into nearby bush to carve out a farm from land surrounding Jun Jun Spring.

It was here at Jun Jun that Frank Jnr became an accomplished horseman and excellent bushman. He assisted his father and elder brother **Jack** on the farm but things were not going well.

He could not read or write and it was said that his father hadn't provided him with the same educational opportunities as his brother. Others claimed that he'd

got on the wrong side of the law after being pursued by police for a theft he hadn't committed. Potential reasons aside, at the prime age of 21 he retreated from society and took to the bush.

He constantly stole the best of horses and helped himself to livestock, food, clothes and blankets. He often threw boxes of goods off moving trains then returned on a stolen horse to go through the boxes and take what he wanted. When the horse he was riding became tired he'd simply set it free and steal another one. To the womenfolk he was behind every tree and they felt unable to cope. The men just swore about what a pest he'd become.

Frank operated across multiple districts and along two regional railway lines. He was constantly sought by police but continuously evaded capture. On one occasion police stumbled upon his camp while he was cooking a stolen chicken. He fled on horseback and as usual got away. The police figured they might as well return to his camp and enjoy the chicken but by the time they arrived Frank had already doubled back, collected the chicken and left again.

After causing trouble over 12 months he was finally captured by Police Constable **Charlie Kroschel** and was sentenced to two years' imprisonment with hard labour. Following his release he returned to Coorow in 1922 but was soon once again wanted by the police. Two constables and an Aboriginal tracker chased his tracks for two weeks through the bush in the freezing cold and wet of winter. They found several of his campsites and multiple stolen goods but no Frank Thomas.

Years later it was suggested that **Jochim Dido**, the tracker, hadn't been as proficient as he could have been as he knew Frank and didn't want him to be caught. The efforts of police were also thwarted by some farming families who believed he was being harshly targeted. When questioned by police they would pretend they hadn't sighted Frank when in reality some had even spoken to him.

The harder the police tried to capture him, the more he flaunted his skill to escape. Often they'd know he was around and would keep watch



waiting for him to steal a fine horse or supplies left at a railway station. He was never deterred and would go out of his way to take their bait and escape.

One moonlit night his father caught wind that he was nearby so hung up some mutton in a shed, knowing his son might steal it. His father kept watch all night but to no avail. Around dawn he fell asleep for just a moment and woke to find the mutton gone.

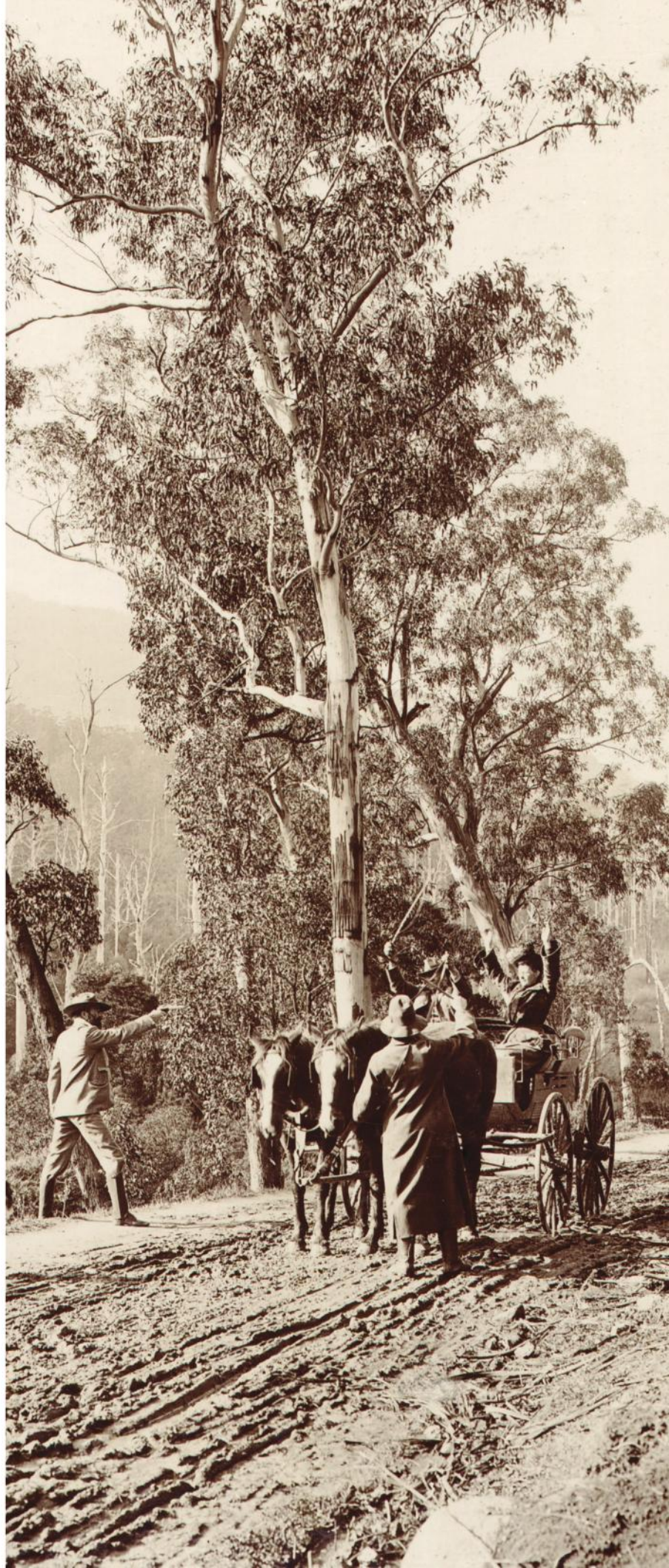
Frank stole horses so many times that one farmer at Waddy Forest had a small yard built alongside his house for his prized horse and kept a firearm at his side through the night. Like the mutton, this proved a tempting challenge and the horse was stolen yet again.

His second stint as a bushranger drew to a close after police pounced on him while he was sleeping in a stable. He offered no resistance and was arrested on 19 charges of stealing and seven changes of unlawfully using horses. He was taken to Geraldton and while awaiting trial he picked a lock and escaped. He immediately resumed his old habits but over an even larger area, now extending up into the Murchison goldfields. With the added crime of escaping custody he was on the run and police again made many fruitless attempts to capture him. For 140 days he thieved his way through farms, camps, railway sidings and trains.

He was finally recaptured on 10 November 1922 and was taken to the police lock-up in Buntine to enable the constable responsible to get some rest, as he'd had almost no sleep for three days. While the constable slept Frank used his coat to pull down some of the wire from the roof of the lock-up's exercise yard and he again escaped, being described by *The West Australian* newspaper as '*a Bird of Freedom*'.

Frank had now become a severe problem and embarrassment for the police. Not only had they struggled to capture him but he'd now escaped from their custody on two separate occasions.

Constables from Three Springs, Mingenew and Goomalling joined forces to locate him but the public and the press had their doubts. Frank was an accomplished bushman and had proven ►





he was capable of enduring fatigue when he was being pursued.

After leaving Buntine he made it to a camp at Latham where he was in the process of stealing a horse, saddle and bridle. After the owner of the items showed up he dropped what he had in his hands and took off with the horse. After arriving in his hometown of Coorow he stole a rifle and ammunition. Many believed he'd never harm anyone, but how could they be sure?

A few days later, Frank very ingeniously stole a horse from **Donald Macpherson** in Carnamah. He went to where Donald's horses would drink each evening and emptied their trough. The horses were waiting around thirsty when he returned with a bucket of water. While one of the horses eagerly drank he caught it with rope taken off the bucket.

Knowing he was in Carnamah the police waited at the railway station, expecting him to steal after a train passed through. Frank entered a shed where a constable was waiting and the constable called for him to surrender. He took off but tripped and fell. He was then given an ultimatum — surrender or be shot. Frank complied and returned to Geraldton with a host of new charges against him. He pleaded guilty to stealing, improperly using horses and escaping custody. He was charged and sentenced to 25 months' imprisonment for 10 offences while dozens of other charges were dropped.

Frank's father wrote a revealing letter to the editor of *The Midlands Advertiser* newspaper, published on Friday 27 February 1920:

*My son has been carrying on this thieving game for 12 months or more. In the first part of his little game he was only mild but as the police put some restraint on his behaviour he got worse and worse in his extravagant pursuits, taking horses four or times a week, jumping trains, emptying goods out without any advantage or gain to himself any more than to get a bit of food. He even came at night and took a horse, saddle and bridle from me and very often came home at dead of night and took food from the safe of his own home whilst a fond mother lay within that would walk over an acre of hedgehogs in her bare feet to give him food had she known he was hungry....*

*He is a fine man and worth a little trouble. I must add my son has been very peculiar all his life. Maybe the complaint is coming to a head now and on the turn to recovery and I hope he will get such treatment as will help him along in that direction.*

As is often the case with Australia's more famous bushrangers, this story doesn't have a happy ending. Frank ended up spending most of his adult life in Perth at the Claremont Hospital for the Insane. He died in 1960 and is buried in an unmarked grave at Perth's Karrakatta Cemetery. In the end, for all Frank's clear thirst for a challenge, and his gift for evading and escaping police, his story is not one of mental wellness — a sad final note for one of Australia's last bushrangers. 🍷

**Below** Midland Railway line in Western Australia, which Frank frequently raided. Courtesy State Library of Western Australia.

