

## The Stobaus Family Saga

By July 1915 three brothers, Ralph, Robert and Victor Stobaus had all enlisted in the AIF. They were the only sons of Ralph and Margaret *nee* Prendergast. Orphaned some fifteen years earlier, they and their sisters had been brought up in Carlton by Catherine Murray, their mother's sister. Their early childhood had not been easy.

According to his naturalisation application their father, Prussian-born Carl Heinrich Ralph Stobaus, was 18 when he arrived in Victoria in March 1854 on the *Walter Raleigh*. By the mid 1860s he was master of a schooner, the *Gem* and later the *Eliza*, which regularly plied the coastline from Belfast (now Port Fairy) and Warrnambool as far as Newcastle in New South Wales. In 1864 he married Sarah Boardman and had a family of eight children, six of whom survived. Tracing the history of this family is not easy. The surname was very often spelt Stobans, not just in newspaper reports but also in birth and death records, in army files and on electoral rolls.<sup>1</sup>

Apparently there was a Stobaus tradition of always using the last of three given names and Ralph, as he was commonly known, soon gave up seafaring for pawnbroking. He was living in Courtney Street, North Melbourne by 1867 and his business opened there in 1869. Over the next three decades he became a well-known local identity, his name appearing in local newspapers from time to time over an early insolvency, break-in attempts, dissatisfied customers, disputes with neighbours and infringements of the pawnbroking regulations. Usually the defendant, he and Sarah were in 1876 the plaintiffs in a slander action against Thomas Gaynor, a neighbouring shoemaker who had "several times, in the presence of the female plaintiff and in reference to her, as it was alleged, made use of these words 'There is Sal Fish that had a child by her father.' The plaintiffs' case was that in consequence of this untrue aspersion on his wife's character his business had fallen from £90 to £20 per month ... his profits having undergone a proportionate reduction. The defendant simply pleaded not guilty. Two or three witnesses deposed to having ceased to deal with the plaintiff, owing to what they had heard from Gaynor about Mrs. Stobans. Damages were laid at £900." The "Stobans" won their case, but the damages awarded by the jury was only £10.<sup>2</sup>

Sarah died in 1886 at the age of forty. In the following year Ralph married Castlemaine-born Margaret Prendergast, aged 23 and born in the same year that Ralph married Sarah. Another five children were born. All of them had three given names and all were known in the family by the last of these three names, Mary Alice Maude (1888) Gustav Adolph Ralph (1890) Robert Hector Otto (1892) Caroline Augusta Margaret (1894) and Victor Norman Hugo (1896). In 1897, at the age of 61 and after 44 years' residence in Australia, Ralph applied for and was granted naturalisation. The letter which accompanied his application gives us a vivid glimpse of his character.

"I am in the Colony of Victoria nearly 45 years constand and during this time I brought a Familie up respectable .... One time I objected to be on the jury and made the excuse that I was not a naturalised British Subject and the late Judge Williams said that I was naturalised three times over and ordered me up in the Jurybox. I dount think the Legislator made the act and meant it for people like me, if I am not naturalised jet by the number of years I am in the Country, I never will be. I look at the prinsable and not at the Money it cost to get naturalised. "<sup>3</sup>

Ralph Stobaus died in 1898, hailed in the local paper as “one of the old identities of North Melbourne”. He left an estate of £740 and an extremely detailed will (which appears in the probate records under “Stobans”). It suggests that he might have been quite a controlling husband and father. His wife was to have three quarters of the rental income from his properties to maintain herself and her children, provide she did not marry or “misconduct herself”, which the will defined as living with a man outside marriage. After her death, marriage or “misconduct” his assets were to be divided between the children of his second family and Wilhelmena Josephine, born 1881, the only child of his first marriage to benefit. She was to have two houses he owned in Courtney Street plus the furniture of the family home (no. 45) “but the other children ... may be at liberty to use the piano if they can play proper Musick thereon provided they behave themselves respectfully”. His younger daughters were to share their home at 45 Courtney Street and Maude (presumably as the older daughter) was to have the sewing machine numbered 107 876. Ralph was to receive the house at 22 Castlemaine Street, Yarraville and Otto to have land near the quarries at Woodend. Land in Yarraville and Maidstone was to be sold and invested for Hugo, who was only two when the will was written.<sup>4 5</sup>

When their father died Maudie, the eldest, was ten. The children attended Errol Street School and in 1898 both Maudie and Ralph featured in the Prize List. But by 1901 the widowed Margaret was in difficulties and may already have been ill. It was a disastrous year for the family. In January the *North Melbourne Gazette* reported that Ralph and Otto were brought before a magistrate after breaking into the Church of England, “committing a nuisance and damaging property”. Worse was to come. “Juvenile Depravity” was the headline in the *Argus* in July.

“Two intelligent looking girls, each only 13 years of age, named Louisa White and Maud Stobaus were charged with being neglected children. Evidence was given by Constables Sharpe and McPherson and Senior Constable Satchwell that during the past fortnight they had frequently observed the girls parading the streets, both in the daytime and late at night, in the company of youths. The result of the police inquiries left but little doubt that the girls had been leading an immoral life. Margaret Stobaus, the mother of the girl Stobaus, stated she was a widow. Her daughter left her home seven weeks ago and she had not seen or heard of her until she was arrested. Elizabeth White, the mother of the girl White said that her daughter had been away from home for ten weeks, and witness had heard nothing of her during that period. In answer to the Bench, the girls stated that since leaving their homes they had been lodging at an hotel in Carlton. Mr Hurst said it was a truly lamentable case. He hoped that the police would ascertain if the statement made by the girls relative to staying at the hotel was true, and if it was correct, that they take some action against the hotelkeeper. It was shocking to see two mere children leading an abandoned life. The girls were committed to the care of the Department of Neglected Children.”<sup>6</sup>

A month later Margaret Stobaus was admitted to hospital. Worried about the care of her sons, Ralph 11, Otto 9 and Hugo 5, while she was in hospital, she agreed to leave the three boys in a home in La Trobe Street run by the widely-admired Selena Sutherland, who for many years had been a crusader fighting for poor and neglected children. Previously she had worked under the auspices of the Presbyterian Church, but after a disagreement had withdrawn from that organisation in 1894 and established what was known as the Victorian Neglected Children’s Aid

Society. While their father was alive the Stobaus children were brought up as Protestants, but upon his death Margaret had had them baptised in her own religion. According to the *Catholic Advocate*, during the three months she was in hospital she repeatedly told her sister Catherine Prendergast that if anything happened to her she wanted them brought up Roman Catholic.

But when Margaret died aged only 37 of “malignant disease of the uterus and exhaustion” in November 1901, Miss Sutherland refused to hand the boys over, saying that a relative on their father’s side had made a claim to them. (This was Ralph and Sarah’s son Rudolph.) It took a writ of *habeus corpus* and a Supreme Court judgment for the boys to be returned to the care of the Prendergast family. Another article in the same issue of the *Advocate* used the case to argue the need for a home for neglected Catholic children where their faith would not be “tampered with”, which was surely something these children had already experienced.<sup>7</sup>

Presumably their lives after 1902 were less dramatic. By 1915 all three of the Stobaus boys had joined up, Ralph at 25, Otto, now using his first given name of Robert, at 23 and Hugo, now Victor, at 19. Maggie, the younger daughter, was living in Cardigan Street, Carlton with her aunt Catherine. Maud, no longer a “depraved juvenile”, had become Mrs Anthony Egan, living in Berrigan, New South Wales and, as Ralph’s story shows, she was an exemplary elder sister.

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#### References:

- <sup>1</sup> Naturalisation record of Carl Heinrich Ralph Stobaus, NAA: A712, 1897/F1240 (National Archives of Australia)
- <sup>2</sup> *The Bendigo Advertiser*, 10 August 1876, p. 2
- <sup>3</sup> Naturalisation record of Carl Heinrich Ralph Stobaus, *op cit*
- <sup>4</sup> Probate file of Carl Heinrich Ralph Stobans, VPRS 28/P0/916/71/898 and VPRS 28/P2/517/71/898
- <sup>5</sup> Will of Carl Heinrich Ralph Stobans, VPRS 7591/P2/71/898
- <sup>6</sup> *The Argus*, 12 July 1901, p. 3
- <sup>7</sup> *The Advocate*, 7 June 1902, p. 11 and 16