

South Australia's most eccentric bushranger

WANTED

John Francis Peggotty



THE BIRDMAN OF COORONG

Bushranger **GOLD**

By Elun Hayle

SOUTH AUSTRALIA'S history has only ever been able to claim one genuine bushranger, but he was remarkable – he was the only one to pursue his career on the back of an ostrich.

The bushranger's remains are somewhere in the Coorong, that long stretch of shifting sand, marsh and sea-lake along the coast from Adelaide. Anybody who finds them will become an instant millionaire.

John Francis Peggotty was born in County Limerick in 1864. He was

apparently the best part of three months premature and there is a letter on record which his father (Mark Francis) wrote to his uncle (Francis James, who had migrated to Australia) saying there was little hope the boy would live...”He cannot tip the scales against a medium sized bird”, which would probably mean the baby weighed less than 1.5kg.

But John Francis Peggotty did live and became a very active boy, but he remained small.

When he left home at the age of 18 his father wrote of him, “As we fare-welled him I realized anew that he was the stature of a quite small boy – I cannot think what occupation he could apply himself to in which he would prosper.”

John Peggotty went to South Africa, where he was captivated by the sight of men riding ostriches. Ostrich races were

common there at the end of the last century.

An ostrich saddle is a small padded cushion held by a belt around the bird's body. The bridle is a rope circle around the top of the bird's neck. To guide it you pull on either rein, as with a horse, but to stop it you pull the neck down so the bird's head almost touches the ground. It's quite a skill and because an ostrich is not nearly as strong as a horse it's a skill that can only be practised by small people.

Nothing is known of what Peggotty did in South Africa, but from his later career it seems certain that he did learn to ride ostriches.

He was next heard of in London in 1890 where he had used his size to economic advantage by sliding down the chimneys of the rich and stealing their jewellery.

*Lone traveler James McLoughlin
was robbed of his cash, gold and
brandy by ostrich-riding Peggotty*

He must have been small indeed to do this. There are no records of his size, but he must have been the equivalent of a seven-year-old.

He was arrested in a London lodging house whose landlady had reported him, when her suspicions were aroused by his habit of parading around the house half-naked and draped with gold chains and jewellery.

"He would have chains on his neck and on his arms, and his chest was almost wrapped in necklaces. I thought it strange," the landlady later told the court.

The jewellery was found in Peggotty's room when he was arrested. It was easily identified as belonging to several prominent London families. This was enough to have him sentenced to 15 years imprisonment.

However, the sentence was later reduced to five years "as the valuables had all been recovered and because of the prisoner's extreme youth". As Peggotty was then 26 years old it seems likely that he had used his size to pretend to be a minor.

He served the full five years then took a ship to Australia to start anew in the employ of his Uncle Francis, who was raising sheep in the Orange district of New South Wales.

"He was very strong and active," Francis wrote to his brother Mark, "but he was not inclined to work. He would loiter around the house most of the day and had the unfortunate habit of borrowing my wife's jewellery and adorning himself in it. I must confess I was not sorry to see him go. He has gone to join some friends in Adelaide and promised me that he would write to you from that town."

No one knows who the friend in Adelaide was, but Peggotty was next heard of as the leader of a gang of small boys who specialised in sliding down chimneys and looting houses.

Some of them were caught from time to time, but never Peggotty. In a three-year period the gang was held responsible for stealing more than 30,000 pounds worth of gold and jewellery – worth millions on today's market.

The boys who were captured all insisted that Peggotty had kept all the jewellery for himself and rewarded them with a small regular wage.

"He liked to wear the jewellery," one of the boys said. "He would cover himself with it."

Then the robberies stopped and nothing was heard of Peggotty until July 13, 1898, when he established himself forever as the most eccentric bushranger in the history of Australia.

He appeared at the mouth of the Murray, near the beginning of the Coorong, stripped to the waist and laden with jewellery and gold chains on his arms and chest, brandishing two adorned pistols and riding an ostrich.

His victim was a lone traveler named James McLoughlin, and Peggotty robbed him of "two one-pound notes, a gold watch and a half-full bottle of brandy."

The astonished McLoughlin reported the robbery to the police, who simply refused to believe him.

But they began to have misgivings a week later when George McBride, of Adelaide, who had been "inspecting properties for possible purchase", reported that he had been held up by the half-naked, bejeweled, pistol-bearing ostrich rider and robbed of "17 schillings of silver".

A party went to investigate and found along the road the "partly decomposed body of a middle-aged man with a bad wound on his forehead." Near the body were tracks which the police normally would have taken to be emu tracks. But reasoning from the account of the two hold-up victims they could only conclude they were ostrich tracks.

There could be no reasonable doubt that the southern Murray and Coorong districts were the haunt of a murderous man riding an ostrich.

From the description given by the surviving victims, the police had little doubt the man was Peggotty.

The police may or may not have known that there was nothing remarkable about the presence of ostriches in the Coorong. The huge, nervous birds are still there, descendants of several flocks imported to South Australia from South Africa in unsuccessful attempts to breed them for their feathers.

How Peggotty caught his mount was never discovered, but he presumably used his experience gained in South Africa. Why he used an ostrich for transport became obvious the first time the police almost caught him.

A party of three led by Sergeant Cooper at the eastern end of the Coorong on January 10, 1899, saw a "half-naked man on a large bird like an emu with a pistol in his hand and wearing a great deal of jewellery. We first thought it was a boy because of his size, but he had a thick black short beard."

The police gave chase and began shooting when Peggotty loosed off one of his pistols at them.

"As soon as our horses reached the soft sand they began to founder, but the bird seemed to take speed and left us far behind. We last saw it carrying its rider over a high soft sand hill which our horses could not climb."

In other words, an ostrich was the ideal transport for the soft shifting sands of the Coorong. It just couldn't be caught.

Peggotty was credited with a dozen more hold-ups and the murder of one more traveler before his career ended on September 17, 1899, when he tried to hold-up Henry Carmichael, who was just pulling into the shore on the east side of the Murray after a day's fishing.

Carmichael, who had a long-range rifle with him, wasn't impressed by the diminutive jewellery-laden ostrich rider. He grabbed the raffle and fired.

Peggotty fire two pistols, missed, turned his mount and fled. Carmichael had left a horse tethered on the shore.

He had recognised Peggotty and knew there was a reward on his head. He leaped onto his horse and went after the midget, who had a good start. There wasn't much chance of Carmichael catching him, but he had a rifle.

Peggotty was in the soft sand and making for the even softer hills when Carmichael, a marksman, dismounted and took slow and steady aim.

"I could see the jewellery hanging on his body and arms," he said. "Many thousands of pounds worth – it made a good target."

Carmichael fired and Peggotty fell from the ostrich, but still held the reins and in moments was back in the saddle and away.

Carmichael fired again. The ostrich staggered but kept going, slowly now.

Carmichael remounted and went after Peggotty. At the spot where the bushranger had fallen, Carmichael saw a broken gold chain and a splash of blood. His bullet had cut the chain.

Peggotty was at the bottom of a huge sand hill and Carmichael knew he would never catch him now, even though the ostrich was wounded.

He dismounted and again took careful aim. Peggotty was hit again, but did not fall.

Once more Carmichael fired. He neatly took the ostrich's head from its neck. The giant bird reacted like a domestic hen. Headless, wings flapping, it ran wildly and impossibly swiftly up the sand hill and disappeared over the top with the wounded Peggotty still astride it.

Carmichael followed. His horse couldn't get up the sand hill so he walked, sinking to his knees and starting landslides.

He took half an hour to reach the top, and there was the headless ostrich. A trail of thick blood stained the sand, leading into a wide stretch of thick scrubland which ran to the water.

Carmichael was not anxious to pursue an armed man who was under cover, no matter how badly wounded. He went back to his horse, collected the broken gold chain and rode off to report to the authorities.

With two bullets in his body, and most of his blood on the harsh sands of the Coorong, Peggotty was a dead man. His body was never found.

His bones still lie in the Coorong, and draped around them is at least a million dollars worth of gold chains and jewellery.

*"I cannot think what occupation he could
apply himself to in which he would prosper"*