

Celebrating the life of our early legal pioneer

By LEAH ANDERSON-BYRNE

William Ah Ket: from Wangaratta to the High Court

A UNIVERSITY of Melbourne professor is researching the life of Australia's first lawyer of Chinese descent, William Ah Ket, who was born in Wangaratta.

Associate Professor Andrew Godwin has been an academic at Melbourne Law School since 2006, after returning from a decade working in Shanghai as a foreign lawyer, and heard of William Ah Ket several years ago.

"However, it wasn't until I was invited by the Asian Australian Lawyers Association to attend the 2019 William Ah Ket Scholarship Award ceremony at the High Court in October last year that I really started to develop an interest in his story," he said.

"By coincidence, a member of the contemporary generation of the Ah Ket family sat next to me and we struck up an ongoing conversation about William, his life and career.

"This subsequently led to introductions to and meetings with more members of the Ah Ket clan; I am currently working with the Ah Ket family to gather information on William's life and to tell his story through various publications.

"The William Ah Ket Scholarship is administered by the Asian Australian Lawyers Association and supported by the law firm, Maddocks; William did his legal training at Maddocks, or Maddock and Jamieson as it was then known."

William's life in Wangaratta begins on the banks of the Ovens River.

"William was born in the toll house next to the bridge on the Ovens River and grew up on land that his father farmed on Oxley Flats Road," Professor Godwin said.

"During his primary schooling, he would travel by horse from his father's property to attend class at the Wangaratta Primary School.

"He studied law at Melbourne University and was awarded the Su-



REMARKABLE LIFE: Wangaratta-born lawyer, William Ah Ket.

preme Court Judges Prize in 1902.

"I have learnt that William Ah Ket's life was one of diversity and service and is a story that we should tell and celebrate in today's multicultural Australia.

"It was remarkable that William became such a prominent lawyer in his times, despite the legal and institutional discrimination against the Chinese that existed at the time.

"What is equally remarkable is how William became part of mainstream Australian society; including marrying a Caucasian lady of Scottish descent, while maintaining and practising his Chinese values.

"William's life was very much about building bridges between the 'East' and the 'West' and focusing on our common humanity and aspirations.

"During his career, William appeared on behalf of clients in many cases before the High Court of Australia, one of which (Potter v Minahan) is still cited as current law.

"In addition to pursuing his practice at the bar, William Ah Ket served as the acting consul-general for China in 1913-14 and in 1917."

Professor Godwin said he would be "delighted" to contact anybody in Wangaratta who has stories about William Ah Ket or people he knew.



Associate Professor Andrew Godwin

If you have any information email Andrew at a.godwin@unimelb.edu.au.

One in three lawyers experience sexual harassment

By NICK SINIS

WANGARATTA-based state MP Tania Maxwell (MLC, Northern Victoria) is hopeful the State Government's review into sexual harassment across the state's courts will provide an opportunity for employees to feel safe.

The review has been jointly initiated by the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court and Chair of the Courts Council.

It will consider measures to prevent sexual harassment, improve reporting and support for those who experience sexual harassment and ensure accountability in workplaces.

Ms Maxwell said she was disappointed and concerned a review was even required.

"It is appalling that sexual harassment is still happening in the work place and I implore people to be mindful of their behaviour and respectful to each other, at all times," she said.

Ms Maxwell said the industry has had a history of inappropriate behaviour and unacceptable inequality.

"I hope this review will highlight and recommend ways in which this historic sexual harassment will be eradicated," she said.

"I would like to congratulate both men and women who have been brave enough to come forward, and report this disrespectful behaviour."

The review will be undertaken in consultation with the Judicial Commission of Victoria.

The government will also conduct a review of the policies and practices of law firms that provide services to government.

This includes working with partners to review training on sexual harassment for all barristers and solicitors, and seek internal audits and assurance on their processes around sexual harassment.

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