

## 17. Across The Indian Ocean

On 23 August 2006 I headed off with Robynne across the Indian Ocean to Mauritius – the land from where Grampa had come from 130 years earlier. His journey would have taken four weeks in a steam boat or tall ship, across the wild seas. Our trip took 11 hours on an Air Mauritius jet plane flying direct from Melbourne. How times have changed!

### Safe Landing

We arrived on the same day as we left Melbourne, because we had gone back six hours in time, landing safely in beautiful Mauritius. I was a little disoriented from my tiredness and the time change; at 73 years of age and being my first major trip overseas, is it any wonder I was a bit disoriented. We were staying at the Klondike hotel at Flic en Flac, on the south-west coast of Mauritius and considered by locals to be one of the most beautiful beaches on the island. The climate was hot and humid, so the weather knocked us a bit at first. We slept for the next 18 hours before finally going out to look around.

After I found my feet (which seemed to arrive the day after I did), we headed off to spend some time with my Cousin Arlette, her brother Sydney along with Sydney's wife Joceyline and their daughter Lorna Purahoo. Remember Samson's second marriage? His daughter Ruth is the grandmother of Arlette and Sydney (and Laurent, who we met some days later).

### Driving in Mauritius

We hopped in our tiny car and headed across country from Flic en Flac through sugar cane country that felt very much like driving through Bundaberg, a sugar-cane region in Queensland, Australia, with mountain peaks all around that are similar to the Glasshouse Mountains north of Brisbane. Fortunately you drive on the same side of the road as in Australia, so it was pretty easy driving there – once we learned the rules! We learnt very early on that when driving in Mauritius you do what the locals do or you just don't go anywhere. This means leaning out the driver's window, putting your head and hand out, halting traffic, while you whiz in and out of the cars, trucks, buses, motorbikes, cyclists and pedestrians. It wasn't long before we looked like locals flying around the streets of Mauritius.

## Our Pronunciation

Once we reached Quatre Bornes we turned left and headed across to Rose Hill. We found Rose Hill easily but finding the road where our family lived was a nightmare, due to there being very few street signs and very few people who could speak English and/or understand what we were saying. We spent a long time driving around in circles. We eventually asked at the Rose Hill police station. After repeatedly stating the name of the road, one of the policemen finally exclaimed excitedly that he knew what we were saying.

They couldn't understand our English pronunciation. In fact their English is probably more proper than ours when you think about it. It's just the slightest change in pronunciation and emphasis that makes all the difference.

We found the road at last (we were so close!), but then had trouble finding the right home due to the lack of numbers on houses. We ended up at another home but fortunately they knew Arlette and rang her. She agreed to stand out on the road and keep watch for us as we drove toward her house. We were very excited and relieved to finally find her.

## The Purahoo Family

Arlette's home is on the same block as her brother Sydney; and his son Rodney and his family live in a third home there. Cousin Arlette was very happy to see us and we talked for over three hours and ate lunch with her.

We spent some time in both Arlette and Sydney's homes that day. They were very welcoming; it took a little time to find that ease of family connection, but once we did, we never looked back. Both Sydney and Arlette shared their stories about Grampa and his parents. They told us that the family in Mauritius always knew of Grampa as 'The Uncle that went to Australia and lived with the Aboriginal people there'.

They also explained, just as Aunty Priscilla had in her letter from many years earlier, that Grampa's real name was Shadrach Peersahib and his parents were Miriam Thomas and Samson Peersahib. Arlette revealed that Grampa's father hailed from Kashmir (Persia), but she did not know where his mother came from.

They went on to explain that Grandfather Samson was a high level Interpreter with the Mauritian government and shipping companies of the day, and that he was a Muslim man who wore a turban. According to the family, Grandfather Samson and Grandmother Miriam had made a very good life for themselves, owning approximately seven properties around Mauritius.



**Arlette Purahoo and Me in Mauritius, 2006.**

Source: Courtesy Arlette Purahoo.

## The Noble Man

Arlette explained that she understood the name Peersahib (the correct spelling within the family) to mean ‘most noble’ – peer meaning noble, and sahib meaning most. She also told us that there are no photos or records available in the family today, because during the 1868 cyclone in Mauritius, Grandfather and Granny Peersahib’s home was destroyed, along with everything in it.

Apparently Grampa was a brilliant student studying at a college at Port Louis, the capital city of Mauritius; he spoke perfect English, was multilingual like his father speaking around seven languages and was an organist. They knew that he had studied Medicine in Australia and talked very proudly of their dear old Uncle.

## Fleeing Mauritius

Sydney explained the reason why Grampa had left Mauritius and travelled to Australia, as told to him by his Grandma Ruth (Grampa’s half-sister). He said that Grampa’s mother Miriam had died and his father had remarried too quickly, leaving Grampa broken hearted. So he headed off one day with a packed bag,

down to where the ships came in; befriended a ship captain and jumped on board as a seaman. Whether he knew where he was headed has never been known. Sydney says he was only 16 or 17 at the time so this would have been around 1875 or 1876 (he was born at Moka, Mauritius on 1 September 1859). In those days it took about four weeks to travel to Australia.



**Sydney Purahoo, 2006.**

Source: Courtesy Sydney Purahoo.

## The Second Wife

According to Sydney and Arlette, Grandfather Samson and his second wife – name unknown – had a daughter together and they named her Ruth. Sydney believes his Grandmother Ruth would have been only a baby or young girl when Grampa left Mauritius, but regardless of this they were close and wrote to each other constantly throughout their lives. It's hard to say how they developed such a close relationship being so many miles apart. It can only be assumed at this stage that their short time together allowed them to form a bond and they maintained that bond through letter writing over the years.

## The Notary

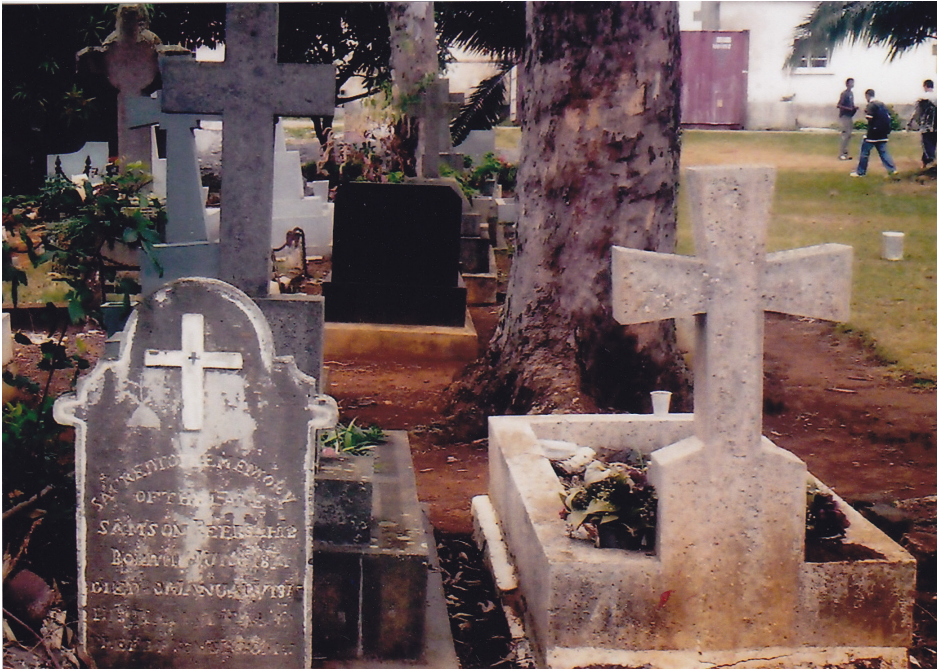
Apparently when Grandfather Samson Peersahib died his second wife was visited by a Notary who tricked her into signing all seven properties and money over to his name. She lived in poverty for the remainder of her life.



## The Resting Place

### Grandfather Samson's Resting Place

We visited with Sydney and Arlette a couple more times before leaving Mauritius. We asked Arlette if she knew where Grandfather Samson was buried and to our surprise she said it was just down the road at St Thomas Church, Beau Bassin. We never really thought that they would know, it being so long ago, or if they did, that it would be an unmarked grave. We learnt very quickly that in research we should never assume.



**Samson Peersahib's headstone at St Thomas Church in Beau Bassin, Mauritius, 2006.**

Source: GBRN Collection.

This was incredible information. We immediately headed off to find Grandfather Samson's grave at St Thomas Church which was only 25 minutes down the road from where Arlette and Sydney lived.

### St Thomas Church

We found the church easily and then set out to find his grave. We searched and searched and finally, there it was directly behind the church hall, a couple of

rows back. It was so very emotional, at the age of 73, 60 years after the passing of Grampa James, to be standing at the grave of his father, my Great-Great-Grandfather Samson. For Robynne, it was her Great-Great-Great-Grandfather. It's incredible when you think about it.

*Robynne: I can't begin to describe how emotional it was to find the grave of Grampa James' father in the middle of Mauritius, so far away from home. It was an incredible moment and I was filled with mixed emotions. I felt the presence of our Indian Ancestors all around us here in this cemetery. Many Thomas family members lie here together with Grandfather Peersahib. It felt so right to be here at last and I had no doubt that 'they knew' who we were.*

The headstone was weather worn and it seemed as though someone had tried to adjust the dates of birth and death. We could read the date of death as 31 January 1875, which was around the same time that we believed from our yarning with Arlette and Sydney that Grampa left Mauritius.

*Robynne: Did this mean he left around the time of his father's death? Did he leave because his father died and he was now left with just his step-mother?*

This conflicted with what we had heard from Arlette and Sydney about Grampa leaving because his father had remarried, and opened up many more questions.

The date of birth was blurry and may or may not have said 9 July 1861. The dates didn't line up for an elderly man and that didn't make sense at all. We could see the dates had been altered so we left with the knowledge that Grandfather Samson's date of death was 31 January 1875 as this was the clearest information on the headstone; we would use that date to confirm his date of birth and to help us locate other records. It was a solid start.

We then drove to Moka and had a look around the area in which Grampa was born. Part of it is a thriving metropolis, but what stood out most was the landscape on the edge of town; more of the peaks that reminded us of the Glass House Mountains north of Brisbane Australia.

## Meeting Aunty Priscilla

Then it came time to go and visit Aunty Priscilla Thomas. Remember, she is the granddaughter of Grandmother Miriam's brother Manuel Thomas. We made the same road trip to Rose Hill, where Arlette and Sydney live, but now needed to find Aunty Priscilla's home. We found Rose Hill and thought 'how easy was that!'; but we spoke too soon. We spent the next 90 minutes or more driving around in circles trying to get to Aunty Priscilla's home. We knew where we

had to be, but with one-way streets, and thousands of people and traffic, we just couldn't get there. Eventually we stumbled upon her tiny little street, and into her apartment block. Thank goodness!



### **The landscape at Moka, the birthplace of Grampa James.**

Source: GBRN Collection.

We visited with Aunty Priscilla in her home over three days. She was so excited to spend time with us. It seemed as though she had been dreaming of this day just as I had. It was very clear she had been holding on to the family stories until this day when she could sit face to face with her Australian family members and pass on the stories of our Ancestors.

On our first visit Aunty Priscilla gave us a beautiful lunch of baked chicken in tomato (Mauritian style), salad, bread and sweets. Then she sat with us in her beautifully decorated lounge room, surrounded by mementoes of her life, her family and her travels around the world. She was 93 years old with a very good memory, so she was able to tell us the family stories, as they were passed down to her, completely undeterred by the video camera focused on her.

She began telling us Grampa James' story as it was told to her by her father Abishegam Thomas, as told to him by his father Manuel Thomas, Grandmother Miriam's brother. At first she stated that: 'Shadrach was a really brilliant student; he was not only brilliant, his English was perfect and he did very good work'. She went on to explain that Grampa was teaching other children at the age of 14.

Her eyes shone bright and her skin glowed as she proudly and excitedly shared with us the same understanding as Sydney and Arlette had. She described Grandfather Samson Peersahib wearing his 'toque' (turban) and his 'garb' (style of dress), and how he met Miriam Thomas and had a son named 'Shadrac' James Thomas Peersahib (Grampa James). Like Sydney and Arlette, she said that Grampa left Mauritius when his mother died and his father remarried too quickly. Grampa was very upset and did not wish to have to deal with his

new step-mother, so he ran away to Australia. According to Aunty Priscilla, he landed in northern Australia where he met up with Aboriginal people, got married and had a family.



**Aunty Priscilla Thomas and me in Mauritius, 2006.**

Source: GBRN Collection.

*Robynne: This is the first we have heard of him landing in northern Australia.*

She was able to tell us about his wife 'Ida' (the name that she knew Granny Ada by) and their eight children. She even knew Grampa wanted to become a doctor and started a dispensary with the Aboriginal people in Australia. She also knew Grampa's half-sister Ruth who was living in Mauritius. It was well known that Ruth had a brother called Shadrac<sup>1</sup> living in Australia and that 'they got on very well'.

It seemed that Aunty Priscilla had given the family stories a great deal of thought in preparation for our visit. She told us all that she knew – which recalled the many letters she had written to me over the years. Aunty Priscilla wasn't sure if Miriam and Samson met in India, Ceylon or Mauritius, nor where they married. She then explained that Indian people came to Mauritius because:

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<sup>1</sup> Aunty Priscilla's spelling of the name Shadrach.



The British were settling here in Mauritius and they put the word out in India and Ceylon that they wanted people to work in the cane fields. So the English in India and Ceylon said we can send you labourers from India and packed them all into boats, under terrible conditions.

These were 'indentured' labourers travelling to Mauritius with the promise of a better life.

## The Thomas Family

Aunty Priscilla went on to tell us about her own life and family. She explained that her grandfather Uncle Manuel Thomas married Estelle Vinden (also Indian) and they had seven children including Gamaliel 'Gami' Thomas (a Captain and Army Chaplain in the armed forces during World War One); William Paranesam 'Nesam' Thomas (an Anglican deacon) and Abishegam Thomas (a doctor). In fact, Uncles Manuel, Gami and Nesam were all deacons of the Anglican Church and Christian Missionary Society. Apparently it was common practice in the Thomas family to give their children biblical names; i.e. Abishegam, Shadrach, Miriam, and Esther.

We have heard this name Gamaliel before; earlier we found that Grampa and Granny Ada had lost a one-year-old child named 'Gamaliel'. Evidently, Grampa had named his son after his first cousin Gamaliel Thomas.

Our trip to Mauritius had confirmed some things we had always heard about Grampa's past, but also gave us some new information on which to build. But our time had passed so quickly and it was time to say our goodbyes. As we started getting ready to leave dear Aunty Priscilla, she led us to her bedroom where to our surprise she had our family photos standing all over her dressing table and stuck to the sides of the mirror. She was so proud to show them to us and this really touched us both.

As we walked toward our car and away from Aunty Priscilla she suddenly appeared so tiny and frail with tears welling up in her eyes, as they were in ours. It was very sad to be leaving Aunty. When she and I said goodbyes it was as though we both knew we would never see each other again. As fate would have it, we never did.

*Robynne: As we started the car and looked back in the rear vision mirror at Aunty Priscilla standing on her balcony, we had tears rolling down our cheeks. We had only a moment in this life with this beautiful, intelligent, amazing and very special woman; but we both felt a deep bond and connection with her.*

We returned home from our trip to Mauritius armed with information that we would now use to continue the research journey in Australia and Mauritius. This burning desire came from all that we had learnt, but even more so, from all the new questions we had.

## The Institute

Within two weeks of our arrival home and after many emails and phone calls to Mauritius, Robynne was able to connect with a Mr Govinden Vishwanaden at the Mahatma Gandhi Institute (MGI) at Moka, Mauritius, and he kindly agreed to start working with us to search for more information about Grandfather Samson, Grandma Miriam and Grampa Shadrach (Thomas Shadrach James).

MGI holds all the information relating to Indian Mauritian history and indentured labourers coming from India including place of birth, date of birth, parents' names, date of death, and often even a photo of the person. Whilst this was very exciting to hear, there was one major problem – Samson and Miriam were not considered to be indentured labourers. Because Samson held a high level Interpreter position within government and shipping companies, it was most likely he was not an actual indentured labourer when he arrived. This meant we had to identify other avenues to find evidence of the arrival of Miriam and Samson into Mauritius.

## The Research

Over the next four years our friend Govinden Vishwanaden searched wherever he could but nothing could be found on either Samson or Miriam. He went to the Civil Status Office (Births, Deaths and Marriages) to get evidence of Grampa's (Shadrach's) birth in Mauritius, but found nothing. There was much writing back and forth between Robynne and Govinden trying to come up with other ways of searching for evidence. But every effort turned up nothing.

Because many Mauritius based archival organisations had not yet digitised their records accessing information was a long arduous journey requiring a great deal of patience. Even Mr Govinden, with his expertise and extensive contacts, was unable to uncover any record of our ancestry in Mauritius. This was both puzzling and very frustrating.

So, during 2008 and 2009, Robynne and I started to make more formal efforts to get support to complete this search. It was getting more difficult to do anything from here in Australia and we needed some kind of financial and academic support to continue on. Thanks to my niece Lyn Thorpe, we finally connected

with Heather Goodall, a historian at the University of Technology in Sydney, who kindly agreed to support us in the international part of our research and our hopes of writing this book.

We were successful in jointly obtaining funding from AIATSIS for one year, to cover all activities in Australia (only). Fortunately Heather Goodall and University of Technology Sydney (UTS) agreed to support us with some funds for Robynne to head back to Mauritius in October 2010 to continue our search there. This would be the beginning of a very complex search, deep within Mauritian archives, and would eventually uncover some incredible information about Grampa and his heritage.