

Trade Unionist and Tiler

John William Skidmore 1878-1934
Mary Amelia Smith 1878-1952

Teenage orphans

John William Skidmore was born on February 10th 1878 at home in Witton's Lane in West Bromwich, Staffordshire England. He was the second of the six children of **John Skidmore** a sheet iron bundler, and **Sarah Jane Colley**. Both his parents were born in West Bromwich and lived there all their lives. The 1881 census shows the family had moved to 7 Pleasant Street and by 1891 lived at 13 Old Meeting Street. At the age of 13 John William was working as a roller's assistant in the iron industry.

John William's parents had died by 1900 and in 1901 his siblings were living together at Swan Village in West Bromwich with his eldest sister 24-year-old Hannah, an envelope maker, in charge. Their sister Florence, now 18 worked as a domestic servant, brother David aged 14 was employed in the iron industry and the youngest, Sarah Jane, was only 12 and presumably at school.



John William Skidmore
Source: Enid Skidmore

From iron to roofing slate

By the beginning of the 20th century the iron and coal industries of Staffordshire were in decline. The 1901 census shows John was no longer living in West Bromwich nor employed in the iron industry but was now working as a roofing slater and boarding with James Parr, a foundry worker and James' wife and baby in Dukinfield, Chester (near Manchester). Why he went to Dukinfield is unknown. Like many towns in the midlands, Dukinfield had developed strong industries in cotton milling and coal mining, but it was a long way away from West Bromwich - today over two hours by car.



Lodge Lane Dukinfield date unknown. John William Skidmore boarded with the Parr family in Cottrell Street, which was off Lodge Lane in 1901.
Source:
pjbrailwayphotos.piwigo.com



Mary Amelia Smith
Source: Enid Skidmore

More orphans

Mary Amelia Smith was born on April 21st 1878 at John Street, West Bromwich. Her father was **James Roberts Smith**, a roll turner in the iron industry, and her mother was **Mary Ashton**. Both parents were born in West Bromwich. Mary Amelia was one of seven children, two of her older brothers were employed in the iron industry like their father. The census for 1881 show the family living at 61 John Street, Wednesbury West Bromwich and by 1891 they are still at this address. However both parents had died in 1890, so the eldest son Edwin, a 21-year-old carpenter, was now the head of the family in charge of his six siblings: 20-year-old Hannah; 18-year-old James an iron moulder; 14-year-old Arthur also an iron moulder; 11-year-old Harold; 7-year-old Emma Louisa; and 4-year-old Samuel. Mary Amelia was 12. In 1901 the census shows unmarried Edwin, still head of the family but now they were living at 62

Old Meeting Street West Bromwich. Around this time Mary Amelia attended a technical school in Birmingham (possibly run by Methodists) to learn sewing.

Teenage sweethearts?



Carter's Green Wesleyan Chapel, c1900, now gone. Mary Amelia Smith and John William Skidmore married here in 1902. The Farley Clock to the left still stands.
Source: OldWestBromwichPhotos.co.uk

As John William and Mary Amelia both lived in Old Meeting Street they most likely knew each other from at least their early teens. On September 28th 1902 they married at Carter's Green Wesleyan Chapel in West Bromwich. Mary Amelia's brother Edwin and sister Emma Louisa were the witnesses. However, at the time of marriage, John William's address was 126 Spon Street Coventry, a street heavily affected by the Great Flood of December/January 1900/01 which inundated the low-lying parts of the city. He continued to work as a roofing slater.



Spon Street Coventry in flood, December 1900. Mary Amelia and John William lived here from 1902. Source: Historic Coventry.co

Loss of baby Harold

Here in Coventry, John William and Mary Amelia started their lives together and began their family. When their first child **John (Jack)** was born at home on January 28th 1905 the family's address was 372 Foleshill Road. A second son Harold was born in 1907 and another son Leonard on January 1st 1910. Early in 1911 little Harold contracted measles and died at the age of 3 years.



Foleshill Road, Coventry, where John (Jack) Skidmore was born at home in 1905. Source: Coventry City Council

Temporary separation and emigration

John William had decided some years earlier that he could make a better life by emigrating to Australia. His name was on a waiting list for two years for an assisted passage, and he finally made it to the top of the list in 1911. Mary Amelia begged him to postpone the trip whilst they were still mourning the loss of Harold, but John William was determined to keep his place on the list and his passage to Australia. He set out alone, the plan probably being that Mary Amelia and the boys would join him as soon as he had made enough money to pay for their passage and had established a suitable place for them to live. En route to Australia he sent Mary Amelia a postcard from Cape Town expressing his disappointment that he had not heard from her.

Meanwhile, Mary Amelia, with her two sons Jack aged 6 and Leonard aged 1, moved back to West Bromwich to live with her brother Edwin Alfred Smith, a carpenter and joiner, and his wife Annie. The 1911 census of April 2nd shows the five of them at 63 Billhay Street West Bromwich.

Later that year, probably because her sister Emma Louisa and brother-in-law William Henry Thomas decided to emigrate, Mary Amelia decided to go with them. She had to borrow the fare from them as John William had not been able to send her money. So, with sons Jack and Leonard she accompanied her sister, brother-in-law and their 2-year-old son Raymond, to Australia. Before arriving in Melbourne, their ship called in at Hobart in Tasmania. Mary Amelia admired the place saying it was a little England. She would have liked to have settled there, but John William had employment as a slater and tiler with the firm *Wunderlich's* in Melbourne.



Mary Amelia (left) and her sister Emma Louisa in Melbourne in the 1940s.
Source: family collection

Overcrowding

Although he had this job, John William had only been able to find one-roomed lodgings and not yet established a home for his family. So, when Mary Amelia and the boys arrived, they had to share a house with Emma Louisa's family. The seven of them rented number 72 Mary Street in the inner-city suburb of Richmond. However, on May 15th 1913, when the Skidmore's daughter Maud was born, and also a daughter to the Thomas family, it was clear the Skidmores would have to move out. Around 1914 both families moved to the northern suburb of Coburg. The Thomas's to Pleasant Street and the Skidmores to 9 Rodda Street where on January 12th 1915 Mary Amelia and John William's last child Arthur was born. Over the next 12 months the Skidmores moved to 35 Carters Avenue, Toorak, and then 151 Brighton Street, Richmond.

72 Mary Street, Richmond, the Skidmore and Thomas families' first Australian home. Photo: Corinne Hurley 1980s





151 Brighton Street,
Richmond, another home
of the Skidmores.
Photo: Ann Hurley 1999

Slaters' and Tilers' Union secretary

John William may have continued working for *Wunderlichs* (I have found Situations Vacant advertisements for slaters for *Skidmore and Balfour* from December 1912 to February 1914 - maybe subcontracting for *Wunderlich's* work). John was very interested in politics and so became a union representative from at least 1913 to September 1915, and secretary of the Slaters' and Tilers' Union, a small but notably well-organised union. The address is given as 35 Mathoura Rd Toorak¹.



35 Mathoura Rd Toorak today. In 1914 the home of the Slaters' and Tilers' Union, now a million-dollar property. Source: Domain Property

Fighting for better wages and conditions

In February 1913 the union was trying to achieve a pay-rise for its members. Back in 1912, by arguing that the cost of living had risen, the union had achieved an agreement with employers for an above Wages Board rate of pay, but only for a 6-month period. This expired and the employers wanted to return to the old pay rate. A report in *The Age* of Wednesday 5th February explained:

'When the wages were increased from the wages board rate of 12/- per day to 13/- per day about seven months ago, the argument was used on behalf of the employees that the cost of living had increased, and it is contended that the same argument applies with even greater force today. For that reason the employees are not only opposing the reduction to the wages board rate of 12/- per day, but have put forward a counter proposal that the wage should be 14/- per day. As an additional reason for a fairly high rate, it is stated that the work is of an irregular character, and when trade is normal the men average considerably less than £3 8/- per week.'

Not able to achieve an agreement with the employers, the union of about 80 men went on strike for two weeks in February 1913 but eventually agreed to allow the Wages Board to arbitrate. After a meeting at Trades Hall, the union agreed to return to work at the 12/- rate pending the Wages Board decision which would include some back pay and fares to and from work. Two months later they received the following determination from the Wages Board as reported in the *Geelong Advertiser* 11th April 1913:

SLATERS' AND TILERS' BOARD.

Mr. John Gahan, chairman of the Slaters' and Tilers' Board, has forwarded the amended determination to Sir Alexander Peacock, Minister of Labor. This is to come into force on the 3rd May. Tile workers others than those employed striking roofs, carrying or mixing, are to have their wages raised from 66/- per week of 44 hours to 71/6 per week. The piecework rates for slating and tiling per 100 square feet have been raised from 6/- to 6/6. Fixing tile ridging is to be paid 1d. per foot extra for each story after the first. No other alterations have been made.

They succeeded in keeping a 13/- daily rate for a 44-hour week.

Another success came in December that year when the union protested to the Master Builders' Association that some employers required their workers to travel from their worksite to the employer to receive their weekly pay. In the case of *Wunderlich's* employees such as John, the firm's office was on the Yarra bank in the city, when most of their work was in the suburbs. Eventually they achieved the right for the workers to be paid at the worksite.

Expulsion from Trades Hall!

Then in March 1914 a new issue arose that brought the Slaters and Tilers into conflict with Trades Hall and the Building Trades Council, and caused their union to be expelled: A labourer named Leo Leach who had been working as a roof tiler for two years applied to join the Slaters and Tilers Union but was rejected because he had not been working the required 5 years in the trade to qualify. Leach complained to the Trades Hall Council who then directed the union to either accept his application or be expelled from the Trades Hall for defying their direction. The Slaters and Tilers did not think Trades Hall should interfere in their membership issues but believed the Building Trades Council of which they were affiliated (and included all 11 different building industry unions) should decide on the matter. When the BTC sought their members' opinion on the matter, Trades Hall, seeing union solidarity and their authority at risk, threatened to expel the BTC also.

As an important union official John was in the middle of all this, and he wrote a letter on March 31st to *The Age* to defend his union's stance against the Trades Hall. His main points were: that his union had a right to ensure their members were 'bona fide tradesmen' and not 'labourers or handymen'; the BTC was the appropriate body to defer to in practical matters concerning the building industry, not Trades Hall; Leach was not being deprived of work (as he claimed) by not being a union member; and that Trades Hall were using the Slaters and Tilers as an example to deter other unions from speaking out against Trades Hall decisions.

The problem arose when some of the building unions (the Plumbers and Gasfitters and the Builders' Labourers - whom the Slaters and Tilers had supported only months earlier in their successful bid to maintain a 44-hour week) in the name of solidarity, decided to support Trades Hall and not the BTC. Eventually the BTC capitulated to Trades Hall and a month later was broken up and a new Building Trades Council was formed.

The press of course loved all this division in the union movement and played up the drama of it:



Wages Board appointment

Although the Slaters and Tilers Union was no longer affiliated with Trades Hall, its existence continued, at least for a while. In January 1915 John was appointed one of three union representatives on the Slaters and Tilers Wages Board. He remained the Secretary of his union until October that year and by this time he had helped achieve a wage rise for his trade from 71/6 a week to 77/-.

Making a home in a stable

John must have been worn out by all the controversy and conflict of his union's expulsion. I can find no trace of him being involved in union affairs after 1915 and his living circumstances seemed to be deteriorating. In 1916 the Skidmores were living in Florence Street Mentone in a stable that was converted into a home. It had an earthen floor, hessian walls and the parents' room in the loft. The family of six had their diet supplemented with duck meat and eggs provided by a well-populated duck pond on the property. Mary Amelia took in ironing from the boarding house next door

to help make ends meet. During this time their 3-year-old daughter Maud contracted measles which must have brought back the worry and tragedy of the loss of their son Harold at the same age in England.



Thought to be the converted stable at 124 Florence Street Mentone, the Skidmores home in 1916. Photo: Corinne Hurley 1980s.

J. Skidmore & Co. - tiler to tile-maker

Maud survived which must have seemed like a good omen for the family. Three years later they had saved enough money to move to Cheltenham near the corner of Point Nepean and Charman Roads. John set up his own slating and tiling business, *J. Skidmore and Co.* with the boys Jack and Leonard helping out and often skipping school to help their father.

By 1921 the family were experiencing good times and were able to purchase some quality furniture, a horse, a cart, a Brougham (buggy), and a piano. A new business appears in the newspaper advertisements: Tilemakers *Skidmore and Luxmore* at Point Nepean Rd Cheltenham and then a newly registered company *The Reliance Tiles Co. Pty., Ltd.* in Cheltenham appears where John is listed as one of the directors.

**Reliance Tiles Pty., Ltd. (The)—Regd.
August 12. Capital: £10,000 in
£1 shares. Directors: William
Anderson, Percy George Sim-
monds, and John William Skid-
more.**

from the *Daily Commercial News and Shipping List* New Registrations, Victoria (Sydney) August 31 1921

End of the good times

The good times were not to last. John was experiencing poor health exacerbated by a drinking problem. Son Leonard would often be sent to get his father out of the pub by first going to the police station to get a certain trusted policeman to assist (if that policeman wasn't there, don't get anyone else!).

The Skidmore name disappears from the *Reliance Tiles* ads from about January 1922. It must be just after this time that John resumes his own tile making business, but had little success. Mary Amelia decided to take a lease on a boarding house named *Tonga* in Beach Road Sandringham hoping to make some money from

summer holidaymakers. Unfortunately, that summer was wet and customers stayed away. The lease had to be given up before a year had passed.

SANDRINGHAM, "Tonga," Beach rd., op. beach.
—Excellent Accom. Show visitors, 8/6 day.
phone, bath heater piano, good table. Mrs.
Skidmore. Phone X6663.

The Age September 21
1923 - Hotels, Holiday
Resorts etc.

Insolvency

The Skidmore tileworks was soon in financial strife and was bankrupted in 1924. They lost all their assets including a Phaeton, the horse and wagon, and the piano.

TILE-MAKER'S INSOLVENCY
Showing a deficiency of £384/9/1.
John William Skidmore, tilemaker, of
Beach road, Sandringham, file da peti-
tion in the Insolvency Court today.
Insolvent set down his assets at £169
18/8, and his liabilities at £444/5/9.
He ascribed his failure to losses in
the manufacture of tiles, mad debts,
and ill health. Mr T. C. Walker has
been appointed assignee.

Notice in *The Herald* January 22 1924. I
think 'mad debts' should read 'bad
debts'?

Another notice in *The Argus* January 23
1924 stated loss of trade was 'through
faulty manufacture, ill-health and bad
debts'.

Shotgun wedding

On December 23rd 1924, the eldest son Jack aged 19 married **Valdis Muriel Rogers**, the 24-year-old sister of his good friend Carl Geoffrey Rogers. The wedding took place at St. Agnes' Anglican church, Black Rock. Jack and Valdis had to move in with his parents at 9 Karakatta Street Black Rock. Five months later Mary Amelia and John William's first grandchild was born, John Kenneth, in May 1925.

In 1926, the Skidmores moved again, this time to Elm Street Brighton. That year, at this address, the next grandchild Renee Valdis was born and financial circumstances seemed to be improving. *Skidmore and Co.* was operating again with sons Jack and Len as tilers. Their first car, a T model Ford, was purchased and Jack and Valdis were able to move out to rent their own house on the Nepean Highway. Economic progress continued and both families were able to buy houses in Robert Street Bentleigh. John William and Mary Amelia purchased number 57 and son Jack and Valdis bought number 52 opposite. Whilst in Bentleigh, two more grandchildren were born, Brian Leonard in 1928 and Corinne Shirley in 1930. Around this time John joined the Cheltenham branch of the Masonic Lodge.



Arthur Skidmore at 57 Robert Street Bentleigh. Photo: Corinne Hurley 1980s



Leonard Skidmore in the 1980s. Source: Diane Cotman

A citizens' league

John was always interested in politics and on December 18th 1930 he had a letter published in *The Age*. The title was *The Helpless Citizen - A New League Wanted*. He lamented the current political situation of, what he believed, were the only two positions represented in parliament (Labor and Anti-Labor or Capital) and put forward the idea of a citizens' league:

'.... whose objects shall be to declare war upon every form of poverty, destitution and want; and as industrial war is one of the main causes of distress, every effort should be made to secure industrial peace.' He added '.... they [this league] would have a social force strong enough to control, and have economic wisdom enough to guide, the two parties whenever they came into conflict.'

He followed his letter up with a second letter to *The Age* a few weeks later on January 17th 1931. '..... Whenever a conflict takes place between (Capital and Labor) the public is squeezed, and the result is called economic pressure. If the process is prolonged it becomes.....economic depression, and unless checked must end in national disaster.'

And of course, it did. The great depression of the 1930s was soon to be upon everyone. John's sentiment would have been informed by his own experiences - probably disillusioned after his union's conflict with Trades Hall, then frustrated with his lack of success in business. Within a couple of years John William and Mary Amelia had to give up their home in Bentleigh. By 1933 they had moved to 137 Balcombe Road Mentone. It was here on August 31st 1934 that John William died at the age of 56 years. The cause of death was given as 'sigmoid carcinoma and cardiac failure'. He was buried at the New Cheltenham Cemetery but there was no money for a headstone. Eventually in 1984, on the 50th anniversary of his death, his

granddaughter Corinne organised for a plaque to be placed on his grave. At its instalment were Corinne and her husband, John William's daughter Maud, his youngest son Arthur, and also a very sudden torrential downpour (causing much laughter)!

Mary Amelia's final years

After John's death in 1934 Mary Amelia lived with her son Arthur, a bricklayer and tiler, at 27 Field St. Bentleigh and around 1937 they lived at 385 North Rd. Caulfield East. In 1942 she saw her sons Arthur, Jack and Len join the army, Jack serving in New Guinea and Len in Borneo. Then in July 1945, almost at the end of the war, her son Jack divorced Valdis (divorce uncommon in those days) and remarried - maybe a relief for Mary Amelia who did not really approve of Valdis. Until about 1947 Mary Amelia lived with her daughter Maud at 276 Neerim Rd Carnegie. Maud's daughter Sandra remembers her grandmother's scones and pastries and her 'magic cupboard' that had wonderful smells of fruit mince and pickles. Having learned dressmaking at a technical school, Mary Amelia was a very skilled seamstress, and passed these skills on to her daughter who was able to use dressmaking to earn coupons during the war.

In 1947 Mary Amelia went to live with son Arthur at a house he built with his brother Len on South Road, Moorabbin. By the early 1950s, Mary Amelia had become ill and in her last weeks, after coming out of hospital, she stayed with her eldest son Jack and his second wife Dorothy at 28 Austin Street Oakleigh. Here on November 25th 1952 Mary Amelia Skidmore died at the age of 74. Her death certificate states the cause of death was 'cardiac failure, uraemia and hypertension'. She was cremated at Springvale Cemetery and her ashes placed under a rose bush there.

Mary Amelia was known to have definite opinions and was very sceptical about religion. She believed we had our own heaven and hell here on earth. I think she certainly felt she had had her fair share of good and bad fortune.



A studio portrait of Mary Amelia Skidmore (nee Smith) probably taken in the 1940s. Source: family collection



Mary (on right) with daughter Maudie, granddaughter Sandra and son Arthur in the 1940s. Source: family collection

Ann Hurley

2020

See my story **The Depression War and Divorce** for more about John Skidmore.

hurleyskidmorehistory.com.au

Notes:

¹ *Labor Call* (Melbourne Vic.)

Other resources:

Australian Electoral Rolls 1903-1954 (Ancestry.com)

Birth Death and Marriage certificates - General Register Office England

Cottman, Diane - Skidmore descendant

England census (Ancestry.com)

Historic Coventry <http://www.historiccoventry.co.uk/main/main.php>

Hurley, Corinne (1930-2014) - Skidmore descendant

Old West Bromwich Photos <http://www.west-bromwich-photos.co.uk/>

Penny, Sandra - Skidmore descendant

Springvale Botanical Cemetery Vic.

Trove digitised newspapers (National Library of Australia)

Victorian Birth, Death and Marriage certificates

World War 2 Nominal Roll <http://www.ww2roll.gov.au/>