

That famous fighting family

Historian Kate Bagnall is co-founder of the Invisible Australians project, which seeks to compile biographies of non-European, non-Indigenous people living in Australia during the White Australia period. Here, she writes about one particular band of five brothers — and their two nephews — who joined up to fight in World War I

LIKE thousands of other Australian mothers, **Jane Sam** said many goodbyes during the years of World War I. In February 1915, two of her sons, **James** and **Norman**, sailed with the 4th Battalion after they enlisted in November 1914. Three months later another son, **Henry**, left with the 17th Battalion and then three months after that another son, **George**, sailed with the 4th Battalion. A fifth son, **Tom**, and two grandsons, **William** and **George Loolong**, also left to go to war. Jane Sam's sons were sent off with pride by the people of West Wyalong, NSW. At the farewell for James and Norman and two other young locals, reported in the *Wyalong Advocate* on February 3, 1915, one speaker noted that, "he had watched these boys grow up to manhood. They had always been worthy townsmen, and he looked for the time to welcome them back".

While her boys took their place among neighbours and countrymen in going to war, Jane Sam's family differed from most of them in a way that was both very significant and quite irrelevant. Jane was a white woman of Australian birth, but her husband was Chinese and her children, therefore, were of mixed race. In 1860, **William Flood Sam** had arrived as a young man from Guangdong, ►

Right Front- and side-facing identity photographs of Percy Sam, 1915. Courtesy National Archives of Australia. Previous page Percy Sam's handprint was taken in 1915 so he could be identified on his return from China. Courtesy National Archives of Australia



spending three years on the goldfields at Tambaroora before moving to Wagga Wagga, NSW. There he worked as a cook and, in 1873, married 16-year-old **Jane May White**. The first Sam baby arrived in 1874, with two more born at Wagga before the family moved on — the births of babies four to 10 were variously registered at Forbes, West Wyalong, Condoblin and Marsden. In 1893, the family settled in the Barmedman district, where the youngest six children were born. In all, Jane Sam had 16 babies over 27 years.

William Flood Sam worked mostly as a market gardener but in around 1910, when he was aged 70, he and Jane and those children still at home moved off the land and into town. William was described by fellow West Wyalong residents as, “a good hardworking sober man”, “a man of first-class character”, while in the *West Wyalong Advocate* in 1944 Jane was noted as being a “highly esteemed resident of the district”. Not one report on the family in the local press, other than William Flood Sam’s obituary, commented on the family’s Chinese connection. They were, rather, much better known as “that famous fighting family of five sons” — a story that appeared in the *Wyalong Advocate* on June 24, 1919.

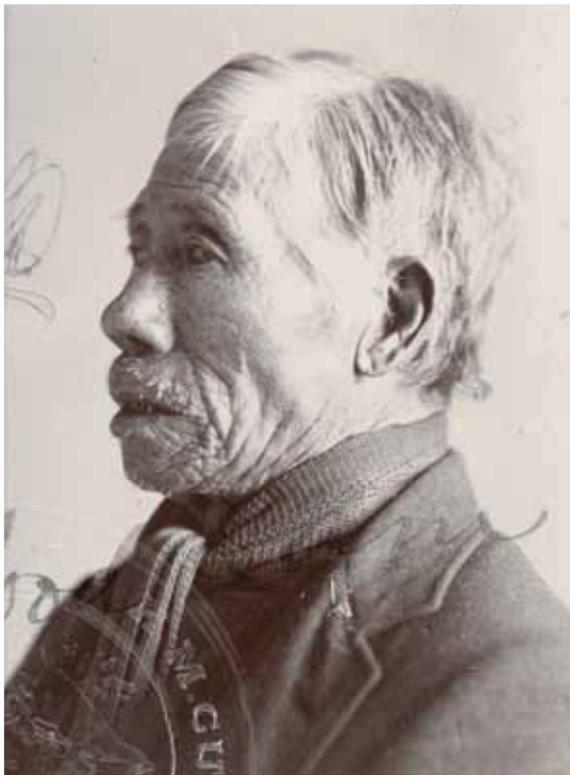
The Anglo-Chinese Sam family was clearly an accepted and respected part of their local community but, more generally, the place of families like theirs continued to be questioned by the young Australian nation. Newspapers still ran reports about the “immoral practices” of the Chinese men in their relations with Australian girls.

Bureaucrats closely monitored the borders to keep out unwanted “coloured” arrivals. And a significant theme of wartime conscription rhetoric was the need to keep Australia white. Fifteen years after Federation, the effect of the White Australia Policy was increasingly evident. In 1901, for example, the Chinese population had numbered about 30,000; in 1911 it was about 26,000 and by 1921 it had dropped further to 21,000. Yet all the while young Chinese Australians were growing up in both the city and the bush — in 1911, there were almost 4,000 Chinese Australians aged under 25.

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Born and raised in Australia, it was natural that young Chinese Australian men should want to join the war effort. But there were racial restrictions on who could enlist in the AIF — men had to be British subjects substantially of European descent. On January 25, 1916 the *Western Argus* reported that hundreds of Chinese had offered their services for the front and been rejected. **George Kong Meng** of Longwood, Victoria, tried and failed, and his rejection in 1916 on racial grounds was particularly odd as his brother Herbert was already fighting at the front. As the *Euroa Advertiser* put it on February 4, 1916, George Kong Meng “is of Australian birth, is married to an Australian, and all his interests are Australian. He is denied the privilege of fighting for his native country because his father was an Oriental. This is preposterous”. Other men did not know of or even consider possible racial impediments to their enlistment.

In many cases men of mixed Chinese and European heritage “passed” for white, while in other



Above These photographs of William Flood Sam were attached to his identity documents when he travelled to China in 1915. Courtesy National Archives of Australia

cases — particularly later in the war — pragmatism and the need for able-bodied men won out, even though at times the Defence Department reiterated its stand that those of “Asiatic origin”, even though born in Australia, were not eligible for service. According to researcher Alastair Kennedy, around 200 Australian men with Chinese ancestry enlisted in the First AIF, most of whom were the children and grandchildren of Anglo-Chinese families like the Sams. A small number — such as **Sam** and **Hedley Tong Way**, sons of a Presbyterian minister from Ballarat — were fully Chinese, while others had more complex identities. **William Ahang** of Tumbly Bay, South Australia, for example, had Chinese, Celtic, Malay and Aboriginal forebears.

The racist policies of early 20th-century Australia did not stop the Sam boys going to war, but they did affect the family in other ways. In 1915, William Sam decided to return to China for the first — and as it turned out, only — time since he had arrived in NSW 56 years earlier, and he wanted to take his youngest son, 14-year-old **Percy**, with him. Under the *Immigration Restriction Act*, William and Percy both needed papers to allow them to return home to Australia without being subjected to the Dictation Test. So even though the older Sam boys were “European” enough to fight for Australia, their little brother was “Chinese” enough to need special papers to prove his right of return — despite being an Australian-born British subject and the son of a white Australian woman. Even more curious, though, is the fact that at the same time as being classified as “Chinese” under the *Immigration Restriction Act*, Percy also came under a law designed to protect the welfare of “European” children. He was one of only a small number of Anglo-Chinese children granted certificates ►



Left A wartime newspaper clipping showing seven of the eight Sam relatives. Courtesy Morag Loh



under the *Emigration Act 1910*, which gave permission for a European child to travel overseas with an “Asiatic”. Father and son left Sydney for Hong Kong in July 1915 and all the while they were in China, Percy’s servicemen brothers were fighting at Gallipoli.

Jane Sam welcomed her boys back one by one. Percy returned home with his father at the end of 1915. Grandson George Loolong returned from the war in September 1918, missing his left thumb. James Sam and William Loolong returned to Australia in January 1919, William with a military medal. George Sam came home in April, also with a military medal. Henry returned in July, with an English bride and baby. Norman arrived back in December 1919, missing his right-hand index finger. The fate of the fifth Sam brother, Tom, is a mystery. It was later said that he was killed in action at Gallipoli, but his name doesn’t appear on casualty lists or in war grave records, nor can a service record for him be located.

After the war, Prime Minister Billy Hughes declared that “a free, a safe and a White Australia” had been gained through the privations and heroism

of Australia’s troops. The contributions of non-white servicemen as a group, including those with Chinese and Indigenous heritage, went unacknowledged, and the ideal of Anzac became aligned with that of White Australia. Yet perhaps for many Chinese Australian men themselves, and for those they served with, race was largely irrelevant to their own experience of war. They were simply young Australians who demonstrated loyalty to empire, country and their fellow servicemen — a sentiment shown, perhaps, in the way that Norman Sam was remembered by four friends after his accidental death in 1922. A memorial notice in the *Cairns Post* in September 1923 stated simply: “Anzac. Mate of mine.”

MORE The lives of Australians like the Sams are being explored through the Invisible Australians project, a collaboration between Chinese Australian history specialist **Dr Kate Bagnall** and digital historian **Dr Tim Sherratt**. Invisible Australians is using digital methods to bring together biographical information about non-white, non-indigenous people living in Australia during the White Australia period. Still in its early stages, the project aims to show the real face of White Australia by drawing this information out of the archive and providing tangible ways for people to use and interact with it. Find out more about Invisible Australians at www.invisibleaustralians.org or follow on Twitter [@InvisibleAus](https://twitter.com/InvisibleAus)