

BARBARA HEATH



TINKER

MARY ('MA') BROWN (DATES UNKNOWN)

Much mystery shrouds the legend of Mary 'One-eye' Brown. According to some sources, she was born around 1874 and died in 1950; others believe her to have been born later and lived until 1970. Whatever the case, Mary—also called 'Ma'—Brown was a tinker: a travelling metalworker who would sell household utensils, including pegs, cups, pots, pans and kettles, to the people of the Tasmanian midlands. With their itinerant lifestyle and particular trade, tinkers tended to be men, and so it is rather peculiar that Mary found her way into this profession.

One source, who was a boy living in Pontville during the 1930s when Mary used to call in, stated that she would often arrive while his parents were out and demand that her large billy be filled with milk, and that she would camp by the old Bagdad railway line. He remembers that a few children would travel with her—and another source suggested that she had up to four children, to whom she gave birth while travelling. Yet another source can confirm at least three children's names—James, Olive, and Joe, the latter being a tinsmith himself. Long-time Tunbridge resident Joy Bowerman remembers Joe, who would make certain items and Mary would sell them. While Mary sold numerous items, it was her distinctive wooden pegs, made from the locally grown willow trees (and held together with tin), for which she was best known (another nickname of hers was 'Mrs Peg Leg Brown') and a collection of them is held in the National Museum of Australia. Joy's grandmother would buy Mary's pegs, and they were later sold in Joy's parent's shop (which Joy went on to run, and later sold to Barbara Heath and Malcolm Enright).

While to some, Mary cut an intimidating figure—not least for her patched eye (she reportedly lost an eye due to an infection brought about by hops juice)—Joy remembers the local identity fondly. Apparently, underneath Mary's cart were many bags sewn together and in them she would hold her beloved dogs, who would then run out and about once Mary had stopped. Local antique dealer Warwick Oakman knows several people who met Mary; according to him, she lived in a caravan (with pneumatic tyres) that was pulled by a horse, and she would park her caravan in Kempton and catch the bus to the city centre. He believes that up until the early 1970s she was "still plying her horse on the highways of Tasmania". A friend of his reported that one day, while travelling on the bus to Kempton, Mary announced to all the passengers onboard that "we buried the old bugger today"—referring to her recently deceased husband. While these are only small anecdotes that indicate an undoubtedly fascinating character, hopefully, in the coming years, more light will be shed on Mary Brown's elusive life story.

"Using willow from the banks of the Blackman River, Ma Brown made pegs and sold them to the local store. We purchased that store almost 100 years later and under the floorboards we found a stash of Ma Brown's pegs, along with other unlikely loot which had been carried there by rats."

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Barbara Heath, *Blackman River peg*, 2011. Cast, fabricated and oxidised 925 silver. 117 x 18 x 20mm.