

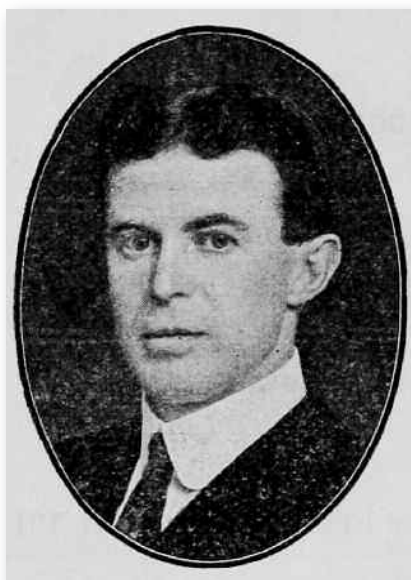
245 Real and Precious Friends

Mary Kircher Roddy researches newspapers and discovers an intriguing family connection to a tragic 1908 railroad accident in Novato, California

I know I've made a lot of friends in genealogy. Many of them are alive — Barb (the one who sucked me into this obsession), friends from my local genealogy society, and any number of distant cousins I've bagged. But I have a soft spot for my dead friends, the random people I've stumbled on, some related to me, some not, whose stories have captured my research time, my imagination and my heart. Phil Redmond ranks near the top of my list.

I've been working on research for a novel based on the true story of my great-great uncle Jimmy Ahern, including the sad tale of his 15-month-old daughter, drowned in 1900 near San Francisco, the day after Jimmy's brother died. My research led me to newspaper accounts of the funeral and the four men who carried her little white coffin. Who were these men and why did Jimmy select them for this sacred duty? I expanded my research net to see what I could discover.

Newspapers are a great resource to pick up details on people, so I headed to NewspaperArchive.com and began to search for the pall bearers. I got a hit! The 1909 search result teaser read



Fireman Phil Redmond suffered serious burns due to a railroad accident. For more than two years, he was hospitalized and underwent many skin grafts that included tissue donations from many fellow railroad employees of the day. (Public domain, Northern Crown Magazine, July 1914, Vol. V., No. 12)

"Jack Hyde went down to San Rafael on last Saturday morning to visit his nephew Phil Redmond."¹ I'd never heard of Phil, but I just had to know what he was doing in San Rafael, my home town. I clicked on the article to read more.

"It was just one year ago last Saturday that the dreadful railroad accident happened which

has since prostrated Phil Redmond, and which resulted in the death of Engineer Hyde's brother. Young Redmond's case has been a most remarkable one of courage and vitality. He has suffered greatly and exhibited great fortitude under the trying ordeals of skin grafting."

Forget the pall bearers and the funeral... I had a new mission — what was this railroad wreck and skin grafting (in 1909, no less!) all about?

Searching now for articles about Phil Redmond, I found another. From the Ukiah Republican Press, October 7, 1910,

"Fireman Phil Redmond was able to get out of the hospital this week after 27 months. It will be remembered that he was scalded in a wreck on the local road."

Sounds like some story.

There are a couple of newspaper sites with San Francisco and other California newspapers online. Fold3.com has a run of the San Francisco *Chronicle*, and a search there led me to the first of the skin grafts —

"Twenty-four heroic railroad men appeared at the Cottage Hospital San Rafael yesterday and submitted to the painful operation of

¹ Ukiah Dispatch Democrat Friday, July 9, 1909, Ukiah, California

having a portion of their skin removed in order to supply 'grafts' for Phil Redmond, the young fireman who was terribly burned in the railway wreck... J.J. Hyde, an uncle of Redmond, notified a number of friends of his nephew's predicament, and two dozen railroad men responded, enough skin being procured to cover the right arm and leg of the patient... Following are the names of the men who so unselfishly underwent the painful ordeal... F.W. Redmond, J.J. Hyde, Dr. James Redmond, Will Hyde, Jim Redmond, P. Frost, J. Liebert, J. Clansey, Charles Russell, J. Fiery, Nelson Hansen, Paul Anderson, James Creighton, Edward Creighton, Earl Gibson, C. A. McNeil, Fred Haldin, Dick Connell, Elmer Berry, Rollie Christophin, Charles Kirsch, J.D. Smith, L. Jackson and Jim Butler."ⁱⁱ

I wondered about the name Kirsch...

An article from the San Francisco *Call* of the following week furthered the story:

"Fevered and all but ready to die from the terrible ordeal through which he has passed and yet has retained a grip on life, Philip Redmond, the fireman whose skin was scalded off his legs and arms in a railroad wreck at Novato, July 3, today for the last time went through the painful operation of having skin grafted on his pain racked body from the healthy ones of his friends... Last Thursday the entire body of the unfortunate fireman was covered by the cuticle"ⁱⁱⁱ cut from 25 volunteers. Some of the transferred skin, however, did not keep



Picture showing the wreck of Northwestern Pacific Railroad engine No. 154 and train near Novato, California, 3 July 1908. (Public domain, from the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen's and Enginemen's Magazine, February 1910, page 285)

healthy, so it was necessary to remove the dead pieces and replace them with new ones... Those who gave cuticle to assist in covering Redmond's body today were the following members of the brotherhood of locomotive engineers and firemen: L. McPeak, J.J. Honn, S. Duren, Frank Wilds, Charles Orbell, C.L. Spinney, William P. Burns, B. Clark, David Pringle, Charles Richer, George Carter, and C. S. Collins."^{iv}

The San Francisco *Chronicle* also reported on 18 August and provided a list of names of skin donors, "W.P. Burns, Bernard Clark, B. Pringle, Charles Percher, George Potter, C.F. Collins, M.L. McPike, J.J. Horn, F. Dunne, Frank Wilds, Charles Cordell, and C.L. Stinney."^v

You can see from the lists that the newspapers are speaking of the same men, but it reminds

me of that old game of "Telephone" where what the first person says and what the last person hears can vary wildly. "David Pringle" and "B. Pringle" are probably the same man, "George Carter and "George Potter" also the same. But there was one name in particular that grabbed me. On August 12, Charles Kirsch donated skin. On August 18 a man identified as Charles Richer by the *Call* and Charles Percher in the *Chronicle* went under the knife to aid Phil Redmond. I'm fairly certain these three names all refer to one person, my grandfather, Charles Kircher, who was a stationary engineer with the railroad in Tiburon, California in 1908. Frank Weyl (identified in the newspaper as Frank Wilds) was best man at Charlie Kircher's wedding four months after they donated skin and

ⁱⁱ San Francisco *Chronicle*, August 12, 1908, page 5, San Francisco, California

ⁱⁱⁱ The modern-day term for "cuticle" is "epidermis", the outermost layer of skin

^{iv} San Francisco *Call* 18 Aug 1908, page 4, San Francisco, California

^v San Francisco *Chronicle*, August 18, 1908, page 4, San Francisco, California

Charles Orbell (Cordell) rented a room in Charlie Kircher's basement for many years. I remember my father telling me many stories about him.

I've gone on to collect about 75 newspaper articles about the 3 July 1908 train wreck and Phil Redmond's tale of survival, searching both online and in libraries and archives in San Francisco, Marin and Sonoma Counties, and pieced together the story. Early in the morning of 3 July 1908, a train was traveling southbound from Santa Rosa to Sausalito. The engineer, Phil Hyde, whistled for the stop at Novato and was coasting into the station when fireman, Phil Redmond, Hyde's nephew, noticed that the tender was bumping over the railroad ties. Redmond called to Hyde who whistled for the brakes which were quickly applied, but the train slid on and hit a "frog" at the rail switch and there, a smash-up occurred. Newspaper accounts differ, but it appears that Hyde was thrown far from

the locomotive and sustained internal injuries. Redmond was perhaps trapped closer to the engine and sustained severe steam burns. None of the passengers or other crew were seriously injured. Hyde and Redmond walked with assistance into Novato where a car picked them up and took them to Cottage Hospital in San Rafael, about ten miles to the south.

Phil Hyde succumbed to his injuries and died five days later. But through sheer force of will, Phil Redmond hung on. I suspect he did so for his mother's sake. Mary Hyde Redmond was widowed in 1885. It was a train accident which took the life of her husband, Martin Redmond, a brakeman with the railroad, who was knocked off the top of a railroad car onto the tracks and run over by the train, leaving his young wife a widow with two small boys, Phil, aged 2 ½ and Frank, only three months old. I think that when the 1908 accident

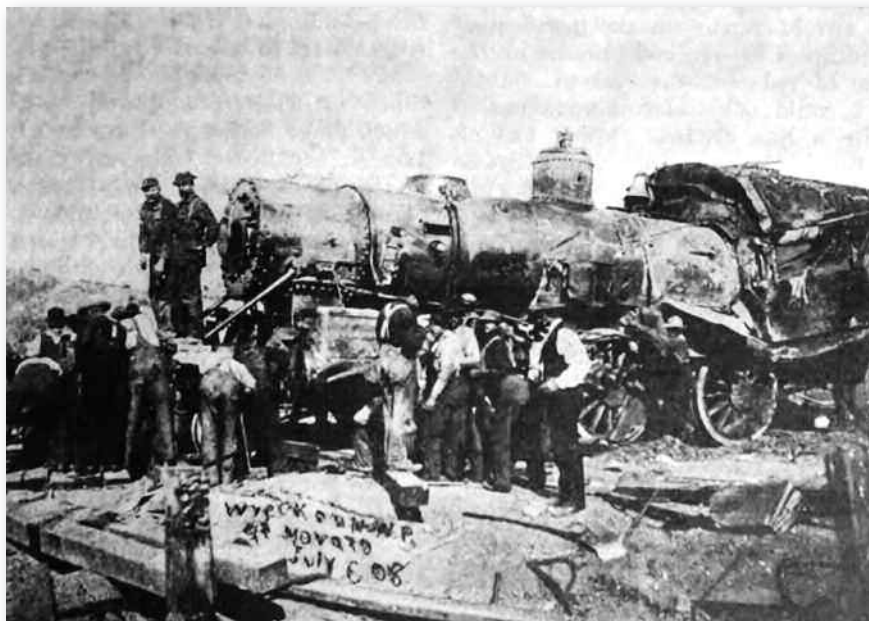
occurred, and Phil Redmond watched his mother go through another loss, that of her brother, he steered through his suffering to avoid causing her any more grief.

***For the next two years,
weekly or monthly,
Phil Redmond had surgeries
to graft skin to cover the
burns on his arms and legs.***

From the newspaper accounts, I was able to extract nearly 100 names of the 200+ donors. I wondered who these men were and what compelled them to undergo the painful process. I used census records and railroad seniority lists to piece together the relationships. The first batch, as you can read from the 12 August 1908 article, had a number of family members — many of them Hyde and Redmond cousins and uncles. The next few batches were railroad employees, colleagues of the injured men. One donor, Dick Connell, was a neighbor of Dr. John Kuser, one of three surgeons who performed many of the skin grafts. A Miss Mary Redmond, identified as a niece in the newspaper (but more likely a cousin) volunteered to donate skin, but the doctors would not allow her to do so.

In mid-October 1908, an article appeared in the Petaluma Daily Courier:

"WANTS MORE CUTICLE. There is to be a skin grafting operation at the San Rafael hospital Saturday and eight more persons are wanted to donate a small portion of cuticle to help cover the arm of Phil Redmond. All who will volunteer to assist the



Another view of the wreck of the N.P.R.R. No. 154. (Public domain, from the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen's and Enginemen's Magazine, February 1910, page 285)

unfortunate young man are requested to call on Station Agent Hewitt at the office of the Northwestern Pacific railroad and he will give them free passage to and from San Rafael Saturday. The train will leave here at 8:30 o'clock."^{vi}

A number of high school boys from Petaluma stepped up to answer this appeal. By November 8, the *Call* reported

"Scalded Fireman's Body Now Adorned by Pieces of Cuticle from 149 Different People."^{vii}

In December 1908, Redmond was put under anesthetic so that doctors could bend his arms and legs, and they moved surprisingly easily, though skin tore and more grafts were required.

By April of 1909, the Wolf Graft, a rare procedure which involves taking a much thicker piece of skin, extending down to the donor's muscles, was performed, the donor being Walter Holland, a sailor.

Another similar surgery was scheduled with three donors, two of them women.^{viii}

Finally in October 1910, Redmond was released from the hospital. He arrived on crutches in Tiburon, where he "found that his own money was no good wherever he went." Throughout his ordeal, it appears he kept his sense of humor intact. He commented to the Sausalito *News*

TIPS FOR RESEARCHERS

- When you're doing newspaper research, read as many as you can, particularly multiple accounts of the same event. Each newspaper will have a different detail or a different spelling of a name. If I hadn't read the newspapers that mentioned Charles Kirsch, Charles Richer and Charles Percher, I might never have put together that my grandfather, Charles Kircher, was one of the donors.
- Think of your own spelling variants, like in the Telephone game, and try them. "Phil" showed up as "Phillip" and "Philip", "Redmond" was printed as "Redman" and even "Reading" in various articles.
- It's time consuming, but I transcribe all the newspaper articles related to the story. I find I learn more and remember more.
- Use a spreadsheet to compile your data - in this case, the names from the newspaper articles. It will help you to sort out alternate spellings for the same person and you can make notes about finding them near on the census to the principals in the story.
- Feel free to let yourself wonder about a random article you find in the newspaper. Maybe someone "up there" is pointing you in a direction. It might lead you back to something new about your family. It did me!

"Several told me that animal skin would not graft. It's false as most of the new skin on me is from Elks."^{ix}

Sadly, the newspaper reported that his mother was suffering nervous prostration. She died a few weeks later.

Redmond went back to work for the railroad, serving in the master mechanic's office in Tiburon.^x He underwent continued skin graft surgeries for the next several years. All in all, more than 3,200 square inches of skin were grafted onto his body. The same community that supported him with their skin continued to support him with dances and other benefits. His story was picked up across the nation in places such as the Toledo (Ohio) *News-Bee* and the Tulsa (Oklahoma) *World* in 1911.

In 1931, he visited Santa Rosa to attend his Uncle Jack's

funeral. He told the newspaper he felt no ill effects from his ordeal. He was in the transport service in WWI and made a number of trips on ocean-bound steamers. He worked on steam ferries on San Francisco Bay and eventually became a grocer.^{xi} About 1923, he married Anna Flanagan, an Irish nurse. He died in Sonoma in 1956, nearly 48 years after his ordeal.

Phil's story is one of a man's will to live in the face of incredible pain and hardship. And it's the story of true friendship, the brotherhood of so many men (and a few women) who sacrificed to save another. I'm glad to count Phil as one of my "genealogy friends" and I'm thankful that finding his story led me to learning about the generosity of my grandfather, as well. ♣

MARY RODDY has a Certificate in Genealogy and Family History from the University of Washington. She is currently enjoying a sabbatical near Sydney, Australia and learning how Australian genealogists pursue this fascinating hobby.

^{vi} Petaluma *Daily Courier* 15 October 1908, page 1, Petaluma, California

^{vii} San Francisco *Call* 11 Nov 1908, page 6, San Francisco, California

^{viii} San Francisco *Call*, April 27, 1909, page 3, San Francisco, California

^{ix} Sausalito *News* 1 Oct 1910, page 3, Sausalito, California

^x Sausalito *News* 24 Dec 1910, page 2, Sausalito, California

^{xi} *Press Democrat* 26 Sep 1931, page 3, Santa Rosa, California