

# Harry Picker's Escapades

Walt Johnson

CYC History and Artifacts Committee

Successful businessman, respected yachtsman, and convicted con man: Harry Picker was all these things in his relatively short life (he died at age 40). A successful agent of the Pacific Mutual Life Insurance Company, he owned a house in the exclusive Menlo Oaks section of Menlo Park and was also an adventurous, winning sailboat racer who was elected both vice commodore and commodore of two different yacht clubs. Yet he left a trail of fraud and dishonored checks, was fired for mishandling business accounts, and served twelve months at hard labor for impersonating an English peer.



Harry E. Picker. (1875–1955)  
Corinthian's Eighteenth Commodore (1913)  
[Honolulu *Star-Advertiser*, 2 February 1906]

Harry Edward Picker was born in Manchester, England, in March 1875 and baptized in Friskney, a small town in Lincolnshire, in August of the following year. His father Edward, a traveling umbrella salesman, moved the family to Stretford (a Manchester suburb<sup>1</sup>) a few years later.

---

<sup>1</sup> An important sports venue, Stretford has been the home of Manchester United Football Club since 1910 and of Lancashire County Cricket Club since 1864.

Picker attended school in Stretford, and by the age of sixteen he was working as an insurance clerk. In the late 1890s the family moved to Egerton Road in Stretford.<sup>2</sup> Harry must have liked the sound of this because he began using "Egerton" as his middle name (in place of his father's name, with which he had been christened).

About this time Picker's first brush with the law occurred. In 1896 he was living in Leamington (Warwickshire), representing himself as the inspector general of The Equitable Life Assurance Company. During his stay he managed to obtain a Royal Warwickshire Regiment of Volunteers officer's mess uniform<sup>3</sup>. He subsequently used a photograph of him wearing the uniform to perpetrate his frauds on local tradesmen to the amount of £150.

In this case, Picker somehow managed to avoid prosecution. If his own account of his travels can be believed (a somewhat questionable assumption), he visited the U.S., then went to Cuba, where he "saw something" of the war<sup>4</sup> then going on there. He claimed he then went to Mexico, and it was there that he learned of the death of the Earl of Hardwicke<sup>5</sup> in England in March 1897.



Former Sydney mayor John Young met  
Picker in Fiji (and was duped by him)

Picker went to Fiji and there made the acquaintance of Australian building contractor and politician John Young, a former mayor of Sydney. Picker introduced himself with his proper

---

<sup>2</sup> Egerton is the name of s district of Greater Manchester.

<sup>3</sup> The "mess uniform" is the most formal type of evening wear uniform used by military personnel. It frequently consists of a mess jacket, trousers, white dress shirt and a black bow tie, along with orders and medals insignia.

<sup>4</sup> This would have been the Cuban War of Independence (1895-1898) that in its last months merged into the Spanish-American War.

<sup>5</sup> This was Charles Yorke, 5<sup>th</sup> Earl of Hardwicke (1836-1897); his son Albert (1867–1904) succeeded him as the 6<sup>th</sup> Earl.

name, but as the pair traveled to Australia aboard the S.S. *Taviuni*, Picker insinuated that this was an assumed name and that he was in fact the new Earl of Hardwicke. He told Young that after hearing of his father's death, he had decided to visit Australia before returning to England to assume his new titles and estates.



Picker convinced Young that he was the Earl as they traveled from Fiji to Sydney aboard Union Steam Ship Company's S.S. *Taviuni*

By the time they arrived in Sydney, Young had become convinced that Picker was the new Earl. Young had an estate in the small village of Burrawang, about ninety miles southwest of Sydney, where his son was organizing a large charity event to raise funds for a hospital. Young invited the "Earl" to spend a few weeks there and to open the bazaar that formed part of the fundraising activities. Picker accepted, then asked a jewelry store in Sydney<sup>6</sup> to send him some samples of their wares that he might use at the charity event. The store, happy to oblige a ranking member of the peerage, sent a large case of assorted items on approval.

---

<sup>6</sup> Flavelle Bros., one of the leading jewelry and silversmith businesses in Australia, had received the Royal Warrant from Queen Victoria in 1901

**IMPORTANT :: NOTICE**  
TO THE RESIDENTS OF THE MOLONG DISTRICT.  
— A GRAND —  
**Fete, Bazaar, <sup>AND</sup> Ball**  
WILL BE HELD AT  
“STRATHMORE,” BURRAWONG,  
ON THE  
AFTERNOON AND EVENING OF  
**Wednesday, October 13**  
IN AID OF THE  
**MOLONG HOSPITAL.**

The Bazaar will be opened at 2.30 p.m. by the Earl of Hardwicke, and visitors will have the opportunity of securing many Choice and Serviceable Articles at most Reasonable Prices.

The Admission to the Bazaar, including Tea, at 6 p.m., will be 1s. 6d. Tickets for Ball—5s. Double ; 3s. Single.

**A Grand Display of Fireworks will be held at 7 p.m.**

☛ Gipsy Tents and Side Shows will be open Afternoon and Evening.

A First-class Band (Professionals) will be in attendance.

**ALL ARE CORDIALLY INVITED TO ATTEND.**

Newspaper announcement of the hospital fundraiser, noting the presence of the “Earl of Hardwicke” (Picker)

[*The Molong Express and Western District Advertiser*, 9 October 1897]

From this material the “Earl” provided some items for the raffle (such as cigarette cases and silver trinket boxes) and at the ball that evening he presented a gold bangle to the best-dressed lady and a brooch to the best dancer. He had paid for none of these.



A gold bangle made by Flavelle & Roberts  
of Sydney in about 1900

At the end of the month Picker departed for Sydney, traveling in a first-class railway carriage in the company of the Bishop of Bathurst. He checked into the prestigious Hotel Australia under his alias.



Picker stayed at the Hotel Australia upon arriving in Sydney

While he had managed to successfully impersonate the Earl in the rural countryside, the big city was a different matter. The jewelers sought payment of the £85 owed them for three sets of samples they had sent to Burrawang,<sup>7</sup> and the police began an investigation.

---

<sup>7</sup> These included three cigar cases, four cigarette cases, three matchboxes, a bouquet holder, a pincushion, a hairbrush, two toilet sets, two lady's companions (sewing cases), a photo frame, five trinket boxes, four flasks, a shaving mug (with brush), a gold watch, a gold albert (watch chain), two gold-filled cases, four silver watches, four silver alberts, and five studs.



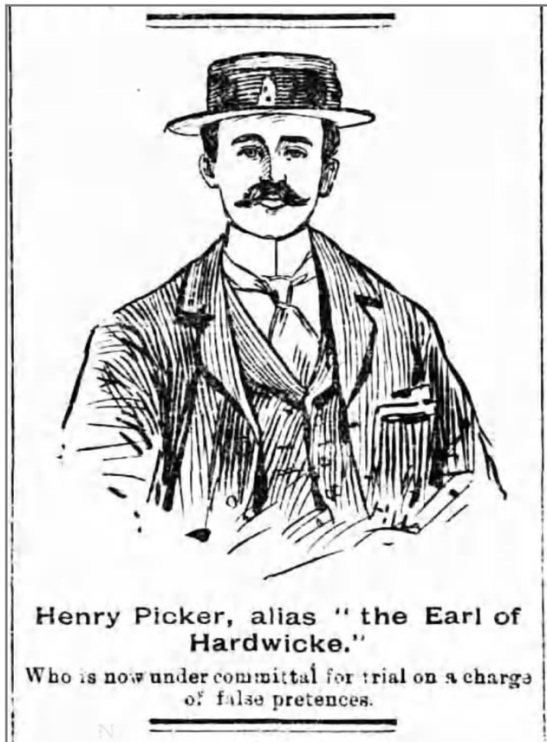


Picker was arrested at the Woolpack Hotel in the Sydney suburb of Parramatta

Two detectives searched for Picker for three or four days, eventually locating him in Parramatta, a major western suburb of Sydney. They arrested him about midnight, too late to catch a train to Sydney, so they had to walk the fourteen miles to the police station, which they reached at four in the morning. As he was being booked on a charge of false pretenses, Picker gave his age as 23 years<sup>8</sup> and, when asked his occupation, indignantly replied "None!". His name was listed as "Harry Picker, alias the Earl of Hardwicke" and bail was set at £150. Somewhat ironically, it is likely that the presence of the "Earl" had boosted the success of the Burrawang charity event, which raised £90 for the hospital.

---

<sup>8</sup> The real earl would have been 30 years old; the age discrepancy was noted by the newspapers.



L: Picker at the time of his trial (The newspaper got his first name wrong)

R: The real 6<sup>th</sup> Earl of Hardwicke

[*Sydney Evening News*, 8 November 1897]

As the police dug into this mysterious "Harry E. Picker," a few revealing items were found in his possession. One was the Royal Warwickshire Regiment mess uniform that he had acquired in England, accompanied by the photo of him wearing it. Another was a passbook in his name from the Mercantile Bank of Lancashire, along with other items that clearly established his one-time residence in Manchester. He was also carrying stationery from various hotels in the U.S., Fiji, and New Zealand, drink coupons from New York City, and a pawn ticket from San Francisco. He also had visiting cards from "Hon. H. E. Yorke," a name that was apparently a conflation of his own initials with the surname of the legitimate holders of the earldom of Hardwicke.<sup>9</sup>

Thinking that a peer of the realm might be known to the colonial authorities, police took the photograph of Picker in uniform to Government House in Sydney, where the governor's private secretary, who had gone to school with the real viscount, told them that the man in the photo was not the Earl. Picker's masquerade definitively ended when it was learned that the true Earl of Hardwicke had recently attended a funeral in London.

Picker had come to Australia from Vancouver, after he had spent time in the United States and New Zealand. He was described by the newspapers as being young, of rather diminutive

---

<sup>9</sup> None of the members of the Yorke family had initials "H. E."

stature, and “dressed in a fashionable summer suit<sup>10</sup>, light tweed yachting cap, and tan boots.” They also noted his speech, citing his pronunciation of “Austwalia” and “kangawoos.”

At first, he continued to maintain that he was the Earl, but when the evidence against him was presented, he admitted that he was not that person and decided to plead guilty to the charges. He nevertheless would not provide his actual identify, and, when asked, had nothing to say to the witnesses or court. At the end of his trial, however, Picker offered a lengthy written statement intended to explain his actions. The judge agreed to accept this.

According to Picker's statement, he was surprised to find on his arrival in Australia that it was believed he was the Earl of Hardwicke and was merely using “Harry Picker” was a *nom de voyage*.<sup>11</sup> Though he claimed he thought it was a joke, he nevertheless went along with it “for a couple of days.” When he solicited the samples, he used the false title because he wanted to avoid embarrassing his new acquaintances. And when the police detectives eventually confronted him, he continued the ruse because “the matter had gone so far that he could not draw out of it.” He claimed he intended to repay all that he owed, that this was his first time he had ever been charged with a crime, and that the six weeks he had already spent in jail was sufficient punishment. Since (he claimed) keeping him in jail in Australia would ruin his future, he asked that the First Offenders Act<sup>12</sup> be applied to his case.

The judge, however, was having none of it. He thought that Picker had shown too much premeditation, and he had read in the papers that Picker had said he did not intend to remain in Australia, as he would have to if he were released for a term on good behavior. He thereupon sentenced him to twelve months imprisonment at hard labor.



Picker's mug shot from Darlinghurst Gaol,  
13 December 1897

In a humorous postscript, the pantomime of “Dick Whittington” given at a local theater that year included “a fearful and wonderful personation of poor little Harry Picker.” It featured a

---

<sup>10</sup> It was early November, summer in the Southern Hemisphere.

<sup>11</sup> It is, however, generally believed that Picker himself had originated these rumors.

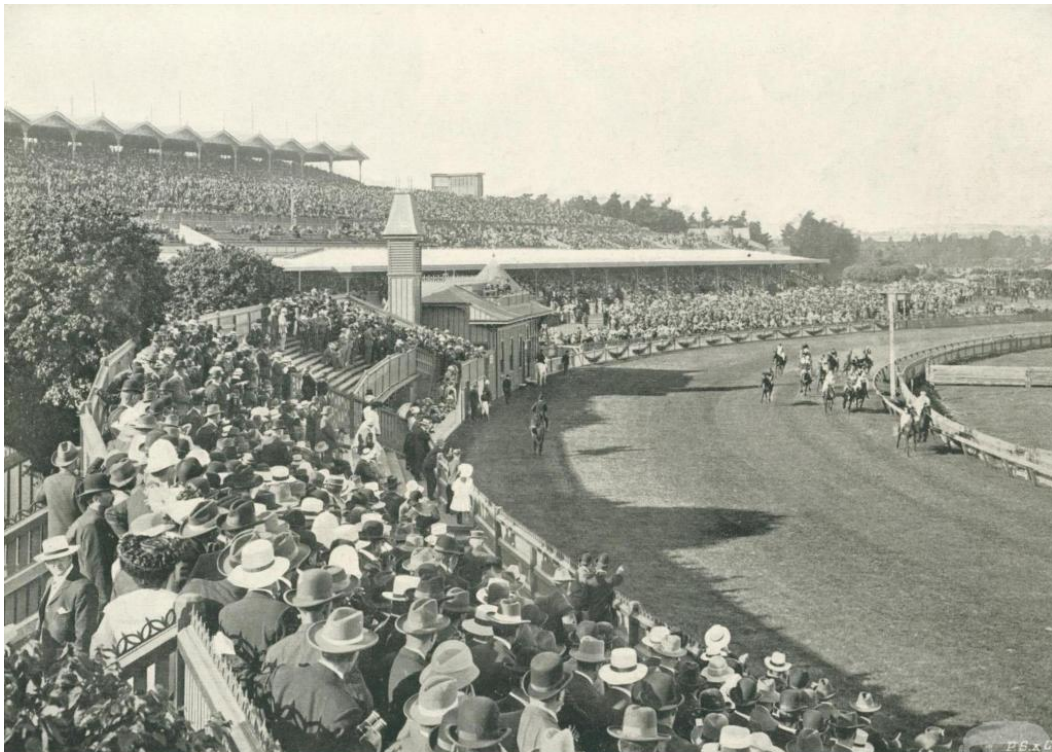
<sup>12</sup> The First Offenders Probation Act of 1894 provided for the criminal sentences of first-time offenders to be suspended and replaced by probation, if the judge deemed the offense to be “minor.”



## Harry Picker's Escapades

character wearing a marvelous getup with cuffs, collar, and stick. His real name was supposed to be "Juggins," but he was known (and addressed on the stage) as the "Earl of Hardwicke."

Picker completed his sentence, but it didn't have the intended effect on his behavior. He remained in Australia for another year, and at a well-known horserace in Victoria in early November 1899 he resurrected his "Earl of Hardwicke" ruse. Presenting himself at the grandstand entrance, he declared that "I am the Earl of Hardwicke; and am entitled to admittance to your grandstand." The astonished gatekeeper took him to the race secretary, who contacted the police. Recognized as the "pseudo-Earl" from Sydney, he was turned out "in a very crestfallen state."



Unreformed, in 1899 Picker once again claimed to be the Earl of Hardwicke and tried to gain entrance to Melbourne's Flemington Racecourse

This experience seems to have finally convinced Picker to leave the colony, which he did that April. Traveling aboard S.S. *Alameda*, he passed through Auckland on his way to San Francisco, where he arrived in early May 1900; he then continued to Los Angeles. One month later he was visited by the U.S. census taker, who recorded his name as "Egerton Harry Picker" (which may have been a simple transcription error). Picker reported that he was an alien of English birth who had been unemployed for the previous twelve of months. But he also claimed his occupation was "farmer" (which had never been true) and that he had come to the U.S. in 1896 (thereby completely suppressing his time in Australia).



Picker sailed from Australia to San Francisco aboard S.S. *Alameda* in 1900  
[John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland]

Picker next moved to Hawaii, where he returned to the insurance business. His life seems to have gotten on track and In July 1907 Pacific Mutual hired Harry to help run its northwest regional office in Spokane. He and his Japanese personal valet went to San Francisco on their way to Spokane. While in The City, Harry hired a car and driver for a sightseeing tour. After they returned to the Fairmont Hotel, he asked his valet how long they had been gone. The valet told him it had been two hours, but the driver insisted that it had been three. Harry paid the driver for two hours and the ensuing argument reached a level that disrupted business in the lobby and was reported in the newspapers. Eventually, the driver seemed to be mollified and went his way. Harry went to a hotel in Pacific Grove while things cooled down.

By October, Harry and his valet were established in Spokane, living in elaborate style in an \$85/month apartment house (expensive for the time). This only lasted a few months, though: by February his office's books were being investigated by an auditor from Pacific Mutual's Los Angeles headquarters and Harry had been dismissed. He returned to San Francisco, where he and a friend spent the next several weeks on a "revelry fling" (as the newspapers put it).

Passing bad checks, evicted from hotels for nonpayment, even wrestling with one of the captive elk in Golden Gate Park, the pair cut a broad swath through the Bay Area. When their escapades caught up with them, the newspapers reported that "friends of the two men are making strenuous efforts to raise money to settle their debts [which ran to several hundred dollars] as quickly and quietly as possible."



Newspaper Coverage of Harry's "Revelry Fling"  
[Honolulu *Star-Advertiser*, 18 February 1908]

Harry spent the next several months out of the country, traveling back to England and visiting Mexico. In December of 1908 the driver involved in the Fairmont Hotel fracas, still not satisfied with the outcome of the affair, swore out a warrant for Harry's arrest for defrauding him. Harry once again avoided the consequences of his actions and returned to a normal life. His insurance business flourished, and he joined Corinthian Yacht Club, where he served one year as commodore. He died in England just two years later.