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Victoria

Ashes returned and 'shadow is lifted'

Jeff Turnbull

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Betty Everett and Pat Spencer, nieces of Colin Campbell Ross with his remains at Old Melbourne Gaol yesterday. Photo: Rebecca Hallas

BETTY Everett grew up with a dark family secret that was never discussed, not even among family members - her uncle had been hanged for raping and murdering a little girl.

As a young girl, Mrs Everett, then Betty Ross, had come across a photograph in the family Bible of a man who looked like her father, but was in fact his brother, Colin Campbell Ross.

Years later, while visiting relatives, she saw a yellowing magazine clipping, with the same photograph, reporting on the hanging of Ross, 26, in the Old Melbourne Gaol in 1922 for the rape and

murder of 12-year-old Alma Tirtschke.

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Betty had never mentioned her discovery to her father Stanley and he never spoke of his brother, but she had grown up thinking a murderer's blood was running through her veins.

Ross, who maintained his innocence up to the moment the gallows floor opened under him, was cleared of the murder in May 2008 after 17 years of dogged research by author Kevin Morgan.

With a petition of mercy from the Ross and Tirtschke families, the case was re-opened in 2006, and Mr Ross was eventually proved innocent and pardoned for the crime.

In the Old Melbourne Gaol yesterday, Ross's ashes, which had been buried in a mass grave, were handed to Mrs Everett and her sister, Pat Spencer.

They will be laid to rest next to the grave of his mother, who had pleaded unsuccessfully to the government of the day for her son's remains.

"A shadow has been lifted from my heart," Mrs Everett said.

Victorian Attorney-General Rob Hulls, who handed the ashes over to the family, said the tragedy highlighted the injustice of the death penalty.

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