

BACK TO PURGA

After the commencement of the war in 1939 there was a huge demand for Aboriginal workers and there was a mass exodus from Purga leaving it a virtual detention centre for orphan children.

Initially, plans progressed for the half-caste village and three neighbouring pieces of land were acquired from Mrs Lucas, an elderly neighbour. The lot numbers acquired were Lots 59, 102 and 103. These were adjacent to the existing mission site. The total area was to be 262 acres. It was also intended to acquire Lot 61 but this never eventuated.

The venture got as far as the surveying of the land, sixty-two separate lots were surveyed. Initially the amount of 1500 pounds had been set aside for the acquisition of the neighbouring allotments owned by Mrs Lucas. There was some dispute about the amount of compensation to be paid and the matter was referred to the Land Court for determination. However, Mrs Lucas died. She was 92 years of age and the price of 1000 pounds was paid. In 1941 the reserve for the purpose of a training colony for the upliftment of half-castes was gazetted in the Queensland Government Gazette on 26 April.

Bert and George Becket deepened the well on the Nine Mile Reserve and a detailed scheme for the water supply to the half-caste industrial settlement was prepared. All cottages constructed were intended to have reticulated water with elevated tanks. To gain access to the site it was necessary to obtain a small easement across the small triangular shaped block adjacent to the Nine Mile Reserve and directly across the road from the mission site. Even that caused some dissent from the owner of that land who refused to allow the easement across his land. The total cost of the water supply infrastructure was to be 1300 pounds.

While all of the planning was going on the condition of the rest of the buildings continued to deteriorate. In 1939 it had been said that the whole of the buildings was so dilapidated that the mission Superintendent was ashamed for anyone to visit. The Superintendent indicated that dormitories should be provided for both boys and girls even though the children may be taken away from them at any time. The accommodation was referred to in terms of "those awful places where they are at present". In 1939 the fund for the immediate capital outlay for the construction of the village was to be set at 3500 pounds with that year's allocation to be 2000 pounds.

However, several months later it was indicated that there was some danger that the department would not even be able to hold the 2000 pounds, which was to have been utilised for the water installation and the building of 3 to 4 cottages.

Gradually even though the land had been secured, the concept lost momentum. None of the former inhabitants of the colony showed any real interest in participating in the venture and the Chief Protector sent letters to such places as Palm Island and to various police districts to see if there would be any suitable persons of a "superior type" that may be willing to participate. There were no takers. The only police district that could recommend some families was in Eidsvold (235kms west of Maryborough). It was felt that part of the reason for the unwillingness of former residents to return to participate in the new scheme was that it would bring them back under the Aboriginal Preservation and Protection Act.

In late 1941 it was conceded that the unavoidable delay of nearly 4 years in bringing the establishment to existence had an unfortunate retarding effect for the improvements and renovations. As a matter of the War economy these works had been deferred as unlikely to be profitable or useful in the new building scheme.

In 1942 the Minister decided that in view of the international situation the work would not and could not be proceeded with. The funds that had been set aside for the venture were redirected elsewhere.

Approval of the cost of building another dormitory was not received until 1944. This was completed in April of 1945 at the cost of nearly 600 pounds. However, the numbers of children at the mission continued to decline and a request was made for more children to be sent there.

The Purga Mission was on its way out. The agricultural land was no longer utilised. The village formerly occupied by the families was no longer in use. In something of a last ditch attempt to save Purga the

Superintendent Major Smith said that Purga should be a training centre for children operating outside the ambit of the Aboriginal department but this created difficulties. Some of Major Smith's views were at odds with the thinking of the day, particularly in relation to the question as to whether it was appropriate to expect Aboriginal people to adopt western values.

The mission reached a very anti-climactic conclusion. Late in 1947 there was a devastating hailstorm. There was significant damage to the buildings, sheets of galvanised iron had been partially dislodged and the place must have resembled a ghost town or at least was approaching that status.

Over the early months of 1948 several of the children were sent out to employment. A small farewell function was planned for the last of them before their transfer. Some were sent to Palm Island to be in close proximity to family members. Others were sent to Woorabinda, from whence they had come, and the rest to that fate far worse than Purga, namely Cherbourg.

After the closure of the mission, Charlie and Nancy Chambers, Aboriginal people from Cherbourg were sent down to act as caretakers. The job of caretaker was handed over to a Mr Hodgson of Purga on 6 December 1948 and the Chambers went back to Cherbourg.

All Aboriginal reserves in the Ipswich District were rescinded by Government Gazette on 16 December 1948. There appears to have been no consultation with any of the former residents. The land was to be utilised for war service land settlement and all of the useable parts of the existing buildings were removed with the exception of the Superintendent's residence which subsequently burnt down. The only remaining buildings are the cream shed and remnants of the old slaughter yard.

The Salvation Army was allowed to retain the church building but nothing else. After the closure of the mission, the church wrote to the State indicating that during the running of the mission it had incurred a loss of some 6000 pounds. An inquiry was made as to whether that amount could be reimbursed.

The Government refused and wrote back calling into question the management practices of the church. This was a disappointing and somewhat premature conclusion to a venture that held so much hope and optimism at its inception. If only the concept had evolved into one where self-determination was the central theme.