

COLONISATION

This is an appropriate time to go back to the beginning of recorded history in the Ipswich area in order to explain how it came to be that a group of Aborigines were being induced to move out of town to a small block of land to live with a former British soldier.

European presence in the area commenced fifteen years earlier in 1827 when Limestone Station was established. A group of convicts along with an overseer were sent to quarry Limestone for the manufacture of mortar for building construction in Brisbane. They did not get a friendly reception from the local aborigines, perhaps not wanting criminals in the neighbourhood and perhaps having received wind of what was happening elsewhere. The station occupants were threatened and had tools stolen. As a consequence soldiers were sent up the river from the Brisbane convict settlement to guard the kilns.

The Ipswich area was opened for free settlement in 1842 and there were frequent violent interactions between the new settlers and Aborigines. This continued virtually unabated into the 1850's.

As early as 1837 Justice Blacklock had provided advice and recommendation to the British Parliament that reserves should be set aside for Aboriginal people in all areas being colonised as was being done in the United States of America and in Canada. These recommendations were ignored, the attitude being that the Government would leave it for the colonists and Aborigines to sort it out between themselves. How different it might have been if the recommendations had been followed.

There was no recognition whatsoever given to the fact that Aborigines owned the land because the British concept of ownership of land was different from the Aboriginal concept. Aborigines were occupiers and custodians and were an integral part of the land. They did not see land in terms of potential material gain and it was most certainly not seen as a resource to be utilised and used up and then cast aside when it was spent.

In 1844 the Aboriginal population of the Ipswich area was estimated to be about 150. It is considered that this figure is very unreliable because Aboriginal people were nomadic and there were never any permanent populations in any particular area at any given time. The populations were in a constant state of flux. In 1854 a big fight took place in the area at which some 800 to 1200 were in attendance. It is not known whether these were local tribes people or whether some were from elsewhere.

In 1849 an Aboriginal reserve was set up on the Bremer River. This was abandoned after 2 years because it was "altogether unfrequented".

In 1858, 480 people were issued with blankets at the Ipswich lockup but by 1861 this number had dropped to 250. This diminution of numbers may have been attributable to the combined affects of disease and violent conflict but nobody really knows.

There are no records of large-scale clashes after this time. At the end of this period the coroner of the Ipswich police district, Dr Henry Challinor pressed for a stop to the "killings and injustices" to which Aboriginal people were being subjected.

Hunting and gathering by local Aborigines continued into the 1870's.

Involvement in the local labour market had commenced earlier with Aboriginal men being employed on various stations in the area and as woodcutters in the forests. The women were employed in houses and hotels, all physically demanding, menial, unskilled occupations. Settlers were dependent on Aboriginal people for the success of their pioneering endeavours. By the end of the 1870's, the traditional lifestyles were at an end; scattered remnants of local tribes gravitated to the fringes of white settlements. Alcoholism and introduced diseases were taking their toll.

There was increased density of European population, large-scale forest clearing and consequent decline of traditional food sources. This resulted in an increased reliance on European foods, which was given to them either as wages for work done or as handouts.

The Indigenous languages were becoming indistinct as their numbers continued to decline.

The Government had neglected the Indigenous population over a period of approximately 40 years since free settlement and approximately 20 years since separation and had not made any serious attempts to rectify what was obviously a situation of great injustice.

Some of the churches had spoken out about this situation, but nobody in authority be it the Monarchy, the British Parliament or the Queensland Government did anything effective to improve the civil rights or lifestyle of local Indigenous people. Perhaps if something had been done earlier, things may have been different.

Aboriginal people were treated as being somehow less than human, more primitive, therefore less evolved, almost as part of the local wildlife to be shifted aside to make way for European plants, animals and progress.

This brings us into the 1880's to the point where there had been such a marked deterioration in their physical wellbeing, that they were being described as "lazy, dirty, drunken blacks, thin, ragged and miserable". This is how they came to be moving out to Deebing Creek Aboriginal Home with a former British soldier. The intention was to keep them away from the negative influences of white civilisation "namely keep them away from the grog, and those 'low classes of whites' who took advantage of the women" and to "Christianise them".

Two of the early European identities who had a major impact on the Mission were Mr W.H. Foote and Dr Von Lossberg. Mr Foote owned a number of properties in the area around the mission and residents from the home worked on these properties. He was a member of the Ipswich firm of Cribb and Foote, General Merchants, who had the contract for the supply of groceries to Deebing Creek and the Purga Missions for many years, including the period when the Salvation Army administered the Mission.

It is interesting to note that one of the Aborigines at the home had taken the surname Foote. There is reference to an Ellen Foote, aged 56 years described as full blood from the upper Logan District, with an aboriginal name of Archer in a list of residents compiled in about 1902. It is not known how this came to be in terms of any possible association with the Foote family.

Dr Von Lossberg was the medical practitioner who treated Mission residents for their illnesses. He regularly made home visits to the Mission. He made a contribution of inestimable value to ensuring the physical survival of the Aboriginal population. At the time of the commencement of Dr Von Lossberg's involvement, the Aboriginal population comprised the scattered remnants of local tribes (who had been described in those disparaging terms referred to previously). When persons were sent to Deebing Creek from other areas and were suffering from illnesses, it was Dr Von Lossberg who treated them.



Quiet time by the creek – thought to be Eva McGrath