NEWS MONDAY magazine

History preserved in photographic collection

Thomas Dick was not a professional photographer, yet in the space of just 14 years he produced no less than 500 photographs of such excellent clarity that those prints existing today are spoken of as works of art which have never been excelled, despite technological advances since they were taken.

Some of his best works were donated to various institutions during his lifetime and some have since been passed on by his family, to be given pride of place in historical displays.

The Cambridge University in England accepted a collection to assist in anthropological studies of the Australian Aborigine.

This particular collection of photographs of Aborigines living at the time in the Hastings Valley was enough to whet the appetite of anthropologist, Dr. Jean McBride, of the Australian National University, who came to Port Macquarie to obtain more knowledge of their lifestyle and to trace the life of the man who took the photographs. That was about two years ago.

The prints in this edition of Monday Magazine were borrowed from the Hastings District Historical Society's display at the Port Macquarie Museum.

Early settlers

Thomas Dick was a son of John Suart Dick and grandson of one of Port Macquarie's first free settlers, John Dick, who arrived in the colony in 1839 with his wife and one child — a daughter, Elizabeth. Two sons died of fever on the long voyage.

He set up business as a tanner in Port Macquarie, fared well, and became a strong force in local affairs. Six more children were born at Port Macquarie — John Suart, William Burgess, James Wardrop, Mary Agnes, who became Mrs. John Glen, Isabella (Mrs. Turnham), Margaret (Mrs. G. Hayward). Elizabeth married John Morrison.

John Suart married Elizabeth Wilkins. The union produced five children — Thomas, who married Jane Freeman of Green Point, Hastings River, John Suart (Louisa Thurling), Ernest (Mary Wilson), Charles (Mary Fisher) and Elizabeth, who married Daniel McLaren. His wife died when still a young woman.

He married again and four more children were born into the Dick household — Ralph, Ruby, Olive and Sidney.

Oyster farmers

John Suart Snr. spent some years working with his father in his tanneries around Port Macquarie until the mid-1880s, when he took out one of the first oyster leases on the Hastings River.

His sons, Thomas, Ernest and Charles, followed in his footsteps, working alongside their father and then later operating this own leases, first in partnership and then on their own.

Thomas took out the first lease of his own in 1899.

Although cultivating oysters and marketing them kept Thomas away from his home in Waugh Street for much of the daylight hours, he still managed to find time for community affairs. For some years, he was secretary to the Port Macquarie Show Society, secretary of the Regatta Club, secretary of the Church of England Parochial Council, an alderman on the Port Macquarie Council and was also a part-time boat builder.

He also found time to pursue his favorite pastime — photography. His interest in the "magic box" began just before the outbreak of World War I. Noted zoologist-turned-Fisheries Department Superintendent, Theo Roughley, taught him the rudiments of the art and helped him with his purchase in Sydney of his first camera, a 5 x 4 Reflex.

Before long he had fitted out his own darkroom and began weekend excursions looking for suitable objects and backgrounds — sometimes taking his subjects with him.

Paid to pose

Natives living around Port Macquarie at the time were always willing to pose for him, and even more willing when he offered them a fee. They were wearing European dress at the time, so it meant getting into 'costume' to be in the act.

Thomas would often hire several cars to transport his equipment and subjects to the chosen sight, which was generally around the

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Fishing with spears, as seen through the lens of Thomas Dick's camera.

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Our heritage —

History in pictures

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base of Mount Seaview, streams in the Upper Hastings or Bonny Hills.

Bonny Hills was then known as Green Hills. The name was changed to avoid confusion with Greenhill, near Kempsey.

Thomas' eldest son, Ray, accompanied him on many of those trips helping to lump the equipment around for his father until the right setting was found.

Now 78 years of age, living with his sister at Allunga Avenue, Port Macquarie, Ray still has vivid recollections of those times.

"The Aborigines certainly liked to go along in the cars. They enjoyed every minute of the trip and loved to pose for dad.

"The gins were very shy and wouldn't get dressed up for the part until dad sent me deep into the scrub while they changed.

"With the exception of man who came across from the Macleay River they were all locals."

Ray is one of four children from the marriage of Thomas to Jane Freeman. The others are Jack, Milton and Margaret.

Black Friday

As a naturalist and lover of all creatures big and small, photography fitted nicely into Thomas Dick's way of life.

Ironically, it was curiosity and thirst for knowledge in this field that led to his death in 1927, on Friday the 13th, his 50th birthday.

He left home after lunch on that day to study marine life in rock pools below the lighthouse at Tacking Point — one of his favorite spots.

He was so engrossed that he failed to observe a huge wave bearing down on him. Seconds later, he had been washed out to sea and then disappeared.

When he hadn't returned well after nightfall, a search began, but it was not until the following Tuesday that the mystery of his disappearance was solved.

Ray and his brother, Milton, came across their father's body lying on a sand spit near one of the headlands, just north of the lighthouse.

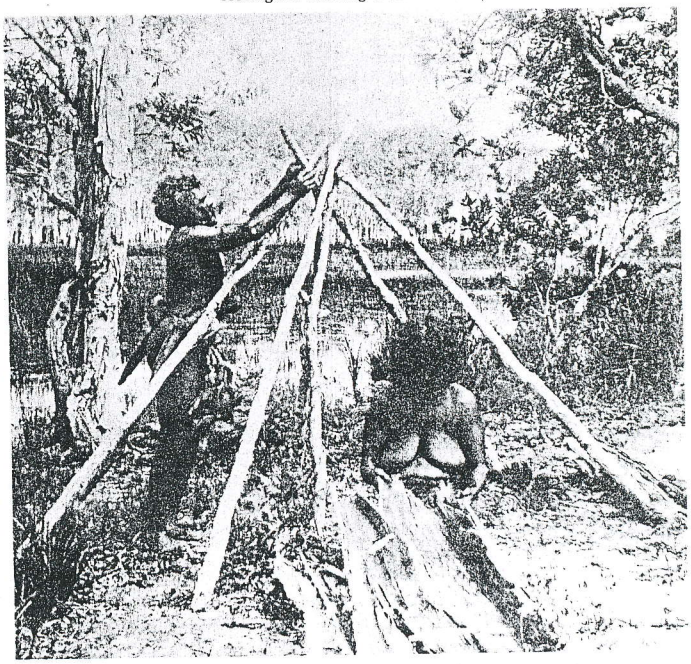
It was a tragic ending for a man, who sought no favor or accolades, but quietly and sincerely gave so much to posterity in his lifetime, and even more after his death.

—Bernard Harte

Three generations . . . above John Dick, the tanner.

His daughter-in-law Elizabeth, wife of John Suart Dick and mother of Thomas.

Above, "Old Murray," who features in several of the Dick Collection photographs. Below, Aborigines building a bark hut.



. . . and son Thomas Dick (pouring tea) enjoying a bush picnic about 1920 with Les Manfield (owner of the T model Ford) and two sisters, the Miss Fletchers. The other man is unknown.

HERITAGE WEEK
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memories of how people lived here before the convicts came

Recent visitors to Port Macquarie include Barry Morris, from Sydney University, who is undertaking research into certain aspects of the economic life of the Dhan-gadi people (the aboriginal people of the Macleay River).

Two Dhan-gadis, Mr. John Quinlan and his first cousin, Mrs. Eileen Davis, helped Mr. Morris with his research by recalling the following memories of their childhood early this century . . .

First of all, we would like to say that it would not be right really for us to talk about the Aboriginal people of the Hastings River, because they belonged to a different tribe to us.

We are Dhan-gadi people of the Macleay River, and they are Birpai. Our grandmother, Mrs. Ellen Callaghan, spent a number of years living on the Rollands Plains when she was young, and she learnt to speak Birpai. She remained a good Birpai speaker all her life.

The photographs taken by Mr. Dick show a lot of the way our people used to live when we were growing up on the Macleay River around Bellbrook. In those years, we moved about with our parents who worked on a number of properties on the Upper Macleay. When we were on the move, and when we were staying at a place for a short time. We usually lived in what white people called a gunyah. We called them a *ngura*, meaning camp, in Dhan-gadi.

A ngura was made in much the same way as the one shown in the photograph. Once the frame was put up, a bark covering was put over the top. The type of bark used depended on what sort of trees were around. The bark covering may come from the tea tree, the stringy bark, or the forest box tree. The covering kept out the rain and a trench was dug around the outside to keep ground water out. A *ngura* was good to live in too. They were warm in winter, cool in summer, and dry in wet weather. If we stayed in a place for a long time, however, our people usually built themselves a bark hut to live in. Bark huts were used because they were larger. The same materials were used to build them.

Uncle Gussy Nance made canoes from the bark of the box tree in those days. The bark of the forest box tree was regarded as better than that of the scrub box tree for this purpose. A bark canoe could hold two people. Uncle Gussy used the canoe to paddle across Nulla Nulla Creek.

Other things were made too. Fighting sticks, *murai* was their proper name, were also made, but were not used for fighting in our time. The same was the case with the spear. The spear was called *gamai* in Dhan-gadi. It had a soft wood shaft from the Kurrajong tree and a hardwood point. Hunting was done with dogs and a gun in our time. In our language the word for dog is mirri — that is, a tame dog. The word for dingo is wangal, and a koala is called yarrayappini. The men used a spear for catching fish. Barrgan was the name of the boomerang. We had two types; one that used to go straight ahead, which was used in fights in the old days, and another one which returned. Uncle Gussy Nance was the best we saw at throwing a boomerang. He could get it to come back to his feet every time.

Our people used to make the boomerang from a tree that we only knew as the boomerang tree. The root of this tree was used to make them, the wood used for the boomerang had to be hard and flexible, for if it was brittle it would break on impact with the ground. The wood used from the boomerang tree had both hardness and flexibility.

A big difference in our time was that people used to wear European clothes. People had stopped wearing what white people call a loin cloth. We called it a *mullapin*. These were made from possum skins. Possum coats were also worn in winter. This had nearly stopped by the time we were born. Wombo Murray was the last person in our time to own a possum coat. The women had dresses, and the men had coats, shirts and trousers to wear. The men, however, continued to prefer to wear the *mullapin* instead of wearing trousers, and only wore trousers when they had to go to town.

Mr. John Quinlan and Mrs. Ellen Davis

Acknowledgment: The photographs used in this article are reproduced by courtesy of the Hastings District Historical Society. They are part of the Dick collection — photographs taken by Thomas Dick on and around the Hastings River, between about 1895 and 1910.

1. A rapidly vanishing part of our local heritage — a sample of the abundant wildlife which supplied local Aborigines with food.

2. Forest, river and sea were sources of all man's needs before the white people came. This photograph, taken 11km south of Port Macquarie, shows stone chippings in the foreground and three local hunters apparently seeking the right place to fish.

3. Bark is stripped from trees to make canoes.

4. Fly and Emily, King and Queen of the Port Macquarie tribe about 1900.