

The up-river murders

Because of our desire to catch some up-river perch, and see some of the things already mentioned, Pat Doyle, Jim Wilkinson and I arranged to meet at Tilbuster (a grant of about 1200 acres of land made to Mrs. Innes of Lake Innes).

We were travelling by horseback, the usual mode of travel here in those days (1920s), when Pat Doyle started to tell me about the murders that took place west of Glenesk in the year 1841.

Just west of the boundary of Glenesk, up a gentle slope about 200 yards from the bank of the river covered with ferns and a good stand of blackbutt trees, four cedar cutters were living in a hut which they had built. They had a small saw pit close handy, where they flitched the cedar. I saw the pit about 55 years ago. It was some 15 feet long by five feet wide, and had nearly filled in by then with soil and rubbish.

The hut had a rough bed each end of its length, and two men used to sleep in each bed. On the southern side of the river, about 250 yards from the hut, there was a camp containing a tribe of Aborigines, whose chief was Taharamidgee.

The tribe was there for some time and they learned to speak some pidgin English, and the cedar cutters could speak and understand some of their language. This tribe was always quite friendly to the cedar-getters, and did not at any time give them reason to think they would do harm to them.

However, Taharamidgee, the king of the tribe, must have suspected that his gin was too friendly with the cutters and decided to club them to death while they were in the bed. This gin sneaked out away from the camp and warned the

cedar cutters, told them to leave immediately, and told them not to let any of the black tribe know she had warned them or she too would surely be clubbed to death.

She told them the tribe was to have a sing-song where they were camped on the southern side of the river on the first night. They were coming across the river to the northern side (the same side as the cutters' camp) the next day, and having a big corroboree. On the third night, they planned a sing-song close to the hut. They were then going to rush in and club the white men to death, and then burn the hut down, so that other white men would think they were burned to death while they were asleep.

Each night, the gin sneaked away and warned the men, and still they went to bed on the second and third nights, not believing her story.

The sing-songs and corroboree took place just as the gin had predicted and still the cutters took no notice. Just before dawn on the third night, one of the Aborigines came to the door. He asked for a drink of water. The cutters said "In the tin near the door".

The fellow dashed the pannikin into the tin,

and his followers rushed into the hut with nulla nullas and other weapons swinging. They clubbed and flogged the men in their beds at either end of the hut savagely. When they were satisfied that the cutters were all dead, they went out of the hut and sat down on their haunches with their spears held between their knees, in a double row outside the door of the hut.

Dead

Now, when George Spokes' mate was hit, he bounced on top of Spokes, and in the dark they were flogging and clubbing the top man. Spokes did not get a scratch, but the other fellow bled all over him. He 'lay doggo' until all was quiet. Some minutes passed and he heard one of the Aborigines say "Bortra", meaning Spokes. Another answered "Baleli", which Spokes knew meant 'dead'.

When Spokes heard this, he knew he would have to move. So he quietly rolled the man off, took off his nightshirt, and appeared at the door, red with blood.

The two lines of black men, sitting on their

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heels, all yelled "Dibble, dibble!" "Dibble, dibble!"

They fell backwards in shock. Spokes took a split second decision and bounded out the door. He ran the gauntlet in very truth between the shock warriors. He said he felt the warm wind of death on the back of his neck in the semi-darkness.

It took very little time for the black men to recover and they chased the white man down the ferny ridge and were quickly on his heels, with boomerangs and spears.

The cedar men had a bullock dray to cart the cedar and small trees were cut off at a height that would allow the dray to pass over them without hitting the axle, about a foot from the ground. However, a big tree had fallen across the original track and the cutters had cleared a way around the tree. Although the top of the fallen log was six feet high, Spokes cleared it in one bound. When he hit the ground on the other side, the leading blackfellow was almost level with him, but the

black man kicked one of the cut off stumps in the semi-darkness and fell. They all stopped except Spokes, who sped on with that 'dibble-dibble' sounding in his ears.

The river frontage of this property is one mile. He ran right across this distance, and turned to the right after crossing the river at the bend where the old crossing was, and came to an old shingle roofed house. Whoever lived there at the time sent someone down to Glencoe, about three or four miles down the river (on the opposite side to Tilbuster), where Captain William Geary lived at that time and had 40 convicts and the troopers to look after them.

Some of these troopers saddled their horses and rode up the river to where Spokes had taken refuge, then on up to the cedar getters' hut. As they rode up to the door, one of the cutters was standing in the doorway, with his fingers hooked over the top of the door. They laid him down, and he died almost at once. The troopers buried the three of them about 200 yards up along the river, where there is a little bit of soft ground on the northern side, alongside some black rocks about eight feet high.

The troopers then tracked the tribe right up the river into New England.

A man named Doyle, one of Pat's grandparents at Doyle's River, saw something moving along the road, and coming closer, he saw it was the troopers with the black tribe. They had Taharamidgee between two of the troopers' horses, handcuffed to each stirrup iron, and were travelling slowly along the road towards Port Macquarie. Immediately behind the troopers was a long line of men of the tribe, then the old men in single file. After them came the gins and lastly the youngsters. The line was about half a mile.

They travelled that way all the way to Port Macquarie, where a scaffold was erected on the eastern side of the old gaol (it was right where the sealed road is now). There was no hanging room in the old goal. The blacks were standing around. The authority of the day asked him if he had anything to say, and Taharamidgee said, "All up this time."

When he dropped, the tribe faded away into the forest in a few minutes, it was quite close handy in those days, and disappeared.

NOTE: Pat Doyle got this story from the sole survivor of the massacre, George Spokes, while listening to Spokes relating it to Pat's father when Pat was a boy, at the end of the last century. He didn't have a lot of excitement and he apparently remembered the story word-perfect, for he had never been to the site before. After he had told me the story, I suggested that if he had the facts right, we should be able to find the saw-pit and the black stones at the burial ground. We walked straight to each of them.

In the next issue of Monday Magazine, Frank Little gives an account of a naddymelon