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Chapter 8

THE ABORIGINES

The Hastings Valley was, of course, peopled by Aborigines long before the first white man arrived. They discovered, thousands of years ago, that it is one of the best parts of Australia in which to live.

The first real evidence of ancient Aboriginal settlement came to light in 1913 when a railway superintendent from Orange, who devoted his leisure to historical exploration, found Stone Age relics south of the town.

Reporting the find, the Port Macquarie News wrote: "While pursuing his investigations in Port Macquarie Mr. Milne discovered the existence of an extensive pre-historic camp of the aborigines, belonging to the stone age period. It is situated on a stretch of beach between Tacking Point Lighthouse and Cathie Creek, about six miles from Port Macquarie. The site is practically continuous for about a mile and is a chain wide in places.

"The whole of the area is literally covered with kitchen middens and relics of the stone age. With very few exceptions the articles found are of the chipped type. The site has apparently been exposed by portion of the sand dunes having been eroded by south-easterly gales and the sand drifting inland. The beach where the discovery was made runs in an unbroken line for many miles south of the lighthouse and contains millions of "pippies" in its sands. It was no doubt the fact of these shellfish being present in such large quantities that attracted the aborigines to the place. It was a regular custom with the blacks, even within the memory of persons now living, to visit the beaches at regular intervals with the object of varying their diet with a feast of the products of the sea".

In 1965, some 50 years after the discovery of the middens, the local council put an end to the mechanical harvesting of "pippies" following complaints from an angling club that tractors were gouging out the shellfish by the ton.

It was not only the pippies which made the area attractive as a home for Aboriginal tribes. There was plenty of fish in the rivers and lakes, waterfowl was abundant, and the bushland was well populated with kangaroos and other animals. Little wonder that many Aborigines chose to live along the coastal strip which, in modern times, has become a "dress circle" residential area. Little wonder, too, that the Aborigines (or many of them at least) resented the intrusion of white men into their territory.

The Aboriginal population at the time of Port Macquarie's settlement seems to have been quite large. When Oxley first looked down on the area from Mount Seaview he saw "numerous smokes arising from natives' fires (which) announced a country well inhabited". After his initial contacts with them he wrote that they were both numerous and treacherous and described them as "handsome, showing evident signs of good living".

This good living was not confined to the plentiful supply of food. The tribes were much better accommodated than those living close to Sydney Cove. Lieutenant King, a surveyor who accompanied Oxley in 1819,

A Town Called Port by John Moyes

Aborigines at Lake Cathie.

remarked that the Aborigines lived in dome-roofed huts which could each hold eight or 10 people. They were much larger than the bark gunyahs further south.

Although Oxley and his party made the first recorded contact with the Hastings aborigines, there appears to be little doubt that other white men had passed through the area earlier. Oxley found, for example, that the local tribesmen were already acquainted with firearms. "If any of the people took up a musket they immediately ran off and it was only by laying it down that they could be prevailed upon to return", he wrote.

From the earliest days of the Colony a number of convicts had escaped and tried to make their way north. Perhaps some of them passed through the Hastings Valley, and certainly one party did land near Port Macquarie towards the middle of 1791. This party comprised William Bryant, a man transported in the First Fleet for assisting smugglers, his wife and two children, and seven other convicts. They escaped from Sydney Cove in a fishing boat and eventually reached Timor.

Whether the Aborigines' fear of firearms was intuitive or born of some bitter experience, there is ample evidence of great hostility towards the men who were founding the settlement of Port Macquarie. Fortunately, those who lived near the settlement did not share this enmity and white and black lived in relative peace. But further afield, a mere 20 miles away towards the headwaters of the Hastings River, there were killings and attempted killings.

Only six months after Captain Francis Allman had founded the new settlement he had to send to the Colonial Secretary the first of what was to become a succession of letters about trouble with the "mountain" Aborigines. His first report told how two convicts were speared while felling a cedar tree, one of them dying five days later. In the attack on the timber-getters' camp the Aborigines seized a cross-cut saw and an axe before they were driven off.

Timber was vital to the settlement's construction, so the cedar cutters went back to their camp and Captain Allman doubled the guard. But only a few weeks later he had to write again: "The natives still continue their acts of hostility and I am obliged to double the guards in the bush — on the 12th (December 1821) our cedar party were again driven in with the loss of an axe — several spears were thrown through their huts. Although fired at frequently and one of them supposedly mortally wounded they continued to annoy the party so much that the guard could not get the men to work".

Allman was a capable Commandant, and he was also a man of some sensitivity. He realised that there would be more musket fire if the

Aborigines remained hostile, but there might be more fire than necessary. He argued that the responsibility for ordering "Open fire" should be that of a commissioned officer, not of a private among the guards, and requested reinforcements — a subaltern and 15 men. If they arrived at all, they arrived too late.

In July 1822 the cedar camp was again under seige. In the timber-cutting party were two Aborigines from the Newcastle district and they were warned by other Aborigines that an attack was imminent and that everyone in the camp would be massacred. Before the attack came, guards took three prisoners and chained them to logs but one of the prisoners managed to grab a piece of timber and fell one of the convicts. The man in charge of the guard, Private Briggs, shot him and the Aborigine lay in agony for an hour. Then one of the convict timber-cutters shot him dead to end his suffering.

Next night a sentry was speared and early the following morning a party of about 60 tribesmen began an attack on the camp. One was shot and the others retreated.

Closer to the settlement Captain Allman was having more success in his efforts towards racial harmony. He proclaimed an Aborigine named Monunggal "Chief of the Port Macquarie tribe" and presented him with a brass breastplate to signify his new status. "Friendly" Aborigines from Port Stephens were brought to the settlement in the hope of establishing better relations with local tribespeople.

So, while the "mountain" tribes continued an unrelenting hostility, the "town" Aborigines lived peaceably and were respected. Two years after the founding of the settlement one of Governor Macquarie's officers wrote: "We dined at Government House and a few of us, walking down to the beach after dinner, were highly amused by a dance among the natives. These people are a much finer race than those in the neighborhood of Sydney, many of them being upwards of six feet high. Their features are also more impressive of intellect and their limbs are better formed than any I have seen before. Some of the more civilised are victualled from the King's store of the settlement and, in return, perform some of the duties of constable in a more efficient manner than any European possibly could.

"Whenever (as frequently happens) any of the prisoners attempt to escape into the woods they are instantly pursued by some of the black police who possess a wonderful facility in tracking them and are being furnished with firearms. They seldom fail to bring them back, alive or dead, for which they are rewarded with blankets, spirits, etc., but should the runaways ever escape the black police they are almost sure to perish by hunger or the hostility of other Indians".

This hostility made necessary the erection of a stockade when a settlement at Rollands Plains was first established. Sentries stood guard at night and the stockade sheltered soldiers, prisoners and the working tools. But, while the authorities took precautions, others apparently did not.

In 1843 an aboriginal woman warned four cedar cutters of an impending attack on their small slab hut at Cogo on the Wilson River. They ignored the warning and at daylight the following morning the Aborigines attacked, killing three of the men. The fourth, George Spokes, feigned death and later escaped to a settler's house.

Later an Aborigine named Terrymidgee was captured, taken to Sydney for trial, and convicted. He was hanged on Gaol Hill on October 25, 1843. Mrs. Annabella Boswell, a niece of Major Innes, wrote in her diary:

"Yesterday Terrymidgee the native was hanged — he was brought down by steamer last Saturday and on Sunday the prayers of the congregation were desired for him, and Mr. Cross attended him in his last moments, but the poor creature was quite ignorant of the value of his soul, as he did not understand English very well, and cannot be supposed to have taken much interest in the prayers read for him".

As with the Aborigines — hostile out of town, peaceable with in — so it was with the citizens of Port Macquarie in later years, see-sawing between antagonism and admiration. The files of the Port Macquarie News are full of articles and letters which reflect a massive division of opinion.

In May 1899 the News said: "The Queen's Birthday is looked forward

Early fishing party on the Hastings River.

to with great delight by the original owners of this continent, as on that day they can partake of the liberality of the Government in the shape of one blanket each. The recompense to these creatures is but scanty, but such as it is they accept it with delight, notwithstanding the shoddy nature of the material. We have inspected the blankets forwarded to Port Macquarie and we fail to detect the least sign of wool in them, the material used in their manufacture being a kind of hair of the coarsest description.

"As for warmth, the blankets contain none: and the poor blacks will need better shelter from the cold of winter than the covering doled out to them by the Government will provide. Whoever the contractor for the supply of these blankets may be, we have no hesitation in saying that he has turned out a bad article, and one which does not compare with the blankets of the previous year — either in weight or quality. So much for our beneficent Government".

February 1892: "We believe that, acting under orders from a superior officer who is simply nothing more than an old fossil, the police in this and the Macleay and Manning districts are just being run about and made fools of on all sorts of rumors which come to hand of the Dora Dora blacks, who are stated to be somewhere between the head of the Macleay and Port Stephens.

"As we stated, a report came into town last week that a Mrs.....of Thone Creek had been outraged by a blackfellow, but although there are undoubtedly bruises on her body there is not the slightest ground whatever for believing her story, yet the already overworked police are ordered out to search for them to the neglect of their other and more important duties.

"The Dora Dora blacks have not been seen in this district, nor has anything occurred to warrant any idea that they have, and all that has been done is to frighten the life out of the district blacks who, we are informed, decamp at the appearance of a policeman with a rifle".

On July 11, 1911, "Townsman" wrote to the Editor:" Sir - For some time now complaints have been numerous from various sources about the situation of the blacks' camp in West Port Macquarie, and the annoyance caused by the Aboriginals there as well as in other parts of town. Ald. Orr is deserving of the thanks of many a resident for making some definite move in Council to try to get these undesirables shifted further away from the respectable portion of the community....."

A few months later the News reported: "The aboriginal camp in West Port Macquarie has been broken up and the nomads once more are scattered abroad. Where they have gone we know not. The reserve has sheltered these

people for a considerable time, and had it not been for the bad example of the white man — and cursed chained lightning and tanglefoot illegally supplied — they may have remained there for years in peace and formed an object of commendation and not that of contempt and scorn..... The aborigines have their good qualities; they have nothing to thank us for; and they could have done much better without the white invader than with him".

Antagonism to Aborigines was not confined to Port Macquarie. In October 1912 a number of white parents objected to the admission of several Aborigines to the school at Telegraph Point, and 30 white children were kept at home in protest. Indignant parents drew up a petition requesting immediate withdrawal of the Aboriginal children and threatened to boycott the school until their request was granted.

Aboriginal parents voluntarily withdrew their children, but the Parents & Citizens Association, realising that they could easily be re-enrolled, asked the Department to give the teacher authority to refuse admission. They gave, as their reasons for this request:

"1. They (the Aborigines) are objectionable in many ways, and your petitioners positively refuse to allow their children to associate with them.

"2. The camp they come from is so objectionable that a petition, signed by almost every resident in the district, has been presented to the Shire Council praying for its removal.

"3. Educational facilities are provided for them elsewhere for there are two reserves, with schools, within 12 miles which they could attend".

The Telegraph Point parents did not spell out what, exactly, they found "objectionable", but their attitude was similar to that in many other parts of the State. During the 1890s the Department's policy had yielded to community pressure and in 1902 all teachers in NSW were instructed to exclude Aborigine children from their schools at the request of any white parent. So the Telegraph Point parents need not have bothered with the petition — the teacher already could remove Aboriginal children if there were an objection.

To solve the problem State-wide, the Aborigines Protection Board found it easier to establish schools on Aboriginal reserves and, once a reserve school was established, it became mandatory for any Aboriginal child living in the district to attend that school, even though he or she might have lived next door to the public school. This had happened at Wauchope with the establishment of Aboriginal schools at Bril Bril and Morcom in the 1890s. However, neither of these reserves had a school at the time of the Telegraph Point petition.

At the time of the exclusion of Aborigines from Telegraph Point school the Protection Board estimated that between one half and two thirds of all Aboriginal children received no schooling whatever, although compulsory education had been in force for some thirty years.

Very few people of Aboriginal descent remain in the Hastings Valley today, although Port Macquarie is the home of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs' area office. Ancient and more recent middens still lie covered by sand dunes along Lighthouse Beach and south to Lake Cathie, but they are not being allowed to lie there undisturbed. In January 1986, Inverell agronomist Adrian Harte, on holidays in Port Macquarie, came across a number of Aboriginal relics, including chipped stones, along the sand dunes at Lake Cathie. They had been exposed by 4WD vehicles cavorting on the beach.