

JACK BOHEMIA AND THE BANJO AFFAIR

Although Dr Bill McGregor is a softly spoken gentleman, members and guests at the third regional Kimberley Society meeting hung on to every word this well known and respected linguist uttered at the Spinifex Hotel, Derby, on 22 November 1995.

Bill, a Research Fellow in Linguistics at the University of Melbourne, is currently on a field trip in the Kimberley where he is continuing his research. He has recently had published, in collaboration with Jack Bohemia, *Nyibayarri: Kimberley tracker*, which is Jack Bohemia's autobiography. Bill's interest in Kimberley history was sparked primarily by Jack, one of the Gooniyandi men who taught him the language, as well as telling him numerous stories about the history of the region, and his role in it.

Jack was born around the turn of the century at Old Bohemia Downs Station, near Fitzroy Crossing. His mother was a Gooniyandi woman; his father was a Jaru man. From age five, Jack began to learn about stock work, ending up becoming head stockman. When his mother died, he moved away from the station, going into the Fitzroy Police Station to ask for another posting, but ended up working as a tracker for the Fitzroy Crossing police. Ultimately gaining the reputation as the best tracker in the Kimberley, he was awarded the British Empire Medal in 1970 for his 32 years of service to the Western Australia police and the community.

Bill gave the audience an extremely interesting breakdown on Chapter 2 from the book, from both Jack's stories of his experiences with the police in the days before motorcars when cattle were droved, rather than trucked, and also from the perspective of the white historian, which dates the affair, discusses motivations and reactions.

Early in September 1922 an Aboriginal man known by the gardiya name of Banjo allegedly shot dead two white men, Joseph Condren, the station manager and Timothy O'Sullivan, the cook, on Billiluna Station. Then, before walking off the station with his wife, Banjo allegedly raided the homestead and storeroom, sharing out the contents—including rifles and guns and a substantial quantity of ammunition as well as food—to the Billiluna Aborigines.

Contemporary sources are not entirely consistent in their accounts of what actually happened. Constable Jack Flinders of Halls Creek took pursuit and, after losing the tracks entirely at one stage, the patrol intercepted fresh tracks three weeks later. The subsequent killing of Banjo was not attributed to anyone in particular in Constable Flinders' official report, and it was not until nearly half a century later that a written source first attributed it to Jack Bohemia.

Bill's in-depth remarks gave the audience some understanding of the historical context in which Jack Bohemia lived and worked. He then turned the topic of the evening's talk to the episode in which Jack Bohemia was involved as a tracker, and also discussed the substantial body of relevant written material in the police files at the Battye Library. In closing, Bill brought forward many questions which he felt were not quite answered about the story, setting off many thought-stimulating conversations from some of the "old timers" in the audience.

Carolyn Ann Jones (Derby)