

TALES OF OLD FITZROY CROSSING

At our meeting of 4 July 2001 Dr Cathie Clement spoke about some of the people and incidents that feature in the history of Old Fitzroy Crossing. The accompanying visual material and readings provided glimpses, both serious and frivolous, of what life was like in the area.

The country surrounding Fitzroy Crossing is home to the Bunuba, Gooniyandi and Walmajarri people. Their first encounters with Europeans probably occurred in 1879 when Alex Forrest's exploration expedition crossed the Kimberley. Forrest described Aboriginal people he saw near Mt Pierre as 'the most miserable lot we have seen as yet'. His lot was miserable too—after failing to find a passage through the King Leopold Range—and several were too weak to walk. They were living off horse meat, game and fish, and at least one horse had been lost with symptoms indicative of what would later be termed Kimberley Horse Disease. Forrest was nonetheless wildly enthusiastic about the Fitzroy River valley and its pastoral potential.

The government allocated Kimberley pastoral leases during and after 1881. The early lease applications, including those lodged by Donald MacDonald & Co. for Fossil Downs Station, were based solely on the scant information recorded by Forrest. The MacDonald brothers built a rudimentary homestead east-north-east of the Fitzroy Crossing in 1886 and for a few more years the Aboriginal people enjoyed unfettered access to adjacent land. The other early West Kimberley stations were much nearer Derby. Some were on the Fitzroy, and James Munro and his associates had a stone homestead (now Lillmaloora Police Station ruin) on the Lennard.

In 1886 thousands of prospectors travelled up the Fitzroy River track to the Halls Creek gold rush. Makeshift stores opened at the crossings on the Fitzroy and Margaret Rivers but, when the short-lived rush ended, the storekeepers followed the disillusioned prospectors back to the port. The MacDonalds were then in the position that would become normal for the inland stations—they faced days of travel over rough tracks to buy any commodities they needed.

In 1890 the Emanuel brothers engaged Joseph Blythe to establish Noonkanbah sheep station on land downstream from the Fitzroy Crossing. The government built a telegraph station at Blue Bush Swamp near Fossil Downs. Edwin Rose put sheep on Quanbun and John Collins put cattle and horses on Beef Acres (later known as Oscar Range Station) thus filling up the land west and north-west of the crossing. The Blythes ran stock on Brooking Creek Station, between Fossil Downs and Oscar Range Stations. The Bunuba people fought against this expansion and there were killings on both sides. Police stations opened at Fitzroy Crossing and elsewhere

during this period. The Bunuba resistance continued until 1897 when a police patrol killed the young leader, Jandamarra (Pigeon).

A few European women had come to the Fitzroy Crossing area by this time. Eliza Annear, wife of the first telegraph master, was possibly the first to do so. Hannah Nicholson and Maria ("Dolly") Pilmer lived at the police station where their husbands served as constables in 1896. Pauline and Mary Blythe were on Brooking Creek Station by 1901.

By 1897 the Emanuels had established Margaret Downs (Gogo) Station on the south-east side of the Fitzroy Crossing, and Hutton and Rose were ready to establish Leopold Downs Station to the north. Jubilee Downs Station also came into existence, replacing Plumb's Plain Station, which the MacDonalds had managed for absentee owners. With wages around and big thirsts building up in the Kimberley heat, there was now money to be made from the provision of amenities. Charles Blythe opened the Crossing Inn, which later included a store, in 1897.

The small population that lived in and around Fitzroy Crossing included many others now part of the district's fascinating history—names like Bell, Bent, Bird, Bohemia, Cox, Cunninghame, Fallon, Flinders, Gardiner, Henwood, Jones, Lawford, Le Lievre, Millard, Orr, Piper, Poole, Ross, Sadler, Scott, Scrivener, Shandley, Skuthorp, Webb and Wells. Those people and others will be in Cathie's book on Old Fitzroy Crossing, which is due to be published later this year.