

MOOLA BULLA

On 2 April 2003, Professor Geoffrey Bolton was to have presented a talk about Moola Bulla but some confusion arose regarding the scheduled date. That situation led to an impromptu session in which Cathie Clement and others spoke about the history of the station. It is hoped that the August newsletter will carry a summary of the talk that was to have been given.

Cathie told how the place was established as a cattle station cum Aboriginal reserve in 1910 because Aboriginal people were killing cattle on East Kimberley stations and running the condition off them in the hunt. The cattle fetched £5 or more per head at market but only fat cattle sold. Small pastoralists therefore found it hard to make a living when people chased, speared and ate their stock. The stock had displaced native game but the pastoralists argued that the Aboriginal people should either hunt somewhere further out or go onto reserves away from the cattle stations.

Charles Annear, the first telegraph master on the Fitzroy, had suggested the concept of establishing a station for Aboriginal people in 1901 but it was James Isdell, a travelling inspector and Aboriginal Protector, who turned it into a reality. He oversaw the purchase of three small stations, which were merged and given the name Moola Bulla. Some people maintain that the name is of Aboriginal origin while others say that it was selected because it sounds good. The original stations were Mary Downs (Mt Barrett), Nicholson Plains and Greenvale, which were owned by Frans Meinsen and James Shepherd. They first ran cattle in the locality in 1902. James Isdell had been a pastoralist, a prospector during the 1880s and 1890s, and a politician. A river was also named for him. As a travelling inspector, he advised the government how the Aboriginal people were faring on stations. In the area that became Moola Bulla, he reported that those who killed cattle not only felt they were entitled to do so but also took pride in surviving gaol terms when caught. Often only the ringleaders were gaoled but, throughout the Kimberley, that approach resulted in hundreds of men being walked to the coast in chains to serve sentences of up to three years.

All the country was leasehold, and the Land Act allowed Aboriginal people to hunt for food on unfenced parts of a pastoral lease. In the East Kimberley, that provision gave them access to most of the leasehold land and, in many instances, it was impossible for owners or stockmen to keep a close watch on the open range grazing. Some of the pastoralists expected the police to act as defacto boundary riders, and Moola Bulla was meant to answer their demands for government action that would minimise their cattle losses.

Arthur Haly was the first manager, and the other Europeans who worked at Moola Bulla included Sir Alexander Cockburn Campbell who received £3 per week as head stockman. Some Aboriginal people came in of their own accord but others, who included people perceived as trouble-makers, were taken there by force. Many children of mixed descent went there to be educated while others went to missions at Beagle Bay, Mogumber and elsewhere. Some went with their parents' wishes and financial contributions; others were forcibly separated from their parents. At Moola Bulla, they had a school, shops for learning leatherwork and other skills, training in domestic work for girls, and training in stock work for boys. After World War I, ex-soldiers also received pastoral industry training there.

Moola Bulla functioned as an Aboriginal cattle station until the government disposed of it to Mr Goldman in the 1950s. The Aboriginal people stayed but were later put off suddenly and transported to Halls Creek. When that town's resources proved inadequate for the influx, some went to Fitzroy Crossing. At the conclusion of the above potted history, Cathie invited members of the audience to contribute some of their knowledge of Moola Bulla. Barbara Jones took the floor and spoke about the background to the previously displayed book titled *Moola Bulla: In the Shadow of the Mountain*. Barbara worked as coordinator and later as a linguist at the Kimberley Language Resource Centre, an Aboriginal organisation set up to promote and maintain the Indigenous languages of the Kimberley. Moola Bulla was a major influence on the lives of many of the people who were working at and visiting the Language Centre. In 1987 the Language Centre received a substantial grant from the Commonwealth Employment Program to employ Indigenous language workers to record indigenous histories in the speakers' first language. This meant that Indigenous people could tell their own histories in their own way in their own languages. The book was an outcome of this project. The number of languages used in the stories serves as an illustration of the various groups of Indigenous people that had at some time been resident at Moola Bulla and also of the wide area of the Kimberley from which the residents had been drawn. Residents came from as far north as Oombulgurri and as far south as the Canning Stock Route. The production of the book was a lengthy process because of the transcribing and translating involved. Its eventual completion was celebrated by a grand picnic, with many ex-residents in attendance, on Moola Bulla hill. Sandy Toussaint, who took the floor next, was employed by the KLRC, Halls Creek, in 1987 to work for several months on developing the early stages on the Moola Bulla Oral History project. She and Hilary Rumley also did substantial archival work on Moola Bulla. Some of that work was published in an article in *Aboriginal History* in 1990. It gives good insight into the government's attitude to the establishment of Moola Bulla and, in one very interesting piece drawn from a 1910 report by the Chief Protector of Aborigines, it quotes C F Gale writing:

I feel confident that under careful management, the settlement will become self supporting almost at once. It would tend to make the aborigines more contented with their lot, as they would then have a home where the young and old might be cared for, and where the adults could find employment and provisions when they required them.

History, I suppose will repeat itself, and in the course of time the native race will be a thing of the past. When this happens the Government, by purchasing the above properties, will have the satisfaction of knowing that they have done their best for the amelioration of a decadent race, and future Governments will have a valuable asset to dispose of, when this state of things comes to pass.

Sandy made the point that the state government decided to sell Moola Bulla in 1955 because it was not economically viable as what was known as a 'Native Welfare Settlement'. There was no question that it would be economically viable as a cattle station. It was simply not paying its way as a combined welfare institution and cattle station. After it was sold, as has been noted above, most of the Aboriginal people from the station were relocated.

Other contributions followed, with David Thom, who lived on Moola Bulla from 1959 to 1969, commenting on the size, cattle numbers and viability of the station. Athol Farrant mentioned having heard that the place had proved a good buy for Goldman, and David confirmed that information. It thus seems that the government had been correct in assuming that, while Moola Bulla was proving too expensive for a training facility, it was a good cattle property. Ian Crawford volunteered the information that Commissioner Middleton had taken responsibility for Aboriginal affairs after World War II, and was still in that position when Moola Bulla was sold. He also mentioned that Munja Ration Depot on Walcott Inlet, and Kunmunya Mission further north on the coast, were also closed and that the Aboriginal people moved from there to more accessible places. Such issues are complex but it seems that the government was moving away from the support of far-flung reserves.

The Thom family bought Moola Bulla from Goldman's successor, Karl Stein. It is a huge station, even by Kimberley standards, and, with the Margaret River running through the ranges and hills, it is good cattle country. David recalled hearing about Shepherd's place and the old Greenvale, and he mentioned that Dawson Downs and Corella Valley had also become part of Moola Bulla. Cathie Clement was able to add that Dawson Downs was a tiny station that belonged to P B Watts, a one-time Derby mailman, before being sold to Frans Meinsen, and that Corella Valley had belonged to Tom Cole, a drover and cattle man who married Mabel Bridge. The Bridge family arrived in 1896 and took up Cartridge Springs (later known as Mabel

Downs) near the present day Warmun. The Bridges later owned other Kimberley stations that included Springvale.

When David Thom lived on Moola Bulla, between 120 and 150 Aboriginal people also lived on the station. Some of them worked in the two stock camps that were required for the management of 60,000 head of cattle. The station was branding 10,000 calves per year. The staff had a tannery and a saddler's shop, and they made all their own ropes. Many of the Aboriginal stockmen in the Kimberley had trained there and, in David's time, a lot made their way back to Moola Bulla. David's high opinion of the place is borne out by its sale, less than three years ago, for \$15 million. At that time, when it was put on the market with the adjacent Mount Amhurst, the places were described as two of the top cattle stations in the Kimberley. The owners were the Quilty, Northcott and Allsop families. The mix of contributors made for an interesting evening and it was fortunate that the topic had brought together people knowledgeable about quite diverse aspects of the history and operation of Moola Bulla. The opportunity to hear about the place being formed and used as an Aboriginal cattle station, and then run as a cattle station in its own right, was unexpected but enjoyable.

Daphne Choules Edinger

Further reading:

Kimberley Language Resource Centre, *Moola Bulla: In the Shadow of the Mountain*, Magabala Books, Broome, 1997.

Rumley, H and Toussaint, S, 'For their own benefit'? A critical overview of Aboriginal policy and practice at Moola Bulla, East Kimberley, 1910-1955', *Aboriginal History*, 1990, Vol. 14, No. 1, pp. 80-103.