

TWENTY-FIVE YEARS OF CHANGE IN THE KIMBERLEY

On 4 July 2007, Max Clarke (former head teacher, Derby District High School) shared his recollections of life in Derby. That time included twenty-eight years as a teacher and shorter periods as town crier, auctioneer, singer, golfer, and as Hamish McGlashan put it when he introduced Max, as *an icon of the area, 1975-2004*.

Max and his wife Maxine landed in Derby in 1975 from an MMA jet – the last passenger ship having called there in 1973. At that time, there were 4000 people in Derby, 2000 in Broome and 1500 in Kununurra – Derby was thus the centre of the Kimberley.

Max's fondest memories related largely to Derby's isolation:

- Roads – the bitumen ended south of Hedland and there was 867 kilometres of dirt track from Hedland; to get to Derby you went via Yeeda Station and the Gibb River Road was extremely rough.
- The rivers – the main stream of the Fitzroy was Yeeda Creek at Willare, and there was even a ski lake.
- Communication – there was ABC radio, a telephone exchange and very out-of-date newspapers.

This all meant that Derby was very isolated but, inside the perimeter, there was a hospital, Dr Mendes, the “native” hospital, two schools, two hostels, three supermarkets, a meat works (DEMCO), and the leprosarium with 30 inmates and sweeping lawns as big as an oval. The leprosarium also had a golf course – 9 holes before a barramundi feast at the Golf Club.

The work at DEMCO was seasonal and an extra teacher was required. The wharf was a hub of activity with one ship every ten days. Three of the big gang of wharfies were on every day, with jubilee twist for morning tea. Quite a vibrant place!

The cattle stations such as Gogo, Meda, Yackamunda and Mt House were thriving, and the Clarkes spent many holidays there. Aboriginal stockmen showed off their marvellous skills.

Camballin had 100 inhabitants, and the dams and barrages there had been constructed for irrigating crops (rice and fodder). Koolan and Cockatoo Island iron ore mines were operating, with a 20-seater Otter plane flying there daily. Derby airport had a full complement of staff, including three meteorologists.

The three government vets provided their services free. The Ag. Department had a 44 gallon drum of dieldrin for community use outside their office (good for dogs with ticks!!).

Life was sweet for Max! Every day a siesta from noon to 2pm. Such was life in Derby.

In 1981, after a break of several years, Max returned to Derby as head teacher. Soon after that, "the rot set in"! The State Shipping Service ceased; the river system was changed; and the ski lake went. There was the man-made Minnie River, the new Willare bridge, and the road to Derby no longer went via Yeeda. The government departments, the airport and the port were all downsized or closed; the cattle stations fell on hard times; and the mines closed. The road from Hedland to Broome became a blacktop. The tourists flooded in, and Broome became the Number 1 town with pearl farms and tourist everywhere. Camballin's 12 mile dam had gone, and, in Derby, the school and houses had air-conditioning.

At the school, although the numbers remained static, the mix of races went from 60% non-Aboriginal in 1975 to 80% Aboriginal in 2004. In 1975 there was only one Aboriginal aide. The curriculum ignored the Aboriginal students' needs but it has improved in some ways since then. The "coloured school" has gone, and the hostels have closed, but throughout the 1980s and 1990s more Aboriginal people became involved with the school. The students' health improved too. Scabies, once common, has gone now. Commonwealth money has been a great help but attendance was better then than now!

More Aboriginal people have employment than before, and many enterprising families – such as the Ah Chees and D'Antoinés – have done well. The Mowanjum Community is also doing well.

Max went on to reminisce about people he had met while in Derby – Ernie Bridge, Elkin Umbagai, Alan Mingulu and Gudu, Albert Barunga, Randy Spargo, Bob Rowell (father figure of Derby), Sister Margaret Wells, Mary Fox of the YWCA, Peter Story the bus and grader driver, John James with his strong views establishing Yackamunda Station, Robbie of Aerial Enterprises and so on. Altogether an enjoyable talk, highlighting a personal perspective on Derby over the past few decades.

Daphne Choules Edinger and Margaret Larke