

## WPS DEVELOPMENTAL NOTE #72

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**Topic: From the Cape to the Kimberley - Aboriginal connection to the meat and livestock industry 1850s - 2000**

In Developmental Note #73, I talked about the connection that many Aboriginal families have with the pastoral (cattle) industry. It is this historical connection that provides **context** and **relatedness** that the Work Placement Scheme is using to improve outcomes for young people from remote northern communities by offering them employment of their choice – abattoir work.

This note complements note #73 by giving a brief historical account of Aboriginal connection to the meat and livestock industry. The story begins in the 1850s and many of the issues are still pertinent today. Amongst other things, it is a story about insights, dilemmas, paternalistic interference, misguided beliefs, short-term solutions and unheeded warnings.

If we could go back in time, would or could things be done differently? Even to day, government departments and welfare agencies are still holding to policies and practices that keep young Indigenous people from remote communities acquiring the characteristics of modern wage earners. They still keep them in a state of dependency where their fate is decided by fickle governments and faceless bureaucrats.

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Pioneering pastoralists pushing into northern Australia encountered strong resistance from traditional owners. On the frontier, pastoralists were greatly outnumbered, isolated and vulnerable. From the beginning, they had adopted a policy of “*keeping-out the local blacks*” out of fear (May, 1994). However, once Aboriginal resistance was broken, pioneering pastoralists quickly realized the benefits of reaching an understanding with the local traditional owners as a way of protecting their stock. Pastoralists began to “*let-in*” local Aboriginals, defining the areas that they could use and stipulating that they could kill wildlife, as before, but not the sheep or cattle. In 1869, Mark Reid, superintendent of Woodstock, informed Police Magistrate J. Gordon; “*No cattle or other property has since that time been destroyed; the behaviour of the blacks since they have been let in, has been without exception good* (May, 1994, p.42).”

For the Aborigines, coming-in had the added advantage of receiving protection from frontier violence where the Snider rifle was used as the means of “*dispersing the blacks*”.<sup>1</sup> The process of “*letting-in*” was often facilitated by the presence of southern ‘foreign’ Aborigines brought along to work on the stations. “*Letting-in the blacks*” also turned out to be a good way of obtaining local Aboriginal labour. By the mid-1850s employment of Aboriginal labour in southern Queensland was common place. A number of squatters in the Kennedy district began using local Aboriginal labour from 1868 and there were reports of a few squatters in the Gulf country starting to use local Aboriginal labour as early as 1867.<sup>2</sup>

In the Northern Territory, it was not until the 1880s - 90s that the pastoralists arrived (Head and Fullagar, 1997) and it was not until the 1930s that Aborigines were encouraged to resettle on the isolated stations in the Kimberley (Davis, 2004). In Queensland, by the 1870s “*letting-in*” was defined as that time when Aborigines were “*allowed and encouraged to come and make themselves useful, as long as they were well behaved, shepherding a few sheep, chopping wood, stripping bark and a thousand odd jobs to which they are adapted, receiving in return blankets, tomahawks, etc.* (May, 1994, p.42)”. Around this time, white labour began to dissipate in Queensland, particularly in northern Queensland, due to the discovery of gold at Charters Towers, the Hodgkinson and the Palmer River. This necessitated a greater and more rapid absorption of Aborigines into the pastoral industry to perform many of the duties that were formally carried out by white people. The vast majority of these Aborigines were born on the stations or belonged to the country on which the stations were located.

By the 1880s the pastoral industry was the cornerstone of the northern economy and well over half the employees working on northern cattle stations were Aboriginal (May, 1994). Pastoral stations were very labour intensive and it would have been impossible to carry on under the conditions that existed at the time without local Aboriginal labour. One of the most important activities on a cattle-station is stockwork. Other activities included horse handling, yardmen, boring, fencing, wood-cutting and wood carting. Then there were the various jobs about the station itself, for example; gardening, butchering and assisting the blacksmith, carpenter and mechanic. Women were employed mainly in domestic duties about the homestead, for example; in the kitchen, house cleaning, pulling the “punkah” in the dinning room and waiting at the table, laundry, gardening, milking, helping out in the store house, meat house and the saddlery. Some women were also employed unofficially in stockwork, boring and fencing.

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<sup>1</sup> Local Aborigines had learnt that by working on cattle stations they could live legitimately on their own land without fear of being hunted. At Mt Mulgrave station, for instance, those that participated in station work retained many of their own traditions. Other members of the same group who opted to remain in the bush were not guaranteed the same security and when found on the run, even in the 1910s, were dispersed. Although, considerable brutality was used against Aborigines after they had come-in as part of the ‘civilising’ process.

<sup>2</sup> In some districts, a number of these ‘stockmen’ were in fact women, owing to the near extermination of male.

### **Advantages of Aboriginal labour**

There were a number of advantages in using Aboriginal labour. The first advantage was that they were on the spot at the time, when white labour was scarce. Employers were able to obtain workers without delay or recruitment cost. In addition, they had the opportunity to personally inspect and select their workers. Traditionally black and white people lived apart. The station camp was located some distance from the main homestead - far enough away to be out of sight, yet close enough to be visited by the manager when workers were required.<sup>3</sup>

The second advantage was that local Aborigines had an emotional-spiritual attachment to their home country. Regardless of the working conditions, if the station was located in their traditional country, they would seldom leave.

Macleod makes the point; *“The Aborigines had nowhere to go but their tribal country, upon which the cattle stations were built. They were captives on their own land, in much the same way as English serfs were to the Normans, dependent on the pitiful handouts from their overlords (Macleod, 1997, p.163).”*

This ‘benefit’ was not fully appreciated by all pastoralists at the time.<sup>4</sup> As was their social adaptation to the monsoon rainfalls of the summer wet season. The north of Australia has pronounced seasons; dry winter and wet summer. Little station activity can take place in the wet season (December to April approximately) so most workers were laid off. For Aborigines this enabled them to maintain many aspects of traditional activities, as explained by Mulvaney.

*“The monsoon period was the time for the station residents Aborigines, freed from their work obligations, to turn in their European clothing, get a few supplies from the station store and head out into their traditional country. This was a time of re-establishing contact with those people remaining out in the bush, renewing links to sites, fulfilling cultural obligations and holding ceremonies (Mulvaney, 1996, cited in Head & Fullagar, 1997).”*

Macleod on the other hand points out that *“These ceremonies clashed with the station managers need for young men to be trained in horsemanship and stock control. There was no easy answer to this conflict between the need for station labour and the preservation of Aboriginal culture (Macleod, 1997, p.162).”*

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<sup>3</sup> The willingness of owners and managers to allow large numbers of relatives to live permanently on stations was in no way altruistic. Pastoralists had come to appreciate the steadying influence family had on those permanently employed.

<sup>4</sup> Aboriginal people were reluctant to leave cattle stations and this was seen as evidence that they were generally well treated by the owners and managers of the properties. In a number of situations this was far from the truth.

The third advantage was that Aboriginal labour was cheap; four Aborigines could be engaged at the same cost as one European. This was very important in the north, where returns were often lower and the costs greater than in the less remote areas. In keeping with government policy, Aborigines were initially paid in kind; with food, clothing, blankets and tobacco. In the 1880s and 1890s, some employers used opium to persuade local Aborigines to work on stations. Pastoralists could justify their small outlays on the grounds that Aborigines were not in the habit of acquiring personal property or that they would spend money unwisely. Although, in 1884, Percival Walsh claimed that most of the blacks employed on stations between Normanton and Cloncurry were receiving regular wages (May, 1994, p.53).

A fourth advantage of employing Aborigines was their superior skills in particular tasks. Traditional hunting skills were highly adaptable to the pioneer cattle industry. Aboriginal knowledge of the country and traditional skills were invaluable in the time-consuming task of tracking stray cattle. On stations with rough country and no fencing, it was acknowledged that a good stockman had to be a good tracker. The Aborigines' ability to work together as a group was readily transferable to this task. They could detect cattle foot prints where the white man could never find a trace. It was commonly alleged that Aboriginal stockmen had the ability to identify the tracks of individual animals. They could also be relied on to locate water and bush foods if caught without supplies. A survey conducted in the Gulf in 1903 revealed that most employers believed that their black stockriders were superior to white labour. They were "*more reliable than the general class of white stockman in the district. They know the country better, and are more biddable* (May, 1994, p.75)".

### **Disadvantages of Aboriginal labour**

These advantages were offset by some disadvantages. The most commonly expressed criticisms were that Aborigines were unreliable, needed constant supervision<sup>5</sup> and had no real concept of work. A second problem was that it was hard to keep or get work from them if their family camps were about. One pioneer cattleman wrote;

*"Clothe them and feed them, treat them with kindness, the craving for the bush and for the society of their tribes in the neighbourhood draws them off, and unless this can be overcome, it will be useless to draw them into any given point* (May, 1994, p55)."

In answer to these criticisms, it is now argued that many local Aborigines who departed from stations did so in order to attend necessary religious ceremonies and social events. Prudent pastoralists learnt to accommodate this Aboriginal nomadism by employing them for short periods. It was fortuitous that the nature of the work allowed this while their attachment to their country ensured that local Aborigines would return.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> More enlightened employers were aware that when blacks were working in their own environment they could slip back into their own system if a European was not present.

<sup>6</sup> The nature of work on cattle stations was characterized by alternate bouts of intense labour and relative idleness. Employers came to realize that the Aboriginal 'walkabout' was actually an asset in station management – so long as the timing could be changed to coincide with slack periods. Some managers assisted in the this process by allowing Aborigines to use station horses and even carts, a

### **Introduction of government ration stations**

Prior to the introduction of the Queensland *Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the sale of Opium Act 1897*, pastoralists had a free hand in their use of Aboriginal labour. Notwithstanding the general lack of dietetic balance, most pastoralists exhibited a fairly responsible attitude when it came to feeding those Aboriginal people who were engaged in station work. It was, after all, in the employer's interest to ensure that his workers were fit and had physical stamina for the required tasks.

Sometimes food was prepared by station staff. One of the main reasons for this was to ensure that Aboriginal workers did not share the rewards of their labour with others in their group who had not contributed to station work, whom they were bound by custom to share.<sup>7</sup> Most pastoralists did not believe that they personally had any responsibility to provide food to those living on the stations who were not working. They believed that this was the responsibility of the Government.<sup>8</sup> In 1890, the Colonial Secretary was critical of this practice, pointing out;

*“Strathmore has been carried on for years past almost solely by the labour of aboriginals of the District, ... it may be very properly contended that the neglect to provide for the latter in their old age will reflect disgrace upon those who have made profitable use of them during their years of health and strength rather than upon the Government (May, 1994, p.49).”*

While the Aboriginal station hands may have been fed the same as white workers, this cannot be said of the remainder of the tribal dependents. As most of the able bodied members of the tribe were usually engaged in station work, those left in the camp often found it difficult to collect traditional food. As one Camooweal police officer said:

*“The very fact of these squatters taking these young boys and girls from the old people thus deprives them of their children's assistance in hunting for food over these endless plains ... (May, 1994, p.76)”*.

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privilege never extended to European employees. This made it easier to transport children and aged dependents and to carry any stores provided by the station. The workers' link with the land ensured that they returned to the station. Besides, the 'walkabout' relieved owners of the cost of keeping Aboriginal employees at a time when the marginal returns on labour were low. Experience taught the employers that Aborigines were much better workers after they had time away from the station.

<sup>7</sup> It was this obligation to share with other members of the group that made it difficult for individuals to accumulate the rewards of their own labour. Anthropologist Baldwin Spencer noted that on many stations and in many private homes the work was done by a few people, *‘but everyone at hand shares in the proceeds, whether these be clothes, food or tobacco; and it never occurs to them that the lazy loafer is living at the expense of his more industrious brother’*.

<sup>8</sup> By the turn of the century there was general acceptance by pastoralists that stations would assume some responsibility for dependants.

As part of the Government's new conciliatory approach, it was decided to give beef to blacks at the time when there appeared to be an increase in Aboriginal resistance in the remote parts of Queensland and as a means of deterring them from killing stock. Ration stations were set up in a number of centres around North Queensland. The Home Secretary stated that the plan of feeding the blacks, "*along with a general policy of kindness and forbearance, had done wonders in a brief period to inaugurate a reign of peace and terminate hostility between the two races* (May, 1994, p.65)". Whereas, some white people were concerned about the impact rationing would have on the work ethic. When the police officer at Turn-Off Lagoon suggested giving food to blacks in his district in 1905, his superior would not recommend it because the "*expenditure on healthy blacks would encourage idleness* (May, 1994, p.63)". Employers around Atherton complained to the government that the practice of supplying rations made it impossible to get Aboriginal labour.

### **Legislating the payment of wages**

A provision of the *Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the sale of Opium Act 1897* required employers of Aboriginal labour to enter into formal written agreements with a minimum wage to each worker. The legislation also made provision for the appointment of protectors. These protectors were to inquire into cases of ill-treatment of Aborigines and generally to supervise their employment. Many pastoralists who had been working local Aborigines for years had come to regard them as goods and chattels and resented the interference of protectors who dared to question their ownership. But it was the payment of wages that was most strongly opposed by most pastoralists. Harold Meston reported to the State Assembly that; "*It will only be under strict supervision that our western aboriginals will receive their proper wages and just treatment* (May, 1994, p.71)". In 1901, the government fixed a minimum wage of five shillings a month plus the supply of tobacco, food and clothing. Within a short time, it was quite apparent that many Aborigines were not getting the wages to which they were entitled. One of the outstanding features of the wages system during this period was the great geographical disparity in rates. This reflected the degree of autonomy exercised by protectors in administering the Act, rather than differences in skills or ability of Aboriginal workers. One way employers got around the payment of wages was to get their employees to spend their nominal wages at the station store. This way money never changed hands. Two items which were supposed to be provided by the employer, clothing and tobacco, were the major items purchased by Aborigines.

In 1909, the regulations required that part of the male wage was to be paid to and managed by the protector. These deductions ranged from 20 to 50 per cent, depending on the outlook of the individual protector. In 1915 the rate of an Aboriginal male stockman were set at approximately one-third of the white wage along with uniform banking deductions. Although the initial idea behind bank accounts was to ensure that Aborigines were properly paid, successive protectors viewed savings as a means of reducing the cost of Aboriginal welfare on the state.

### **The establishment of government settlements and removal orders**

Access to water and dispossession from their traditional hunting grounds were major sources of conflict between pastoralists and Aborigines still living a traditional lifestyle. This, combined with the fact that by the end of the century the physical condition of permanently employed station Aborigines was far better than that of Aborigines leading a traditional lifestyle, led Europeans to believe that the only solution was to round up those still living a traditional lifestyle and place them on reserves until such time as their services were needed in the industry.

The *Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act 1897* also provided for removal orders. Removal orders were the authority issued in the name of the Chief Protector which allowed Aboriginal people to be sent, against their will, to government settlements and missions, and were a very effective way of controlling their movement and behaviour. Aborigines who were considered 'surplus' to the station needs could be removed. They could also be used, or threatened to be used, to make labour more acquiescent. These orders were available from the turn of the century, but when Palm Island (known to Aborigines as Punishment Island) was established in 1918 there was a rapid escalation in the use of these orders. The threat of being sent to Palm Island, Cherbourg, Woorabinda or one of the other government settlements became a device for controlling the behaviour of station employees.

Back in the 1950s, NT Patrol Officer Macleod had a poor opinion of government settlements like Warrabri and Papunya in the Northern Territory. He saw that Aborigines had been enticed to these settlements with visions of an easy lifestyle, only to be captured in an artificial and sheltered environment, and deprived of a purpose to life. *"These 'havens' fed their inmates processed food, gave them nothing to do, and gutted the spirituality and mythology and social life of traditional culture. The end result was dehumanisation. Settlement Aborigines were an undignified group of aimless, miserable and often ill individuals (Macleod, 1997, p.229)."*

Despite his criticisms then, Macleod says that he still can not propose a better alternative way to ease Aborigines into mainstream society. *"A halfway house was essential, and so the settlements were probably as good as any other solution, although gathering many unsophisticated people together in one place accentuated the vices that were bound to appear. If there hadn't been a system holding back the thousands of natives that wanted to flock to the towns, Third World humpies and nightmare slums and exploitation by the white population would have been far worse (Macleod, 1997, p230)."*

### **Missions**

Employers' labour requirements were in conflict with the aims of missions in their districts. One pastoralist stated: *"a mission is simply a harbour for blacks. You cannot do anything with blacks when a mission comes (May, 1994, p.79)"*. In 1906, Simpson of Dunbar station reported that so many of his Aboriginal stockmen were running away to the Mitchell River mission (known today as Kowanyama) that it was only a matter of time before they were all gone. He believed they were being deliberately enticed with tobacco and food, because these *"boys are very useful to*

*those people owing to their station training (May, 1994, p.79)*". Missionaries did have serious reservations about their congregation taking up work outside the institution. In 1917, Hey of Mapoon mission reported somewhat dejectedly that the demand;

*"... for aboriginal labour outside the mission will be an ever increasing danger to the healthy development of the Settlement. ... [They] returned with little in their pockets and their families and gardens at home were neglected. It would be very desirable if it could be carried out, that all dealings with other races should cease, at least for another generation (May, 1994, p.80)."*

A number of employers claimed that missions made Aboriginal workers less reliable. The Queensland member for Fassifern argued; *"the idea of confining them to mission stations and spoon-feeding and nursing them is not in their best interest. They have to be treated in a way that will enable them to be absorbed eventually in the white race and become more self-reliant (May, 1994, p.140)"*.

Aborigines who lived and worked on cattle stations also believed themselves to be superior to both mission and government reserve people. They considered them to be poorly dressed, ill-housed and generally *"poor and dry"* (McGrath, 1987; Stevens 1974). On the whole, Aborigines on cattle stations were better nourished than those in settlements and missions because they had access to fresh and plentiful meat and more cereals (Stevens, 1974). In addition, station managers on the whole left the "blacks camp" alone. There was less interference in camp life and in disputes between those living on stations than there was for those living in the settlements, where missionaries frequently intervened in fights and marriage arrangements (McKnight, 1986).

Jean Devanny believed that the mission education system was instrumental in reproducing the conditions which kept Aborigines subordinate in the European system. By way of example, the Aboriginal community of Kalumburu in the Kimberley was established as a Catholic mission in 1913. Father Sanz, originally from Spain, now 95 years old, is still in charge of the mission along with his deputy Brother John. He was described by the ABC Big Country program as a "benevolent dictator", and still maintains that; *"The Aborigine can not be taught anything and they will not work unless they are made too"*. They were also quoted to have said; *"The Aboriginal will not work unless whipped"*.<sup>9</sup> According to the Chairman of Kalumburu, Clement Maraltadj, *"The only time someone went out of the mission was when they were kicked out or because they were sick. In those days, there was a law that if we were on the street with no money we were locked up"*.

### **Two-thirds that of the Station Hand Award**

Growing competition for jobs in the 1890s brought changes in the attitude of the white working class towards Aboriginal people - fanned by the emerging White Australia policy. What had been tolerance of Aborigines in the industry turned to simmering resentment by the last decade of the nineteenth century. From the 1910s,

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<sup>9</sup> The Work Placement Scheme has found that young people from Kalumburu can be very good workers without the need for any metaphorical whipping.

members of the labour movement were opposed to Aboriginal people engaging in many facets of station work. While the Queensland government remained committed to making Aborigines available for work in the cattle industry, the Australian Workers Union (AWU) was equally committed to having them excluded. Many workers resented the fact that they could not get jobs because employers used large numbers of low-paid Aborigines. One correspondent wrote to the Worker newspaper saying; *“The sooner the unionists demand their removal lock stock and barrel to Palm Island the better for the workless men and women (May, 1994, p.104)”*. The AWA lodged complaints with the department about low rates of pay around Burketown, causing unfair competition for white workers. An official of the AWU stated that; *“Were it [the employment of Aborigines] put a stop to, hundreds of white workers would get work. Legislation in connection with this important matter is the best method of dealing with it (May, 1994, p.83)”*.

Whilst this was going on, the AWU took up the case of equal pay for Aborigines, not because of any desire to improve the lot of Aborigines, but as a device for creating more jobs for white workers. They believed that if black and white workers were given equal pay, employers would choose white workers.

1919 proved a turning point for Aboriginal labour in the cattle industry after wages were increased to two-thirds that of the Station Hands Award. A former resident of Wrotham Park station recalled how, in 1919, Aborigines were removed to create more jobs for whites.

*“This was a cruel business. It was the younger, experienced workers, who were supposed to be keeping white men out of jobs that they took away, and this left their parents and sometimes grandparents, who were living with them on the stations, without anyone to earn money and look after them. Old Sergeant Magee, who used to come out for them, was just as discussed about it as we were. He knew our boys had been born on the station and belonged in that country, but his orders were to take so many blacks from each station and that what he had to do. He used to come past the veranda at Wrotham Park with the poor things and they would look at me and call out, ‘save me, Missus, save me.’ But there was nothing I could do about it and nothing Magee could do either (May, 1994, p.105).”*

Within two years of the 1919 regulated wage increase, the cattle industry was in recession: plummeting world meat prices saw the collapse of the Queensland beef export trade. Australian producers were the victims of a power struggle fought out between American and British interests in Argentina, which culminated in the flooding of the British market with cut-price meat. Queensland producers, even with the advantage of cheap Aboriginal labour, simply could not compete. From the 1920s to the 1930s, few cattle stations operated at a profit, a situation that called for severe cost-cutting measures. Singled out for particular attention were the large number of dependents who lived in station camps. In 1920 the Chief Protector noted that as a result of the regulations, a number of old people and very young children were sent to reserves. The Chief Protector noted in 1928;

*“most of the cattle stations, which absorb the major part of the labour available, found it necessary to shorten hands and otherwise practise economy in labour costs. The married labourer, with a family to be fed, was not so much in demand as the single man, ... (May, 1994, p.113).”*

Although it was expedient in the short term to remove ‘surplus’ Aborigines to settlements, the effect was to destabilise those who were regularly employed on the stations.

Northern Territory Patrol Officer, Colin Macleod, said that the inroads made by native welfare legislation were bitterly resented by many in the cattle industry. A number of cattle barons wanted it both ways. On the one hand they rejected interference in their control over Aborigines, yet they continually labelled them as useless do-nothings who were unworthy of any payment, even after they had worked for weeks on end under very trying conditions (Macleod, 1997).

According to Macleod (1997, p.163), *“The bigger stations, under managers, tolerated us [Patrol Officers], knowing they could wield influence in Canberra if they thought that our demands went ‘too far’. The smaller stations, closer to the financial knife edge, just wanted us to stay away from ‘their Abos’. Such stations made no payments or deducted costs ‘incurred’ in providing sustenance for their workers’ families, leaving a nil balance owing. The attitude was simple: feed the labour force and its dependants enough to keep them alive, and discourage the sick and old from remaining on the property. Bad luck if those ejected were deprived of family and entry to their sacred sites, which had now been turned over to cattle grazing.”*

Macleod said that if the Aborigines at Wave Hill Station appeared happy, with no complaints, it was largely because they had for so long endured squalid station conditions that they had given up expecting any improvement. In the 1950’s the relatives of the workers were kept a respectable distance from the homestead in a filthy camp without running water, proper toilets, cooking or laundry facilities. It was the same old story: skinny sick dogs, flies, miserable humpies, the bored unemployed, the old and frail, the aimless young, all presenting a most wretched pitiful sight. Tea, flour, sugar, some tinned food, and a ration of meat from the herd was provided. Macleod said that to see a mess of offal being cooked up in a copper over a fire is not the most appetising sight, much less when it is being ladled out on to dirty tin plates and eaten with fingers by people sitting in the dust, not even bothered to swat the flies or push away the mangy dogs. This was a far cry from life as a nomad.

Besides removing dependants from station camps, employers began discharging their Aboriginal employees at the end of the mustering season as they did their white workers. The owner of Lorraine station was reported to have said;

*“The conditions under which blacks must be employed are in many respects onerous. A black must be paid a wage in accordance with his age and not with his usefulness. He must be paid full rates through the wet season in order that he may be kept signed on (May, 1994, p.114)”.*

This discharging of workers at the end of the season had the effect of creating a class of casual labourers without permanent station affiliation. Simultaneously, employers were beginning to notice a loss in traditional skills that were so valuable to the industry. One manager was quoted to have said; *“This younger generation has not the genius of their forefathers (May, 1994, p.119)”*. The communal spirit was still strong but their skills were deteriorating. Increasingly, from the 1920s, the nexus between Aborigines and traditional land was breaking. Small inland towns became the new focal points for those Aboriginal workers who became part of the casual workforce.

By the 1950’s there were only small pockets of families camping on properties in the Northern Territory. Macleod reported in 1957 that a number of Aboriginals were ‘sitting down’ (camping) at Litchfield, south of Darwin, *“as it often happened that if a property owner had resident native employees, their friends were allowed to camp on the property”*.

According to Patrol Officer Macleod (1997), a number of government settlements in the Northern Territory in the 50s were a miserable affair. Lean-to’s of bush timber and scavenged building materials, no toilet facilities, and dozens of diseased skinny dogs. The children had runny noses and clusters of flies about their eyes. The adults were sitting around in the dust playing marbles. With little exercise and more food, they soon became fat. A few young men had labouring jobs on the construction site, but in reality employment opportunities were all but nil (Macleod, 1997). Idleness for any community is miserable and dehumanising. How much more so it was for nomadic peoples no longer able to work out their energies foraging for food; now forced to live cheek by jowl with member of another tribe.

Boredom, coupled with the elimination of one of the essentials of the old way of life, hunting, was rapidly sapping any purpose to life. The daily handouts of food from the store were undermining the younger men’s respect for the old men, who were meant to be the repository of ancient ritual, the essential link in the preservation of the food chain. Queuing at the store for a tin of fruit, a bag of flour, sugar, tea, and a handout of meat was far easier than spending hours stalking a wallaby (Macleod, 1997).

### **Equal wages**

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, there were relatively good economic conditions, but in the late 1960s and early 1970s, there was another slump in beef prices, coinciding with poor seasonal conditions. The decline in beef prices culminated in 1974 when beef reached its lowest price in over two decades. This was due to worldwide overproduction, mainly in Europe. As a result, prices collapsed on the world export market and the slump in Australian’s beef industry was severe (Jennings, 1983). The Kimberley was also hit hard, including the abattoirs in Wyndham, Broome and Derby; 75 per cent of the meat from these northern export abattoirs went to the North American market as hamburger mince.

In 1968 compulsory equal award wages were introduced. It was the AWU that successfully applied to the Industrial Commission to have the rule of two-thirds that of the Station Hand Award overturned. In Queensland, the Department of Aboriginal and Islander Affairs rushed through an amendment to Regulation 74 which usurped

the clause, allowing below Award wages for slow, aged or infirm workers. This outraged the AWU, but, ultimately, it made little difference.

The introduction of equal award wages for all workers, combined with the slump in beef prices resulted in the final mass exodus of Aboriginal labour and widespread unemployment. In many ways, the introduction of equal wages symbolized the final blow that marked the end of the 'golden age' of Aboriginal employment in the northern pastoral industry. The decision to implement equal wages meant that station owners could justifiably evict their remaining Aboriginal tenants on the grounds that it was too expensive to pay wages to all inhabitants of their properties. As one Kimberley station-owner commented;

*"The stores ... used to comprise about 4 tons of flour, 2 tons of sugar, several tons of tinned goods, a couple of bales of blankets for the wet season, and much clothing ... Now the order could be much smaller and a lot of money saved (Schubert, 1992, p.88)."*

Dr Coombs, a senior government advisor, economist and bureaucrat, observed that the accommodation reached between Aboriginals and the pastoralists was shattered by declining viability and structural change in the pastoral industry, coinciding with legislative change requiring the compulsory payment of award wages. Again, Aboriginals were forced to build up new communities and had to adjust to life as dependents of government, given the lack of other sources (Coombs, 1989). Peter Yu, former executive director of the Kimberley Land Council, stated that;

*"None who knows the Kimberley could forget the despair of the refugee camps ringing the region's towns – homes for years to thousands of Aboriginal pastoral workers and their families kicked off the cattle stations after the introduction of equal wages (Smith, 2003, p.563)".*

It was estimated that by the end of the 1960s, more than 93 per cent of the Aboriginal population still lived and worked in agricultural and pastoral areas (Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics, 1971). A survey conducted in Queensland in the 1960s revealed the ratio of black and white workers was roughly equal. Two years later Aboriginal labour made up only one-third of the workforce on stations.

There were several other factors that affected the demand for Aboriginal labour in the late 60s and early 70s. After the War there was a marked shortage of skilled station managers in the north and those who filled the void were less-skilled and often inexperienced in handling Aboriginal labour and had little respect for the Aboriginal ability to handle stock. This period marked the end of the open range system and the introduction of fencing and the wider use of motor vehicles. This trend reached its peak in the early 1970s with the introduction of helicopter mustering. While it had been commonly asserted that Aboriginal people had an innate ability to handle stock, after World War II there was recognition that they, like all others, had to be trained for the job. Youths who were brought up on missions had no experience with horses and stock and found stockwork hard to learn. Plus, the sacking of domestics and the removal of families from properties, station life lost much of its appeal. Many younger men did not have the same interest in the work knowing they could obtain

higher wages in other industries. Others blamed the introduction of legal drinking in 1965 for deterioration in the quality of Aboriginal labour. Technology had a big impact on the operations of cattle stations, particularly radio transmitters, telephones, the construction of an extensive network of rail and roads, followed by introduction of road trains; replacing the old drovers. All these things made it easier for the movement of goods and people. Cattle arrived at market quicker and in better condition and improved communications made it easier to attract white labour to the area. Soon this was complimented by the increasing use of light aircraft. By the 1960s, many stations had their own airstrips.

The combination of thousands of people leaving the stations, missions closing down, the lifting of alcohol restrictions, and the universal availability of social security payments, all in a space of a few years, proved too much. Unemployment, poverty, social dislocation, overcrowded refugee camps, alcohol fuelled violence, crime and general social unrest swept across the north of the country like a pandemic.

Then there was the problem of adaptation. The paternalistic approach taken by consecutive governments had prevented many Aboriginal workers, their children and grand-children from acquiring the characteristics of modern wage earner. Departmental paternalism had ensured that these people remained in communities outside the mainstream of Australian society; keeping them in a pre-industrial state. In 1974, a social worker named John Tomlinson gave notice; *“The institutionalisation of so many people in the welfare-rehabilitative style rather than the engaging of people in the producer-consumer struggle of the wider society has the effect of mortgaging future generations”*. Likewise, Coombs (1973) warned that *“present policies (of paternalistic welfare) are producing a race of cripples”*. They pointed to the urgency of working effectively with what was then a relatively small population rather than waiting twenty years and trying to work with a much larger population. But these warnings were sounded as far back as 1905. They went unheeded then, like they have gone unheeded today. Today we have so many disheartened old ringers telling their useless welfare dependent grandchildren grand stories of the *“golden age”*.

McKnight (2002) described the situation on Mornington Island, but he could be describing any number of communities across the north.

*“Although they had more schooling than the stockmen generation they were obviously less educated and had a poor command of reading and writing. ... They spent little time in the bush except during the holiday periods .... The [community] was the centre of their lives. They obtained odd jobs [in the community] but few of them could be depended upon to work steadily. The stockmen generation had a poor opinion of them and frequently remarked that they could not take the hard life of being in the bush away from their parents. They soon acquired a poor reputation on the cattle stations. With a few notable exceptions they kicked against discipline and they seemed impervious to instructions. They frequently failed to finish their work. They would get into arguments with their employer and walk off the job. In short, they could not or would not cope with the outside world. But neither were they making a good job of coping with ... the inside world of the [community]. They did so little that the elders ironically referred to them as pensioners. ... Young people,*

*according to the elders, had become so unruly and disrespectful that they would even hit their own mother's brother. They were continually getting into trouble, gambling with cards and dice, drinking methylated spirits, breaking into the [community] store, stealing whatever they could from the [community] and other people. Theft became so common that people attempted to secure their dwellings in a vain attempt to safeguard their few possessions. Young people wandered about aimlessly only appearing at home for something to eat. They contributed little or nothing to the family larder by hunting or working. ... The youths smuggled in alcohol and whenever they were successful they staggered about and brawled .... They began to have children but they appeared to pay scant attention to their welfare. The children were mainly cared for by grandparents. Young people seemingly never gave a thought to the possible consequences of their actions. They were evidently bored. And whenever one of them suggested that they break into the [community] store, or something of that sort, they unhesitatingly did so."*

It was Brady (1992) that identified a remarkable anomaly in the regional distribution of petrol sniffing. She found that communities comprised of people who lived on cattle stations and worked in the cattle industry, or for whom the industry was a major component of their lives, petrol sniffing rarely occurred (Brady, 1992). She identifies a number of possible reasons for this. These include the presence of greater self-esteem, a secure male identity, and the perpetuation of identification with a cattle industry ethos. As some Borrooloola men explained to Baker (1989) the reason why they liked station work "[We] *knew what we were doing*". Their skills were valued and it was this that provided equality of work between black and white.

### **Barely surviving**

The 1960s and 1970s saw the establishment of a number of federal administrative bodies, such as the Department of Aboriginal Affairs and the Aboriginal Land Fund Commission which purchased land on behalf of Aboriginal people. Their legacy continues today through the land-purchasing policies of the ILC and its commercial subsidiary, Land Enterprise Australia. These organisations have been instrumental in Aboriginal recovery of pastoral leases as a means of generating economic returns. Over the last 25 years, 26 of the 98 stations in the Kimberley region have been handed over to Aboriginal people. But times have changed.

In the Kimberley, like every other region, the pastoral industry has moved from being the cornerstone of the northern economy to forming only slightly over three per cent from 1997 to 2000 (Davis, 2004). It is a declining and antiquated commercial activity. Herd sizes and the number of pastoral enterprises have declined and northern meatworks have closed. The closure of northern meatworks has forced northern pastoralists to sell on the live-cattle export market. These markets are vulnerable to international fluctuations in currency values and transport costs are high. Almost all of the 26 Aboriginal-owned pastoral leases in the Kimberley rely on supplementary Commonwealth funding and the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) and very few are able to generate any monetary profit without this ongoing assistance.

Despite this, the industry continues to hold significant attraction for a number of young Aboriginals. Throughout cattle country, you will see young and old men wearing the style of clothes associated with pastoral work – ‘flash’ cow-boy shirts, Akubra hats and R.M Williams leather boots. At rodeos, Aborigines from all around are there in abundance.

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