

The Importance of Fraser Island's Oral History

FIDO began collecting oral history relating to Fraser Island in 1975 with statements from former bullockies and Aborigines. Many of these interviews were edited into affidavits which were presented to the Fraser Island Environmental Inquiry. In 1976, FIDO undertook a larger project to collect much more of the oral history. The importance of this history is to have some idea of an ecological bench-mark which pre-dates the experience and observations of contemporary managers.

The Veterans Tour

In 1976 FIDO organized a veterans tour of Fraser Island. The 12 veterans included men and women, Aboriginal and white, with a wealth of the island going back to 1907 and a great ability to recall. 79 year old Sid Jarvis remembered taking his first bullock team to the Island in 1918 and described the area vividly. 84-year-old Jules Tardent had an even longer memory having first visited in 1907 and written a major paper on the island in 1948. The tour and the interaction with others stimulated all veterans to recall additional memories and events and point out where they occurred on the ground.

FIDO was inspired by Peter Stanton who discovered that where the explorer Edmund Kennedy had ridden a horse through open savannah on his way to Cape York, a hundred years later the same area was covered by almost impenetrable rainforest. The changes are attributed to the absence of Aboriginal fires.

The unique 1976 FIDO Veterans' Tour revived memories and produced a wealth of colourful stories and entertaining yarns, about characters and events of the 1920s and 1930s. FIDO was able to identify where certain photographs were taken and draw ecological comparisons between what the photographs showed and the contemporary landscape. The veterans visited such places as the site of the old McKenzie's saw mill, which finished operating in 1923. The site is now almost unrecognizable and covered by quite thick bush.

Place Names: Veterans shed some light on the origins of some place names. For example 'Bob' after whom Bob Gully is named was a bullock, indeed a beloved team leader. The team was hauling timber up a particularly steep grade one day with the aid of a pulley block. The team using their own weight pulling downhill, almost had their load to the top, when the frayed rope broke and the load careered backwards downhill at breakneck speed, scuttling the yoked bullocks unmercifully, and breaking the back of Bob. His name is now perpetuated on the map. This anecdote has led to more work to discover the derivation of Fraser Island place names.

Photographs: As well as oral history FIDO continues to collect old photographs as an environmental record. Old photographs that show that since the 1930s Fraser Island's vegetation patterns have changed dramatically. The photographs show that there were extensive grassy pastures along foredunes where now there is a thick scrubby bush of banksias and other scratchy undergrowth, extending right to the beach. The remark of old-time foresters that they "could crown every stump without getting out of the saddle" assumed new significance. This led FIDO to search for more old photographs showing evidence of ecological changes. Photos are an important adjunct to the oral history.

Much valuable history has been lost but FIDO is continuing to collect as much early history as possible, whether photographs or oral reminiscences to help better manage Fraser Island into the future.

McKenzie's Sawmilling Operation

Sid Jarvis who was working timber on Fraser Island when McKenzies sawmill began observed.

"McKenzies had their own ship and their own men. The boat they named the "GLEN WAVE". She would come and take it. They would never cut the timber into boards. If they could cut a log a piece of 12 x 12 out of a log, then they would cut it up, even if it was 30 feet long. They would cut up anything. The just cut big fitches and they sent it from here to Sydney. Just the heart and the rubbish stopped behind on the island. The "firewood" they called it. It stayed behind, whilst the rest of the big stuff was sent off. They took everything. They took turpentine and box. They were fairly hungry for timber, I suppose. The Maryborough mills at the stage wouldn't take turpentine.

"There were two steam locomotives operating from McKenzies and McKenzies started up after the First World War and operated for a short time. They used to have an ordinary locomotive and one that ran on a cog wheel. Both of them ran on tracks, which were about 3'6". In fact, all of the tramlines, as far as I can remember, were as wide as the ordinary Queensland trainlines. The locomotives would collect water at Woongoolbver Creek, about four miles out from, up from the old forest station. It used to be a very nice creek, with clear, beautiful water.

"There was a, log hauler used by the McKenzies to haul timber out of the scrub. It was an American invention and I'm not sure how it was powered. To operate it they used to take out the little wire rope, then hook it on to a snatch block and it was pulled into the start to take a big rope and it was that big rope which hauled the logs in. A big cable was hooked on to the logs, and they used to use a chain or dogs on the log and wind it up. They operated the log hauler for McKenzies mill until the McKenzies went broke. Only the McKenzies used such an invention. Neither Wilson Hart nor Hynes did it. They used only bullocks, and some of the big grooves and trenches, such as the one going up towards Wabby Lakes are the relics of the grooves worn by the hauling logs in past days by the log hauler, because this was one of the areas it operated in."

With such a bustling, thriving enterprise, it is surprising that McKenzies failed. Folk history recalls that the main reason for the closure of McKenzies sawmill in 1924 was industrial trouble. Since the timber was being loaded on a ship to go outside the port limits, registered stevedore had to be used, which meant that on each occasion a ship was to load wharf-labouring gangs had to be despatched from Maryborough adding to the operating costs. The upshot was that the McKenzie operation became uneconomic and it was forced to prematurely close down. There is a good deal of speculation that the industrial trouble which finished McKenzies was inspired by Maryborough firms

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who resented the intrusion of McKenzies into their territory and the competition which this posed.

Amongst the many stories of Fraser Island is the little known story a Mutiny amongst the forestry workforce around 1926. Because there is so much fiction, fantasy and romance embroidered into many Fraser Island yarns, I was skeptical especially after confronting one of the alleged participants the late 'Ned "Vicious" O'Brien of Marroon in December, 1976.

Several members of the Veteran's Tour recalled the story of the mutiny. Kel McGrath said he had seen the volumes of correspondence on file in the Brisbane Forestry Office from Forester Greenslade. Names frequently mentioned included Danny Buckley and his brother and "Vicious" O'Brien.

When I began inquiries, all but vicious O'Brien had died. When O'Brien was asked about the incident he laconically denied that there had ever been a mutiny. He asserted that all the men had been at work. Asked about the *"burning down of huts"* O'Brien replied *"No huts were burnt down. One caught fire from an old kerosene lantern but there was no arson. Anyhow it was an old hut abandoned by McKenzies and they didn't belong to anyone"*. When pressed about the arrests of the "mutineers" at the Maryborough Wharf, O'Brien exclaimed, *"None of them was charged. Nobody was fined. The only person who should have been charged was Greenslade"*. That seemed to deny the whole incident short of searching Forestry Department Archives which had been depleted by the termites in Fraser Island storage.

However, in 1977, I was able to meet the 73 years old Charles Terkelsen in Bundaberg. Young Charlie worked on Fraser Island during the 1920's. He was based at the McKenzie Forestry Camp during the Mutiny and gave a first hand account of it although he claimed that he was not directly involved. Terkelsen was then in his prime as a champion boxer and in training. He held several titles and was still fighting. Because he had a bout scheduled for the Friday after the Mutiny he did not become involved in the insurrection nor let it interfere with his training.

Terkelsen was one of a three man crew on the locomotive operated by the Forestry Department on the tracks originally built in 1919 for the McKenzies Sawmill, which by the time of the mutiny had been abandoned for 4 years. Dickinsen was the head of the locomotive crew which was engaged in hauling in turps (*Syncarbia hillii*) from the forest. At the old McKenzie Wharf the logs would be rolled off the rail trucks and dropped into the water. Some time later they would be picked up by a log barge to shipped to Maryborough.

Forester Greenslade, Officer in Charge of Fraser Island, decided to review this practice of dumping the logs into the water which depreciated the value of the logs. He instructed Dickinsen to stop this practice. Dickinsen ignored the instruction whereupon Greenslade *"sacked everyone on the spot"*. This was an impetuous and provocative move on the part of Greenslade whose relationship with his subordinates was poor. The strained relationships probably provoked Greenslade but it only galvanized his opposition into solidarity.

The dismissed workforce had to wait for a few days for the boat took them to Maryborough so they indulged in the favourite Fraser Island pastime of drinking. The alcohol fueled their indignation and resentment and they began muttering what they would do to Greenslade. Eventually, they chopped off the verandahs from some of the shacks with axes and then burnt them down even the shack Charles Terkelsen occupied.

At some stage during a riotous three days a shot was fired and an A.W.U. friend of Greenslade was told, *"The day the boat lands you will be shark bait"*. Greenslade and his mate were to be tossed overboard. Greenslade, fearing for his life disappeared. It was subsequently revealed that he hid in the ceiling of his residence until rescued by Jimmy Lynch, captain of the Forestry supply boat, *"Relief"*.

Naturally, all the alcohol in the settlement was quickly consumed and it appears that Bendy Webber, the punt operator was despatched for fresh supplies to the Urangan Pub. Perhaps it was this incident which alerted mainland authorities in advance that something was amiss on Fraser Island, because by the time the *"Relief"* berthed in Maryborough that Friday all the authorities were already alerted. The police arrested all but Charles Terkelsen as they disembarked. The Police didn't bring any charges against Young Charlie who had his scheduled boxing bout that night and whom they encouraged to win.

When all the dismissed work force had been arrested, Greenslade emerged from the small boat. The workers marvelled at how Greenslade could have been secreted out of the house and into the *"Relief"* and how he escaped any discovery either at the camp or on board the boat.

According to Charlie all were charged with arson and given light fines. Forestry work was disrupted for a time. Forester Greenslade was moved away and it took time to re-establish a happy workforce on the island, but after two weeks things were straightened out and the men were put back on the job.

Time hung heavily on the hands of the early timber workers outside their work and Charles Terkelsen tells some fascinating stories of how the late Freddie Ross the agile athletic runner who often ran from McKenzie to the Ocean Beach. He would return with a bag of "wongs". He also fought bulls. An Aborigine taunting a wild bull on the beach by McKenzie's Jetty is quite a contrast to the Spanish bullfights of Latin countries. There was also an exciting incident when a bull saw Freddie and Terkelsen asleep on the beach and sought revenge but the agile Fred escaped and Terkelsen only narrowly missed being trampled by the monster.

Terkelsen recalled discovering an Aboriginal burial ground 200 yards south of McKenzie's Jetty where erosion exposed several skulls. These may have been some remains of people who died at the infamous "Balargan" Mission at North White Cliffs. This was operated by the Queensland Government under the lthe supervision of Harrold Meston in 1896-97 prior to being moved to Bogimbah. Official records reveal a death rate almost as horrific as the most notorious prisoner-of-war camps.

In the 1920's many Aborigines sought to escape from the government settlement at Cherbourg where they had been "relocated " to return to "Kgari" or "Carree" (as they knew Fraser Island) if they could. Terkelsen described how they would cut bark from trees and form it into a great improvised raft and float it across from the mainland with "the gins" sitting on it and the men swimming behind pushing it