

# IKE OWEN'S FRASER ISLAND — 1915 - 1977

**Isaac Garry Owens was one of the last full-blooded Butchulla. He died at Hervey Bay in 1977 aged 62, a bachelor like his elder brother Henry ("Banjo"). He made a statement on his recollections of Fraser Island to the Fraser Island Environmental Inquiry in 1975 and also accompanied the FIDO veterans tour to Fraser Island in September 1976. Ike Owens loved Fraser Island - his ancestral home. His father was Garry Owens (possibly taken from the name for Fraser Island "Kgari") and Garry's Landing is believed to be named after him. This verbatim and signed statement is one of the few recorded by a Fraser Island Aboriginal with 20th Century island connections:**

I was born at Hervey Bay on the 18th June 1915. I have been associated with Hervey Bay and Fraser Island ever since I grew up. My father was a Fraser Islander. He was one of the Butchulla tribe. My brother Banjo was older than I am and was the principal guide at Happy Valley tourist resort for Ken Miller when that resort was operating during the early 1930's.

I first went to Fraser Island in 1931 that is 44 years ago. Since then, I have been backwards and forwards quite regularly. I went there a number of times to muster cattle and horses. When I was working. I would normally stay from six weeks to a couple of month's. But I have also been to Fraser Island a number of times when I wasn't working. However, that was before I get sick.

There are very few aborigines left who have the same kind of family association with Fraser Island. Only the Owens, and now they have almost gone. There are only two of us left. Apart from myself and I am a bachelor, there is my brother Bill.

There were once many Aboriginal people from Fraser Island, but they were taken off Fraser Island to Yarrabah and Palm Island missions. I do not know of any other Aboriginals who have a continuous family association with Fraser Island. However, during my lifetime association with Fraser Island, I have picked up a number of different bits and pieces about the history of the Aboriginal people. Contrary to a number of opinions there was only one tribe on Fraser Island - the one batch of Butchullas - ran right through from Hook Point to Sandy Cape. They all used the same language. It was the one tribe right through.

I can remember a tourist resort at Happy Valley being built about 1934, by Mr. Ken Miller for Warrys. A road was constructed from Yidney Creek, towards Happy Valley, but this was never completed. I reckon there were about four, five or six cottages built at Happy Valley, but they let the place go and then started to pull the place down, and sold it to people at Scarness. They were very nice cottages. One of the developments of the tourist resort was to put a road in from the beach to Wabby Lake. It used to be possible to drive a T Model Ford through from the beach to Wabby Lake, but that road is now overgrown. It doesn't take much for a road to become overgrown on Fraser Island.

As long as I can remember there have always been two lakes at Lake Wabby. Before I started working for the McLivers, I was working with bullocks, hauling timber from Lake Wabby to the old tramline. I was working

for a man named McWatters. We would load the timber on the wagon and haul it down to the tramline. About 1934, I started to work for McLivers. When I started mustering, I walked that Island. I walked all across to Happy Valley. Happy Valley was just starting then. I walked right up to Indian Heads right over the top and back to Bogimbah — stopped off at McKenzies. That is a long walk.

When I did my walk around the top end of Fraser Island, I walked around the beach and over the sandhills. It was not overgrown then, there were open grassy areas all through there. The Island is now very much overgrown, because in the past they used to see that it was kept clean by burns.

I counted brumbies from Happy Valley to Indian Heads. At a guess, 800 horses. There were some good horses there. There were chestnuts, greys, blacks and bays. There were a lot of white horses too. Some of the horses were branded. Before I got there, they did musters, and what they didn't put into the punt, they drove back again and they were running round. These were some of the branded horses. They drove through Wathumba and pushed them onto the back beach, and then they walked back down to the Millers.

Later on, they went in for bullocks, cattle like, and we drove cattle right through the Island and we came back to Wathumba. We didn't go right up to Indian Heads, we came back this side of the big hill and out back to Wathumba.

They finished mustering horses around the 1930's and we didn't tackle them anymore. We just let them go loose. We had about three or four hundred cattle running on the Island at the time, that's steers. We didn't have any cows. In those times, we used to be able to buy a poddy calf for about 50 cents from the mainland and take it to Fraser Island and just let it grow. There are not many horses left now. They died out or something went wrong with them.

The place that we used to call Eurong was just near where Freddy Jarvis' house is now. There used to be a coconut tree standing there, and there was a homestead or building at one time. Although, as long as I can remember, I have only ever seen the stumps of a building which was once there. We used to put our horses in the house yards. Aldridge and Deacon used to hold grazing leases at Eurong and house and yards were built on the property. All the horses were grazed south towards First, Second, Third and Fourth Creeks. No horses were grazed north of First Creek. They were breeding and work horses and all young stock was taken to Booral.

My first visit to Waddy Point and Indian Head was in 1932/33. I was employed by George McLiver and Wyn Bagnell, mustering cattle and horses in that area. One or two miles off the beach were the feasting places of the native people and many mounds were to be seen in the feasting areas. Also ceremonial and bora rings were seen.

All the areas of special ceremonial significance that I knew of, are fairly close to the beach, no more than two miles, because the people didn't go too far away from the beach. They liked to hang on the beach to get their food and they just went back into the hills a little bit. They also went into the forest areas to get some fruits and nuts, but they also managed to get a lot of honey. They didn't only get the honey out of the trees, they got honey from the grass sticks. There is a lot of honey in grass sticks and in the bottlebrush. I've sucked bottlebrush; but wongs were the main food. So they would go out to the beach and have a feed of wongs and then come back inside, again, and perhaps on the inside of the island they would have a feed of fish and crabs, and pearl shells —those big flat shells. The native people didn't confine their activities only to the outside beach, but they wandered around to the inside of Fraser Island as well, I have seen a number of Bora rings. There are two big ones, one little one and one big one, at Waddy Lake. It's right on top of the hill, or right to the side of it. It's a great big fella. Even if it is overgrown I would still be able to see it because the mounds were very high. If I could get to the lake I would be able to take you to the bora ring. There are supposed to be bora rings at Yidnev and Bogimbah, but I haven't found those ones yet. The bora rings can be identified because they are like a circus ring.

The special significance of the bora ring was that only men could go to them. Young fellas and they would put these young fellas through the mill, fix them up, do everything. They were very sacred sites. The women of the tribe were not allowed near them. I never did come across any burial ground, but there could have been some around there where they used to bury them, but the only place that I know that they used to bury them, they'd dig a hole for them, was at Bogimbah. That's near the old mission station.

There was a settlement for native people at Bogimbah Creek, or near the mouth of Bogimbah Creek, and the settlement was also used for people from the mainland. When this settlement was finished, the people were removed by a boat called the "ARAMAC" to Palm Island and Yarrabah. This was the sorry ending to a very fine race of people. I have been told that seven natives left Bogimbah in a whaler for Little Woody Island, but rough seas capsized that boat and all seven were drowned.

Later, of course Bogimbah became the end point for the telegraph line, which ran from the mainland to Sandy Cape. It was brought across by undersea cable from Woody Island, and Bogimbah became a test house, and it was here that old Bellert would have his camp, and it's still known on the maps as "Old Bellert's Hut". Bellert used to run along the old telegraph line in an old T Model Ford to see that the line was properly

serviced. At one time my brother Banjo and I, together with Mc Livers, Bradman and Armstrong, helped to clear the old telegraph line from the suckers which had grown up. This was while Bellert went after dugong. Bellert would catch dugong and take them to an old factory that he had at Burrum Heads.

There was a shark factory built on Fraser Island at Wathumba, on the freehold land. They did not actually treat any sharks, because the chap who was launching it, left as soon as it had collected a great deal of money. There was good grazing country around Wathumba and this was the starting point for those who wished to go through to the back beach. There was a bit of freehold here and it had huts and yards, and it was the starting off point for droving stock down to Moon Point.

There were hundreds of horses pastured in the area between Wathumba and Caree in the north, and in this area miles of open grassy country was available. There were some very big horse drives, and the horse pads were very deep and very wide. The pads were up to 2 feet deep and probably about 6 feet wide and they could easily be seen. The main pads ran from the back beach and from this side at Wathumba and from Coongul, down to where the water is and right through the middle of the island. That's where a lot of the good feed was.

Coongul Creek was one of the nicest creeks on the island, and it was an area from where the pines from the Bowarrady scrubs were rafted to Maryborough. Transport from the forest to the creek was done by the old horse trams and Coongul was one of the main camping and fishing places for the native people.

Just south of Coongul Creek there was an area of 640 acres of freehold selected by Mr. Lars Benson. A house and yard was erected and Mr. Benson transported his wife and family to Poothoo Creek. There was good fishing here and large oyster beds were part of the scene. A lot of timber was also taken from Moon Point and Poothoo Creek. The Bensons had a house at Moon Point, but when they sold the property to the Bagnells, the Bagnells pulled the house down, pulled it with bullocks down to Bridge Creek and put it on a launch and brought it to Urangan. They put up the house at Dundowran and Bagnells lived in it for years.

I do not like to see the Island as it is now, being knocked about, the way they're doing. All of my old friends have gone and the Island is not like it used to be. The beach is different — dirty, with bottles, cans of beer, and bottled beer and rubbish. Joves, it's terrible! I don't know! On the back beach specially. I do like this (western) side around Moon Point and that, that's not spoilt by people, but there's too many people around the island. It's going to be like Queen Street in Brisbane, I think, before long. Even though there were two or three thousand aboriginal people before the white man came, they weren't knocking it about like the people are now. They didn't throw everything about like they do now on the beach. There are cars running up and down the beach.

*All we left was a few footprints.*