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MILPARINKA

A brief history.

The story of Milparinka began in 1845 when Charles Sturt led an expedition to try to reach the centre of the continent, where, he was convinced, he would find an inland sea.

Skirting around the Flinders Ranges to avoid the impenetrable horse-shoe shaped "Lake Torrens" Sturt traveled along the Murray River, then the Darling, until he reached Menindie. Continuing northward through ever increasing dry country Sturt reached a water hole on a creek that eventually became known as Depot Glen. Here the expedition was forced to remain in camp for more than six months. This spot, just fourteen kilometres from Milparinka, is one of the Australia's most important historical sites, and is the burial site of Sturt's second in command, James Poole.

In ensuing years Depot Glen was visited by other explorers, most notably Ernest Giles, and became the site of a gold rush that would grip the region some years later, in the late 1870s. Before then, however, pastoralists and squatters had begun gradually creeping their flocks of sheep northwards, taking advantage of seasonal waterholes, and the grasses and edible perennial shrubs that grow throughout the area.

Whilst local Aboriginal women had often found gold nuggets in the area, it was not until John Thompson, a shepherd tending flocks of sheep on Mt Poole Station, discovered nuggets himself that a new gold rush was sparked. Traveling from Wilcannia, often by foot, the prospectors and miners faced a journey of 300 kilometres, and un-imaginable hardship.

Within a very short period hundreds had found their way to the goldfields and had taken up prospecting claims. Nuggets were found near Mt Browne, and then Warratta, and later, The Granites.

The resources of the area were severely tested. Water, or the lack of it, was a huge problem for the miners, and impeded both the mining operations and domestic situations. Many existed on a diet of mutton and wild spinach and suffered from a range of diseases from scurvy to ophthalmia. As a tent township of up to 500 men grew up alongside a waterhole in the Evelyn Creek "Milparinka" was established.

In 1880 Milparinka was proclaimed a township. Within the region, then known as the Albert Goldfields, grew three other townships: Mt Browne, Albert and The Granites. Today, only Milparinka and The Granites, now called Tibooburra, its Aboriginal name, remain.

The population of the Albert Goldfields varied significantly during the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth century mining operations. Mostly the fluctuations were the result of the lack of water, and the effect it had on both prospectors and mining companies. At times there was not enough water to carry out operations, whilst deep shaft mines on Mt Browne had the opposite problem: the mines filled with underground water which required specialized pumps to remove.

Which ever way one looks at it, life was tough on the Albert Goldfields.

During the early part of its history Milparinka was regarded as the principle township of the goldfields, with its waterhole of prime importance to the region. Plans were made to excavate the creek to create a permanent waterhole, and a well was sunk in the creek to the north of the township.

A police station, encompassing a Court of Petty Sessions and gaol cells, were built from local sandstone. Troopers stationed at Milparinka and The Granites were responsible for escorting gold to Wilcannia, as was "law and order". Magistrates on the "circuit" conducted court. Whilst the general conduct of the inhabitants was satisfactory, sheep and horse stealing and " other minor offences attributed to alcoholic influences" were recorded.

Later, colonial architect James Barnet designed a second courthouse, which was constructed during the 1890s alongside the police station. It, and the police station and cells, survive and today form the Milparinka Heritage Precinct.

Mines inspectors arrived regularly in the area, preparing reports on population and conditions, as well as the mining operations going on at the time.

During the course of its life-time Milparinka had all the facilities of a functioning community. In Loftus Street alone there were four hotels, of which today only the Albert remains. A branch of the Commercial Bank opened alongside the Pharmacy. Its ruin is opposite the Albert Hotel. An office of Cobb and Co took bookings for transport to and from Wilcannia, Mt Browne and The Granites.

A post office was opened, and after occupying several facilities, was finally established in a new building at the southern end of Loftus Street. Milparinka was connected by Telegraph to the outside world in 1896, and a locally printed newspaper, the Mt Browne and Sturt Recorder, relayed world and national news to local people.

Three large warehouses sold the requisite goods for the goldfields and community, whilst Chinese gardeners developed vegetable plots alongside the Evelyn Creek, near the well. There was also a butcher and baker.

Goods generally arrived by camel team from Wilcannia, or along a route established to the west that intersected the South Australian railway line to Farina or Marree. On at least one occasion they literally saved the population from starvation. Camel teams were also involved in the medical evacuation of a number of miners suffering from typhoid, some going to a makeshift hospital in Tibooburra, others transported to Wilcannia.

A blacksmith built a workshop in the town and was probably kept busy repairing harness , wagons and mining equipment. The Milparinka Public School opened in 1883 and over-saw the education of around twenty local children at a time, sometimes sharing the teacher week about with children of the Mt Browne township.

Whilst mining operations on the Albert Goldfields continued into the early years of the twentieth century the lack of rainfall generally curtailed operations. By the 1920s " no mining of any consequence" was undertaken in the region. The court closed, the school closed, the post office was relocated and Milparinka ceased to function as a township.

During its lifetime more than 378 births were recorded in Milparinka, together with over 600 deaths. Happily, not all these deaths actually took place in Milparinka. Some 60 marriages were recorded.

Written by Ruth Sandow, January 2007