

The Coppermanna Lutheran Mission

By Michael Sawtell

I must tell you how I enjoyed the August issue of *Dawn* and the picture of those charming young full blood aborigine boys.

Full blood aboriginal children, when they are clean and well brought up, are the dearest little children you ever saw. They delight to creep up and hold your hand.

I grew up with such young boys sixty years ago, and it makes me sad to think of what lies ahead of them, when our civilisation detribalises and demoralises them.

You may theorise as much as you like, but you cannot detribalise our bush aborigines without demoralising them. Therefore I am dead against tearing them out of their own natural environment. Let them stay in their own country as long as possible.

However the story of Hermannsburg Lutheran Mission is not complete without some reference to the Coppermanna Mission at the Cooper river on the Birdsville track.

I have visited Hermannsburg on that strange desert river the Finke, which is the longest river of the one name in Australia. It flows down for seven hundred miles into Lake Eyre. At Hermannsburg there is a deep gorge in the Finke, which I hope we will dam some day, for that is part of my dream for our mighty inland irrigation.

I have met Pastor Albrecht, who is now in charge of Hermannsburg. My friend Albert Namatjira was a native of the settlement and was brought up on the Mission.

The article in the August issue of *Dawn* on Hermannsburg also mentions the Rev. Strehlow, whose son is now a Professor of Linguistics at the Adelaide University, and is a great authority on aborigine dialects. He is like myself, in that he grew up with aborigine boys, the real way I believe to learn about all forms of aborigine life.

Hermannsburg Mission was founded in 1882, but Coppermanna was founded in 1866, by Pastor Hermann Vogelsang, who I saw in 1901, when I was a drover's boy on the Birdsville track.

He was a thick set stout German who used to ride about to see that "the drover-man" did not molest the aborigine women. The Coppermanna Lutheran Mission had a tough time. They struggled along till 1914, when they had to close down. Then some of the German missionaries went up to Hermannsburg.

In 1950 I camped in the ruins of Coppermanna when I travelled up to Birdsville with the well known mail man Tom Kruse, when that famous picture "Back of

Beyond" was being made. You may see the remains of Coppermanna, and also see and hear Uley, one of the few Coppermanna aborigines left now. It is good to hear the voice of Uley, full of natural pride, as all aborigines are when they say, "This is my country. This is a good country."

That Coppermanna country has only a five inch rain fall and is subjected to very severe droughts, but it was not that altogether that finished Coppermanna. It was racial prejudice.

It was during World War I that silly people claimed that the aborigines were being taught to be disloyal, because the Scriptures were being translated into German, and that the hymns were sung in German. It is an interesting fact that most tribal aborigines are good linguists for they all have to learn two or three dialects of the surrounding tribes. At the same time in 1914 the old town Hergott Spring, which is the rail head for Coppermanna, and was named after D. D. Hergott, a German botanist, who accompanied the famous explorer McDouall Stuart in 1961, was changed to Maree, which is an aborigine name for water. The government also withdrew their support. However anyone who really knows the pioneer days of Australia will agree with me that the Germans are among the best settlers we have ever had.

The Coppermanna Lutheran Mission had a great influence on all aborigines, right from Hergott Springs to Birdsville, all around the east side of Lake Eyre upto the Simpson desert, where in my day the aborigines came from hundreds of miles to gather the indigenous native narcotic Pituri.

However, they have nearly all died out now, for the desert aborigines are not a very virile type. The other day in Port Augusta I met a very fine full blood from that Coppermanna country, named Mungerannie Joe (which is the name of a bore on the Birdsville track). Joe was a truck driver in charge of a road train, which was carrying a load of cattle worth several thousand pounds. He was delighted, as all aborigines are, when I talked to him and he found that I knew his country. If any readers of *Dawn* wish to know more about that strange country and Coppermanna, I advise them to read a splendid book "Land of Mirage" by George Farwell, in which he quotes Professor A. P. Elkin, fellow member of the Welfare Board.

Now what have I learned from all my bush experiences, and mixing with all types of aborigines? It is this, that in spite of differences in race and creed, all men worship in their own way the same great laws of Nature and God, for as the American prophet-poet Emerson said, "Nature hums the few old familiar tunes".