

POT-POURRI AGAIN

The Story of Carowra Tank

The Seventh of a Series of Articles by L. N. BRIGGS, Manager of Taree Station

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Last month I told you of my arrival at Carowra Tank Aboriginal Station where I was to do my first work among aborigines.

Carowra Tank is in a very dry, desolate part of the State. When my wife and I arrived there it was much drier than usual. We had a little son, three years old and a little girl two years old. It didn't look like a very good place in which to bring them up. There was no fine house, such as many of you live in now, to call our home. There were houses of galvanised iron for the dark people on the Station, but our home for two and a half years was a camp made up of two large tents facing each other, with a galvanised cooking galley between them.

Our nearest neighbour lived sixteen miles away. He was a lonely bachelor. There were no white children for our little ones to play with. As I had become a Red Indian when I was a child, so my little son became an aborigine at Carowra Tank.

One of the men of the Station made him a set of little boomerangs and shields which amused him for hours at a time as he played with them in the scrub. You will remember I told you earlier that I shot myself with a rifle when I was a little boy. Well, this little fellow cut his hand rather badly with a boomerang one day. Ted King, who was just a big boy then, bound his wound with a piece of his shirt and carried him home. (How are you these days, Ted?) The little boy doesn't throw boomerangs any more. He is now a foreman in a big engineering works in Sydney. In war-time they make parts for big guns, instead of boomerangs.

It was hard to get good food to eat. The sheep were terribly poor and fresh vegetables were hard to get. Our bread came with the mail every Sunday. It was three days old when we got it. But my good wife learned to make her own bread which was much better. We both became experts at making dampers.

When meat was scarce, I would go with the Station hunters with my rifle and bring home kangaroos and young emus. The emu had to be cooked under the ground, because the old people were scared of what the evil spirits might do if the smoke or steam from the cooking emu were to rise in the air.

There were many full-blood aborigines on this Station and they were a fine and friendly people. They would never think of stealing or of doing anything which was not honest. If any of the young people did do something which was not quite right, a council of old men would have a meeting and then tell the Manager what punishment they thought should be meted out to the offender. Sometimes the one who had done wrong would be told to leave the Station for a few months. The council of old men would see that he did not return until his time was up.

Many of the older people did not have what we call "surnames" or family names. There were many Jacks and Willies. But, to distinguish one from another, the name of the place where they were born was used as a prefix. Thus, there were Keewong Willie, Cobar Jack, Red Tank Maggie, and so on. To-day throughout the western part of the State there are many families of Johnsons and Williams. This is because the sons of the Jackies took the name Johnson and the sons of the Willies took the family name of Williams.

The Carowra people were a happy people. It is just as well that they could be happy with so little to make them happy, because the State Government had very little money to spend on our people in those days.

This little story may make some of you laugh and it might make others feel sad. It may even make a few feel angry. However, it should make you all feel grateful for the great changes which have come into your lives during the past few years.

The story concerns a death and a funeral. These are certainly not the sort of subjects to make amusement. For years the people at Carowra Tank had buried their dead wrapped in a blanket and placed in a semi-sitting position in the grave which was lined with gum leaves. A blanket of gum leaves would then be strewn over the body before the earth was shovelled in. No coffin was ever used, except on one occasion, while I was at Carowra.

The younger men of one family had been away working on a sheep station where they saw their first "white-fellow funeral". Shortly after their return, the elderly father of the family passed away. The young men came to the Manager and asked if they could have a "proper white-fellow funeral with a box" for the old man.

