

The Tabulam Convention, 1955

By

MALCOM J. C. CALLEP, M.A.

For fourteen years now on the North Coast of N.S.W., the annual Conventions have been the great event of the year, planned for, saved for, and looked forward to by the people of half a dozen stations.

Previous Conventions have been held at Cubawee, just outside Lismore, but chiefly owing to the influence of Alec Vesper of Woodenbong, it was decided to break with tradition and gather by the banks of the beautiful Rocky River on the Board's new station at Tabulam for the recent convention. Despite the advantages of spacious recreation hall and church it was feared that many people would not be willing to travel all the way to Tabulam, but the record roll up proved such fears groundless.

The visitors arrived by bus and by truck, in their own private cars and even on foot. Every "beigal" (aborigine) on the North Coast seemed to have but one fixed idea; to get to Tabulam. Many stayed with friends on the station and the rest slept in the hall or in tents hired for the occasion. The heavy rain of the previous week gave way to bright sunshine, and two short thunder storms proved to be only a minor annoyance.

From Maroopna in Victoria came Mr. Shedrach James, well known preacher and lecturer, a leader among the aborigines for many years. Also from Victoria came Frank Roberts Jr., who, I understand, is making a name for himself as an evangelist far from his native Lismore.

Late on Friday night a big red truck driven by a white missionary, Mr. Palmer, arrived from Boggabilla, bringing among others two old friends of mine, Mrs. McGrady and that fiery evangelist, Dick Piety, already well known among the "beigals" of the North Coast. From Fingal on the Tweed River came Pastors L. Phillips and Don Brady, bringing with them a party of visitors from a very long way away indeed, G. Anda, H. Smith and B. Over from the islands of Torres Strait. Everyone I spoke to was most impressed by the songs sung by these men in their own language. From Billinudgel came Mrs. Nouter and her daughter Lily.

The South was ably represented by Mr. Sam Leon of Forster, Mr. Bert Mar, Mrs. Ella Simon and Mrs. Marjory Mar, of Purfleet, near Taree. Mr. Claude Randell represented Maclean, and on Sunday, Mr. Wally Carter arrived in his car from Grafton just in time for the baptism ceremony.

Over the weekend, Woodenbong Station and the reserve at Cubawee must have been almost deserted,

it seemed to me that the whole populations of these sister communities had moved en masse to Tabulam. Notable among these were Alec Vesper, Frank Bundock, Joe Clarke, and Erkie Green from Woodenbong, and four generations of the Roberts family headed by grandfather Liol, from Cubawee. From Woodenbong, John Close carted £50 worth of groceries, besides meat and bread and an organ in a borrowed truck. Similar contributions were made by the Cubawee people. The brunt of the preparation, the erection of tents to accommodate visitors, and a large marquee in which to hold the services was borne by Tabulam Christians, Eric Walker and his wife Una, his uncle Jack Walker and Mrs. Marjory Marsh.

Nor must those who carried out the catering be forgotten. For one meal alone on Friday, 642 adults, besides scores of children were fed. It says much for the organising ability of Mrs. Marsh and Mrs. Florrie Collins, of Tabulam, Mrs. Frank Roberts, Mrs. Aubrey Roberts and Mrs. Laurie, of Cubawee, that none of this vast concourse went hungry. Mr. Alan Boney, from Guyra, who has had some experience of cooking is to be congratulated both on keeping up a steady supply of freshly made tea, and in assisting the ladies with the preparation of meals. A particularly pleasing feature of the convention was the manner in which a group of girls waited on the table, quite a job when there were often five sittings per meal. Notable among these were Irene Roberts and Vivienne Laurie of Cubawee, Judy Slockey, from Coff's Harbour, now living at Tabulam, and Lily Nouter, of Billinudgel.



On Thursday, a "Welcome Tea" was held at which Jack Walker and Eric Walker welcomed the visitors on behalf of the Tabulam community. Friday brought what I thought a very well reasoned address from Mr. Shedrach James: it is a pity that the Aboriginal peoples have not more leaders like him. I think everybody present was impressed both by his command of the facts and by the restrained, tolerant fashion in which he presented them.

On Saturday, Mrs. Ella Simon held a children's service and Sunday brought what to my mind was the climax of a weekend that will long be remembered; the baptismal ceremony in the Rocky River just below the Station. The ceremony was conducted by Pastor Frank Roberts, of Cubawee. Candidates were Frank Hickling, Herb Walker, Unice Walker, Mrs. Aubrey Roberts and Mrs. Laurie. The evening service was conducted by Frank Roberts Jr.