

## REASSESSING THE MISSIONS: BALGO – ITS HISTORY AND CONTRIBUTION

*On 3 November 2004, Mark Nevill presented an illustrated talk that covered some of the social history of Balgo. In his varied career—after living in Wyndham and Derby as a teenager in the early 1960s—Mark commenced professional life as a government teacher at Balgo. He later became a geologist before being elected MLC for the Mining and Pastoral Region; a position he held for 18 years. He is in a unique position of having seen Balgo both in the Mission days and subsequently, having visited regularly since teaching there.*

First, Mark told us about the history of Balgo Mission. In 1928, the Pallotines, represented by Father Droste (who built the famous Beagle Bay Church) and Fr Raible, took over the Kimberley Vicariate from the Trappists who had established Beagle Bay and Lombadina.

The Pallotines—the Society of Catholic Apostolate, was founded by Italian priest Vincent Palloti and the German Branch subsequently blossomed under Bismark and operated in the Cameroon before being displaced by the French. Fathers Droste and Raible came from the Cameroon. The last German Pallotine in the Kimberley—Father Lorenz—has just retired some 75 years after their arrival.

Fr Raible travelled the Kimberley by horseback and camel and became concerned at the plight of the Aborigines, particularly in the East Kimberley. Leprosy and yaws were widespread. A Royal Commission into Aborigines in 1933 drew attention to the problem of leprosy.

In 1934, because the Pallotines were looking for a mission base to establish contact with the Aborigines in the inland, they bought Rockhole Station for £1400. It was situated about 20 miles (32km) south-west of (old) Halls Creek and ran about 1000 sheep.

In September 1934, the selected staff set about founding the Mission and soon a shed and a mud brick room were built, a windmill installed, and 1154 sheep shorn. Father Ernest Worms, the missionary and ethnologist, made a wonderful contribution studying the local Djaru Tribe.

Father Raible applied to the Health Department to set up a hospital and leprosarium at the Mission but there were government objections to the movement of Aboriginal lay helpers from Beagle Bay to Rockhole. Father Raible went back to Germany to be consecrated a Bishop. On his return to the Kimberley he brought out Dr Betz and his wife (also a doctor), in a final attempt to help convince the Government to agree

to his plan. However the scheme was dealt a final blow when a medical clinic was set up at Moola Bulla Station in 1935.

In 1936 Father Herold took over the running of the Mission but it only survived until 1939, not being in a position to properly look after the Aborigines. During the period 1937-39, Bishop Raible and Father Worms made three expeditions into the country south of Halls Creek looking for a new Mission site. They found good country but it was inaccessible by car or truck and devoid of timber for building and firewood.

Dick Smith (a mixed-blood drover and lay helper) found a promising spot 80kms south of (old) Billiluna Station and 30km south-east of Lake Gregory at a place called Djaluwon. In 1939 it was decided to sell Rockhole and drive the stock to the new site, using camels and donkeys to transport possessions. (Ernie Bridge's father bought Rockhole). The Pallotines were treated hospitably by the owners of Ruby Plains and Billiluna Stations on their way and were permitted to stay at Comet Bore on Billiluna using it as a base until either the creek at Djaluwon filled or until a windmill was erected there. They reached Djaluwon in September 1939 where 60 Aborigines awaited them. Water was the main problem but in December they struck water at 70 feet. They erected a bush shelter to live in. The heat, over 40°C on most days, was overpowering. It ruined the vegetable garden and affected the donkeys so much that moving equipment from Comet Bore was slowed to a trickle. The second Balgo lasted only 6 months. No rain fell. There was no wind so water had to be pumped, the debilitating heat continued and the lambs perished. Showers of rain were followed, as was the Aboriginal custom, taking the livestock with them.

Father Alphonse and helpers made many excursions into the interior sinking bores and wells to look for water, which they found at two places in 1940 (Darbi and Bishop's Well). Darbi became the new Mission site when Bishop Raible decided it was suitable for stock and mission work. However, water, feed and communications were poor.

Conditions at Djaluwon worsened and they were forced to retreat to Comet Bore where they were met with hostility by the new manager, war having been declared on Germany in September 1939 and anti-German feelings were rife. In 1941 the police came from Halls Creek and confiscated their guns and ammunition, but they were not interned as were the religious at Beagle Bay and Lombadina. The stock had been moved back to Darbi late in 1940 following rain. No major catastrophes occurred in the next few (war) years and they lived an isolated life, tending to their stock and to Aborigines without any communication, as the pedal radio didn't work. They continued drilling for water and had success near Balgo

and Bishop Raible decided Balgo Hills would be the new site for the mission homestead.

In 1942 work commenced there, at what is now known as Old Balgo. Fifty Aborigines were there and by 1943 the timber work for the Mission was completed using bloodwood and river gum. The preferred timber was the desert oak from Billiluna but they were driven off by the new manager. Ant-bed bricks were made for the homestead and chapel. The camp at Darbi was abandoned.

The first years at Balgo were tempestuous with drought, sandstorms and floods with resulting stock losses and a plague of flies. However the Mission was consolidated over the next few years. Buildings were completed, a vegetable garden established, a well sunk, horse and wool sales made, and an aerodrome site selected. In 1947 monthly visits by the flying doctor commenced. There were now 150 Aborigines at the Mission. They didn't want houses because they couldn't see the stars. In 1956 two St John of God sisters arrived, beginning a tradition that continues today. In 1958 Father McGuire replaced the Germans and he immediately set about rebuilding the Mission in steel. Accommodation and a new school were planned, but the Native Welfare Department grant was withdrawn when it was found the Mission was just inside the Billiluna pastoral lease boundary. Although Margaret Doman, the new owner of Billiluna offered to cede the land, Father McGuire decided to seek a new site for the Mission.

In the meantime the Mission prospered. There were 87 children under the age of 13 years, and the first Government teacher came to the school in 1961. Another came the following year. Horses and chickens were sold, a pig industry commenced, they had their own grader, and roads were graded to all bores. The Lotteries Commission donated a water boring plant, and abundant water was found at what would become the site of the new Mission. By 1964 the population had grown to 200 people.

The new Mission was completed in 1965, built of local Permian sandstone, timber and steel. It had an administration centre, hospital, school, monastery, teacher's house, kindergarten, church, convent, laundry, men's accommodation, dormitories, bakery with a brick oven (100 loaves/day), dining room, slaughter house, store, workshop and a head stockman's house. The Mission was largely self-supporting with extensive vegetable gardens, a cattle industry with over 1000 head, a thriving horse industry together with goats, donkeys, sheep, pigs and fowls. They had machinery for road and dam building, trucks and water boring equipment. By the late 1960s the Aboriginal population numbered 300. The children sent to the school lived in dormitories. In 1967 there were 35 in Mark's first class, Grades 2

and 3, all born in the desert. There was no power during the day to operate the fans in the summer.

In Mark's view the work of the Pallotines and the St John of God sisters in the Kimberley is an heroic chapter in our State and national history. Mark sees the strength of Balgo then, compared with now, as being:

- Better policing, no alcohol,
- Better education, no truancy,
- Better health,
- Better diet, supplemented with much bush tucker,
- Organized work and the learning of skills. The policy was no work, no tucker!
- Industry developed, horses, cattle, etc.,
- There was a role for men,
- The Aborigines were free to move around, and,
- Minimal impact on Aboriginal culture—they were free to practice their customs outside the immediate Mission area.

Negative change in Aboriginal communities in the Kimberley is often attributed to the introduction of the equal wage. Yet, while pastoralists were concerned about the possibility of higher wages, little displacement occurred as a result. The other factors that Mark identified as causing an exodus from the stations were:

- Access to child endowment and unemployment benefits, or 'sit-down money' as it was called,
- Rising costs due to the first oil price hike, and,
- Changes in the pastoral industry, which displaced the need for labour. Changes such as mechanisation - mustering planes, motorbikes, portable pumps, better fencing, steel cattle yards, etc

The result is that many Aboriginal people lost the structure they had in their everyday lives, a structure that was there in the traditional lifestyle in the desert, on the missions and on the stations. The increased disposable income gave them increased access to alcohol and nutritionally poor food.

*Daphne Choules Edinger & Gilbert Marsh.*

**Further reading:**

Byrne, Francis. *A Hard Road: Brother Frank Nissl, 1888–1980: A Life of Service to the Aborigines of the Kimberleys*. Tara Publishing House, Nedlands, 1989.