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ACROSS AUSTRALIA .....

FROM TEACHER TO TEACHER

SCHOOLING AT YARRALIN OUTSTATION



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HISTORY

Victoria River Downs (VRD) is an area of prolonged contact. Early contact, in particular, was marked by fatal violence and disease. The effect of this time is still apparent in the stories of atrocity told by both whites and Aboriginals. If you believed everything you were told there would be a skeleton per square mile. In time the gunsmoke settled down. The people now at Yarralin are survivors. The Karanga tribe is represented by three old men and about seven other linguistic groups are there.

The Aboriginals came to live in camp at VRD, "the station". They were employed as domestics and stockmen in a paternalistic situation. Why they eventually left the station in the Wattie Creek Walkout I don't know. In doing this, however, they placed themselves beyond redemption in the eyes of many of the Europeans. When they then left Wattie Creek, they returned to VRD, but to set up an out-station at Yarralin, about twelve miles from the homestead. Some returned for work, others to be near medical treatment. One man was expelled from Yarralin for trouble-making.

Many of the children had been to school at VRD and then at Wave Hill. While at Yarralin they received no schooling.

INTRODUCTION OF THE SCHOOL

In their approach to the Department for a school in 1974, they requested that the teacher be a male, married, white teacher. They also asked for "two ways" in education. The European way and the Aboriginal way were both to be taught. The stone-flagged verandah of an old building was chosen as a site for the school. Three of their

community were selected as teachers, the basis of choice being that they were the most educated in the western sense. But this left no teacher willing to teach in the Aboriginal way.

The solution to this problem, as with many other problems, came with waiting. It came when one of the prospective teachers found himself in jail, thus leaving the opening needed.

PROGRAM

The program in that first year, 1975, consisted mainly of the three R's on one hand and Aboriginal culture on the other. The latter gradually evolved into an arrangement where Daly Bulgara took four of the kids at a time to show them how to make traditional articles and how to find various foods. Occasionally he taught painting, using water colours on paper, but with traditional motifs. Daly would also come into the school and try to indoctrinate the children on the value of the "two way" idea. (This is pretty necessary as the children are the least sold on the concept.)

PROBLEMS

These are many.

1. I have found the attitudes of the station people difficult to adjust to. This is a personal problem which all teachers have to solve, particularly if they live in small communities. They have to adapt or isolate themselves from companions in their own culture.

2. Any employment, other than a government job, requires leaving Yarralin. Consequently, attendance at school goes up and down. The community help out though, by looking after children while their parents are working elsewhere during the cattle season.

3. Yarralin community has a mixture of languages. This makes a bilingual program virtually impossible. Ngarinman, the dominant language, is spoken by half the children only and it has not been analysed as yet. The children normally speak a form of creole.

4. Alcohol can be a problem, if only sporadically. A wild weekend can unsettle the kids for a week. On one occasion, nearly everybody was camped upriver because they wanted to escape the fighting. Another time I was advised to leave because the old men were anxious about my safety.

5. Many kids lack one or both parents. Some of them have white fathers who have since departed, causing some personality problems as a result. This is all partly alleviated by "grannies" who look after spare kids.

6. Many people at Yarralin are nearly blind, deaf or crippled. Most of the older women are overweight as are some of the men. The children have at times suffered from malnutrition and there are hearing and sight problems.

7. Initially I had great difficulty getting anybody to teach the Aboriginal part of the "two way" program. At meetings called to discuss this, everybody would agree it was a good idea, but no volunteers would be forthcoming. One of the reasons for this is "Shame". In the past in that area they learned to hide or discard their Aboriginality. Doubt now existed as to what "Aboriginal way" meant. One man, under the influence of *pitjerri* suggested that what was really needed was "three ways". White, *Ngarinman* and *Naliwurru*. He was a *Naliwurru* tribesman. Any who considered the job were afraid they could not teach the kids in the school situation. Others thought that the kids knew it already and therefore the idea, while good, was really a waste of time. This problem was eventually solved in a time-honored way. We all waited.

   One day Daly Bulgara was painting a stone right in front of the school. I went out and asked, "Would you mind if the kids copy that?" No, he was happy at the idea. Out went the kids with much enthusiasm. This incident marked the beginning of teaching in the Aboriginal way. It gave me the opportunity of explaining how this could be seen as teaching the Aboriginal way. I could show them this was a learning set-up.

8. Yarralin and the school are vulnerable to decisions made by individuals. I think this is more so at Yarralin than at other outstations. People move in and out more freely. In the first six months of the school, people shifted to Katherine, Bradshaw, the VRD homestead and Wave Hill. The history of the community and its mixed nature all mean there is less access to recognised rules and laws. I'll give an example of this. There are perhaps four main leaders at Yarralin. In one week alone one man had gone to Timber Creek, one had left in a welter of accusation and counter accusation and a third was at the station getting treatment for a "crook" heart. The truck had broken down and more than half the people (and that means half my class) were stranded at the station.

The leader who had shot through, had a wife who is a fine teaching assistant.

9. Yarralin is almost totally dependent on the station for its various supplies. Lack of transport might be the cause of a dissolution of the outstation.

10. It seems to me that relations between adults and children compare badly with those I've observed in north-east Arnhem Land. Good attendance reflects parents' rather than children's desires. I've seen kids belted into school. This situation has improved since Daly came into the school.

SINCE THEN

Things from a teaching point of view have improved steadily. Much equipment has arrived. The days of a pencil and paper on the verandah type teaching are over. The dogs can't raid the new caravan. The kids have learned a fair bit, especially in the reading line. The teaching assistant gets better all the time. Daly does a superb job, in terms of the aims.

Yarralin is to cease being an outstation and is becoming a normal pastoral school in 1976.

I have often wondered if Yarralin should ever have been an outstation school. Everything that was required can be fulfilled in a normal pastoral school. Yes, it is the form of the thing that counts. The school, whatever its final shape, has grown out of the people. The motives have not all been what we might call idealistic. Some of them are quite pragmatic. The way schooling was introduced at Yarralin is, I hope, something which will stay in the minds of the people there. I hope that future teachers here know what it was and what it signifies.

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