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School Days in the Early Seventies in Far North Queensland

*Edward Deemera **

At Yarrabah primary school, Mr. Flighter was my normal teacher when I was in grade seven. He taught us every morning and then we went to different classes.

My English teacher was Mr. Snodgrass. He had one leg shorter than the other, so when he walked he would limp on one side. He was the one who would whack some of the kids on the back of their legs, just below the kneecaps for no reason sometimes. The kids would tease him when he was not looking and then he would turn around and ask anyone of us, "Who is making that noise?" Sometimes we would play a game with him and blame each other, but when he had found out the person making the noise, he would send him or her up to the principal for caning.

The principal at the primary school was named Mr. Tallon. We called him, "Sir," when talking to him. He was very stern and hard. Only once I was sent up to the office and got caned. He would tell you first; "Hold out your hand," and then whack you across your knuckles. If you pulled your hand away and he missed it, he would tell you to do it again and whack you twice with the cane. He had two of them in his office.

From grade seven I went to Cairns High School to do grade eight. The Yarrabah Council had just bought a bus and every morning we would catch the bus at Yarrabah and go over the range into Cairns. Sometimes the days would be good but when the rainy season came the roads were boggy and slippery. Sometimes good size puddles would form. I remember one day we were going along a dirt road beside a hillside and the section of the road was wet and slippery. Everyone on the school bus was frightened because the bus was rocking from side to side.

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It was a bit scary, but we made it through. Also the small bridges and some parts of the roads were covered up with water from the overflowing creeks. But most of the time, we would get through when we came back from Cairns at about three o'clock.

When the bus got into Cairns and everybody had jumped off they would go down town into Woolworths and Coles and wander around inside. Sometimes they would go in pairs to steal new clothes. When they came near the door one of them would give the other person his clothes or, if not, they would wear the clothes under their school uniforms like a pair of tee shirts, and sometimes they would get a pair of shoes.

At Cairns High School there were three basements. Two of them were once occupied by Yarrabah and Kuranda kids. Each morning the Kuranda kids, after leaving the train at Cairns Railway station, would come down to Cairns High and go to their basement for a rest or they would go across the street to buy some food and drinks in a snack-bar. When we came in the Yarrabah bus we would go to our basement and have a rest. Some of us would go across the street to buy food and drink in the snack-bar. We would put money in the jukebox there and sometimes the guys from Yarrabah would pick out a song, a favourite one, from Skyhooks. The girls didn't like these because they liked Sherbet. When I was going to Cairns High school Skyhooks and Sherbert were the two biggest bands.

My subjects at Cairns High were Maths, Reading, Writing, Social Studies, Drafting, Metalwork and Woodwork. For social studies we would study other countries and their "customs". I didn't like maths much. Sometimes I would skip it. For reading we would go to the library at Cairns High and read there. I really liked metalwork and woodwork.

With woodwork I made a tie rack, with small hooks where you put your belts too, and a good size wooden port. It started out good but when it came to cutting out joints I made a couple of mistakes, but it turned out alright. Also I made a small step ladder. Like the wooden port, the step ladder started out good, because cutting the steps out of the wood was alright but joining them together was a bit tricky. Also some of the cuts were deep or shallow. Sometimes I would chisel out little bits to make

it even so the pieces of wood for the ladder would glide in the slots which I had cut out of the wood.

With metal work I made a small rectangular box like the boxes bakers use to put their dough in before putting it in the oven to get cooked. I also made a small funnel and a flour sifter. There were so many things but I can't remember them all. For making these things in metal work I used gas and a soldering iron. First of all I would light the gas then I would put the soldering iron in and when it was hot I would take it out and press a piece of solder with it, solder is a soft alloy used to cement metal parts together.

I liked drafting too. My teacher would give us drawings of plans as homework to do, and we would take them home on Fridays and bring them back on Monday morning. I always did the homework when I got home from high school. The drafting set we had to buy from the shop in town included a small ruler, compass, and divider. I had a small box to put them in when I was not using them. Also our drafting teacher gave us large sheets of white paper to do our plans on when we were in class.

When my Mum got sick and she had to go into hospital at Gordonvale, she told me to stay with my Aunty Enid in Earlville, which is a suburb on the outskirts of Cairns on the south end of the city. So I stayed with my Aunty Enid in Earlville during that time.

I started grade eight and went until grade ten.

My cousin had a bike there in Earlville, but I had to fix it up first like buying a new chain and oiling it. I also had to buy two tyre tubes because the old back one had a puncture in it. One afternoon as I was leaving Cairns High on my bike and I had just finished putting air in the tyres, the back tyre went flat on Mulgrave Road and I had to push the bike all the way until I got to Earlville. Every morning I would ride the bike from my Aunty's place all the way into Cairns along the main road.

When the Yarrabah bus left Cairns High in the afternoon and I'd be riding along the main road, the kids would sing out to me and the bus driver would beep the horn and I would wave to them, and that would happen every time I saw them.

I also had to buy a brand new seat for the bike, because the old one was a bit rusty underneath. Every time the seat would slip and I had to hold on to it as I was going along the road, which was a bit embarrassing. I didn't want to do this every morning when I rode my bike to Cairns High, so I saved up my pocket money that Aunty Enid gave me for doing odd jobs for her around her house. Sometimes when I came home in the afternoon she would tell me to mow the lawn around the house which was a big yard to mow, but I didn't mind.

Anyhow as soon as I had enough money for my seat I couldn't wait to get a new one and get rid of the old one. The new one was nice and comfortable to sit on. Also I didn't have to hold it every time I went to Cairns High in the morning.

Also the chain kept slipping. Every time I peddled, the thing would slip right in the middle of the main road which made me very 'shame'. Sometimes then I would have to start pushing the bike from there all the way to Earlville, so I had to get a new set of bike chains. Also the sprocket was pretty bad, but I didn't have to buy one because underneath my Aunty Enid's house was a couple of spare sprockets.

Anyhow my mum got better and left the Gordonvale Hospital and went back to Yarrabah. I was in grade ten then and by the end of 1974 I left Cairns High School.

I missed out on getting my H.S.C. certificate, but it wasn't only me that didn't get it. There were others also, meaning some of the Yarrabah kids. I think the school principal of Cairns High told the students that they were welcome to come back and get their H.S.C. certificates, but when I asked a couple of my high school friends if they went and got their certificates, most of them said they didn't.

I forgot to tell you that I went back to Yarrabah where my mum lived and went on the Yarrabah bus to finish my high school. At the very end of 1974 I was glad there was the long break.

After I left Cairns High my mum got me a job at the Yarrabah pottery but I didn't start work until after Christmas. That was my first job, and my mum was always proud of me. I loved that job and I miss it.
