



The History

Croker Island is located 290 kilometres north east of Darwin in the Northern Territory, Australia. The Island is quite small - approximately 48km long and 8km wide.

In the early 1900's Commonwealth policies were based on ideas that Aborigines were a 'problem' and had to be segregated onto missions.

The problem to policy makers were the 'half-caste' or 'part white' children who were born of mixed traditional and European parentage. They were thought to be the worst of both races, to have no future and would be shunned by both races.

However, they were presumed more genetically advanced than 'full-blood' Aborigines and through assimilation that the 'colour' would be 'bred out' and they would take their place in white society.

'Half-caste' children were extensively removed under these assimilation policies and placed in compounds in Darwin, Alice Springs and Pine Creek.

In 1940, Croker Island was selected as a suitable site for 'half-caste' children by the Methodist Overseas Mission.

"It was thought that Aborigines in the traditional context were doomed to 'die out', while those who have been corrupted by contact with white settlers would eventually be absorbed into the white community". Peter Forrest (Historian)

In November 1941, the first 44 children, mostly aged between 2 and 5 years, arrived on the Island with 4 missionaries. One child was 12 years of age while another was only 3 months old. By the next month, 96 children were living on Croker Island.

Croker Island was 'home' to 200 children. Upon its closure in 1966 when integration ideas peaked, some children were adopted and fostered throughout Australia. However, many were sent to South Australia to be institutionalised until the age of 16 at Lentara Children's Home, Magill.



The Trek

19th February 1942 Hours after Darwin came under attack from Japanese forces for the first time, over half of the population began to move to the southern and eastern states.

By March Most white women and children on the coastal missions were evacuated. However, three missionaries, Margaret Somerville, Olive Peake and Jess March, along with the Superintendent, Mr Wale, declined to evacuate and chose to stay on Croker Island with the 96 children.

Japanese planes flew over the Island daily. As a precaution, the missionaries and children gathered stones which were laid out in the shape of a cross and then painted white. The mission was also blacked out at night. Food including flour, sugar and tea were in short supply, so local products such as wild pigs, yams, cockles and turtle eggs were used.



7th April Finally after the wet season had passed, the Larpan boat arrived to collect everyone from Croker Island. This was the beginning of a remarkable exodus – by boat, foot, canoe, truck and train.

8th April They arrived at Barclay Point on the mainland – 96 tired children slept on the beach. One child aged four tragically passed away, leaving 95 children.

9th April By utility and truck they drove to Oenpelli, the smaller children went in the vehicles and the older ones walked.

27th April They left for Pine Creek, travelling several miles to East Alligator River. Canoes transported the children while the utility truck was carried across on a makeshift raft made out of six empty four-gallon petrol drums tied together, which was then pushed and pulled to the other side.

"During the canoe trips our eyes scanned the river looking for crocodiles. We all feared the canoe's tipping over and spilling us into the river." Claire Henty-Gerbet (Paint me Black)

After many miles walking and days being bitten by masses of mosquitoes at Sandy Creek, they eventually arrived at Pine Creek. At the request of the American military based at Pine Creek, the children presented a concert including songs and recitals.

Food was limited to government rations of flour, rice, tea and sugar. *"It is not easy feeding 95 children three times a day on such a limited larder"*. Margaret Somerville (They Crossed a Continent).

The next stop was Birdum, where they transferred to cattle trucks and lorries under military escort southward; then onto Alice Springs where they erected tents in the dry creek bed. The journey commenced again by train bound for Adelaide via Oodnadatta, Marree and Quorn and then onto Yerowie and Nhill. Their next stop was Melbourne where most of the children felt frozen from the cold.

Finally, the group arrived at Sydney's Central Station. The children were split into two groups - some went to Haberfield and the others travelled to Otford with the staff.

1944 Eight older boys were sent back to Croker Island to help with further construction of facilities.

1946 69 children left Sydney for Croker Island. Margaret Somerville also returned as cottage mother and remained there until 1965.



The Reunion

Croker Island & Darwin, 6th to 11th July 2003

After almost 40-50 years the journey back to their Island home became a reality for Edna, Gladys, Lorraine, Beverley and Margaret who were accompanied by SA Link-Up.

"We collected shells like we used to, childhood memories came flooding back and it was especially lovely to see the older one's eyes bright and young again.

All of a sudden as I watched the waves gently wash over my feet and thinking how beautiful this small part of the Island was, for no reason whatsoever I started to tremble and sobbed out loudly, my cries being drowned by the pounding waves and the laughter in the distance. At that moment I felt such sadness, wishing I was young again and thinking why was I ever taken away from the only home that I ever knew.

I thought how lucky I was that I don't have the memory of when I was taken from my mother at three years of age.

We were invited to take a trip on the other side of the Island on the back of a ute. What an adventure! We were all transformed into young girls again, especially one of the older ladies who left her medication in Darwin, but who found a spring in her step and clambered on the back of the ute with the rest of us.

It was a very emotional four days and three nights for all of us, but good to see our Island home again after all these years. We talked about coming back when all is green, when the dry land is flooded and covered with waterlillies floating just above the water with their juicy stalks and delicious bulbs waiting to be picked, thrown on the hot coals and eaten.

We are still finding out today, through information kept from us regarding our blood relatives that most of us are related in some way or another. It's good to know the person you knew growing up with is your cousin, sister or brother, even the smallest of detail about your life means so much to us and can make such a difference in your life. It makes you cry with happiness when you are told that as a child you cried, was sick, or clung to someone because you were scared of something or someone, that that person stayed a while with you... Until we meet again!"

Tania & Margaret

'Then & Now'
Featured in 'The News' on 31st May 1956 and below at the reunion on Croker Island 2003, Tania Ryan and Margaret Gray.



Newspaper Article 1956

'The News' 31st May 1956

"Two new girls interrupted the Grade IV reading lesson this morning when they arrived at school half an hour late...

They are Tania Ryan, 10, and Margaret Gray, 8, two part-Aboriginals from Croker Island Methodist Mission, who have been brought to Adelaide by the Methodist, Presbyterian and Roman Catholic Churches in conjunction with the Commonwealth Government as an experiment in assimilation.

More children will be brought to Adelaide from Croker Island if the experiment is successful.

The girls will live in the Methodist Children's Home at Magill and will remain in Adelaide until they are 21."



Botanical Gardens - Sydney 1944
Croker Island Evacuees
L to R Mattie Frith - Betty Harvey - Betty Fisher - Alice Carrol (back) - Polly Dean
Violet Liddy (back) - Claire Henty - Nida Willson - Ruby Braun - Lorna Tennant (back)
Lily Kurnoth (back) - Daisy Murphy (front) - Jessie Waters
(Photo Courtesy Claire Henty)

"The evacuation was a shared experience which brought us all closer together. By going to Otford the children gained in four years what might have taken twenty years. Many had never sat down at a table and cloth to eat and many had never been to school but at Otford they learned to conduct themselves very quickly. However, the children all missed the Island and almost all of them longed for their return... They longed for the freedom of their lovely land."

Margaret Somerville (They Crossed a Continent)

"On and on we walked, always hoping to meet the other half of our party. We had been walking for six hours in near century heat. Then we suddenly came to water. It was only a large muddy hole but we had arrived. Even our hardy, barefooted, brown skinned children were complaining of sore feet and sunburn. How the small children stood up to the walking I don't know. I was just exhausted."

Margaret Somerville (They Crossed a Continent)

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