

The Cummera Walk Off and the return to Base Camp Politics

The 1939 ‘Walk-Off’ when hundreds of residents walked of Cummeragunja in protest of the oppressive conditions and management of A.J. McQuiggan and camped on the Victorian side of the Murray River, is still a focal memory point in the Yorta Yorta community. It is still seen, as a defining moment in our people’s ongoing struggle for self-determination, civil rights and rights to traditional lands. But what is remembered of Cummeragunja itself? Just how difficult was it for Yorta Yorta people to permanently leave the one place that many had come to regard as ‘home’?

In order to understand the significance of Cummeragunja to the people that lived there, it is necessary to place the 1939 walk-off in its proper historical context. ‘Cummera’ as it is affectionately known, came to symbolise Aboriginal survival in the face of dispossession; a flourishing community that defied the widely-held narrative of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century: that the fate of the Aborigines was hopeless and that these ‘poor’ ‘wretched’ people and their culture would eventually ‘die out.’ It was a place that represented resistance to government control over Aboriginal affairs and the continuity of culture and identity. At the same time, those who lived on Cummera were constantly answerable to the Aborigines Protection Board, which had the power not only to take away their land but also the children who did not meet the Boards imposed and stereotypical criteria of Aboriginality. It was a place of freedom and recreation, yet Aboriginal people’s opportunities, from access to employment and land, to welfare and equal wages, were invariably restricted by the prejudice and ignorance of the wider community. Cummera is remembered bitter-sweetly, with pride and sadness, but it connects generations of Yorta Yorta people together, and it is tied up in all our success stories and achievements under extremely difficult circumstances.

This paper will explore the historical reasons why people left the reserve in 1939, suggesting that rather than a once-off occurrence, the walk-off came from a long history of protest by Yorta Yorta people. Drawing on oral testimonies from people who grew up on Cummera prior to the walk-off, and some of my own oral

knowledge passed on by my parents-grandparents who were born and grew up on Cummera, the paper presents a picture of Cummeragunja through the oral record and explains what Cummera means to its people today.

Cummeragunja reserve was the outcome of a long history of efforts by traditional owners of the Murray-Goulburn area to reclaim their traditional land and live self-sufficiently. As Diane Barwick notes, records dating back as early as 1861 show that Yorta Yorta people sought compensation for the effects of European dispossession.¹ In 1881 forty-two Yorta Yorta men from Maloga Mission (the place where families were relocated before Cummera), signed a petition to the New South Wales Governor, requesting a 'sufficient area of land to cultivate and raise stock...that we may form homes for our families' and eventually 'support ourselves by our own industry'.² Daniel Matthews, who ran the private mission at Maloga, had encouraged the petition and lobbied all levels of government as well as the Newspapers for food and land to be set aside for the welfare of Aboriginal people. Matthews was an Echuca merchant who was well-respected by the local tribes, and had started the mission at Maloga after visiting Coranderrk, a then successful self-sufficient reserve in Central Victoria, hoping his mission would give Aboriginal people a better standard of living. Once Matthews received regular funds he was able to accept everyone who wished to settle at Maloga.³ Two years after the petition of 1883, 1800 acres was set aside three miles upriver from Maloga, which residents fenced, cleared and used to take care of sheep, working without wages. In 1887 they petitioned again for the allocation of one hundred acres to each Aboriginal capable of and wishing to farm for himself, but the Aborigines Protection Association rejected this proposal and withheld further funds to Maloga mission until all buildings were moved to the government reserve. Reluctantly, residents were forced to move

¹A report of the Victorian Board noted that some of the Moira tribe requested a tax on steamers that came up the Murray, because they were driving away the fish which were their source of food. Diane E. Barwick, "Coranderrk & Cumeragunja: Pioneers & Policy" in T. Scarlett Epstein & D.H. Penny, eds., *Opportunity & Response: Case Studies in Economic Development* (London, 1972). 47.

² Ibid.

³ Maloga grew in population to a total of 153 in 1887. As well as the surrounding Moira Lakes and Goulbourn river, residents came from as far as central Victoria, exiled from the once prosperous Aboriginal reserve at Coranderrk. A Newspaper reported at this time that resident's homes at Maloga were as well furnished as the rest of the community. Ibid, 48-49.

after the Association warned that those who remained at Maloga would lose their cottages and a chance to farm a block of their own, while those who had already moved to what would become Cummeragunja would have their rations taken away if they visited anyone remaining at Maloga.⁴ From the outset, then, Cummera was not only a lot of hard work but it was not the secure home that other people might enjoy. The families who moved there worked hard for twelve years without pay on rations of flour, sugar tea and some meat, clearing the land and building the township.⁵ However, instead of gaining freehold title to their own blocks of land, as was customary for settlers at the time, they received what only amounted to ‘permissive occupancy of Crown lands.’ This meant that their land was considered temporarily reserved from lease or sale for ‘Aboriginal purposes,’ and was administered by Lands Departments, who were susceptible to influential settler lobbies.⁶ The original land reserved for Yorta Yorta people at Cummeragunja would be continually taken away from them and sold to nearby settlers well into the 1960s, in an ongoing process of colonisation. In response, Yorta Yorta never gave up their fight for free title over all of Cummeragunja, and the reserve became a microcosm of other Aboriginal claims to native title all over Australia.

More than anything else, Cummeragunja was for the Yorta Yorta a place that could be regarded as ‘home’. Even when they were not living on Cummeragunja, Yorta Yorta people were always ‘coming back’ there. Men often had to leave in order to find seasonal work to supplement their income, before coming back to support their family. Generations of people who grew up in Cummera and spent their lives elsewhere are buried there, in accordance with Aboriginal customs of returning to country. I was born just after the Walk Off on the river bank in Mooroopna, and learned of the cultural and emotional attachment of Cummera. It was my parents and relatives who told me stories of Cummera and with whom I would often visit for family gatherings, burials, and to fish at the special places for the favorite yellow belly and murray cod. I remember clearly how my parents and grandparents would always talk about Cummeragunja in very

⁴ Ibid, 50.

⁵ Ibid 51.

⁶ Ibid, 16.

affectionate terms often saying things like “poor old Cummera” or “dear old Cummera”. Later in life I recall how my mother would yearn to visit Cummera and relive the old days and how she would embrace those who she visited with deep affection often shedding a tear together for the place that they loved so much. This is what brought Cummera home to me as special places in our history and identity as proud Yorta Yorta people.

The testimonies of people who grew up on Cummeragunja create a picture of one very big extended family, rather than disparate families and separate houses. As Merle Jackomos explains, ‘we were all related on Cummera, we more or less had the one common great grandmother.’ Similarly, Melva Johnson remarks that ‘everyone was auntie, everyone was uncle, and there was a deep respect for everyone.’ Hilton Hamilton Walsh, who grew up on Cummera during the Depression years, recalls ‘our people always had...extended family, where you could be billeted out anywhere as soon as you got into your teens, to make room for the younger children.’⁷ This sense of community at Cummeragunja grew out of the necessity for survival. The community remained after the walk-off, when people moved to the riverbanks at Mooroopna-another significant chapter of struggle and survival in Yorta Yorta history-see ‘The Mooroopna Flat History’ in *Oncountry Readings*. https://app.lms.unimelb.edu.au/bbcswebdav/xid-2410941_2

The walk-off in 1939 did not come about spontaneously; rather it was the result of a series of events that made living on Cummeragunja increasingly unbearable for residents. For a long time Cummeragunja had ceased to function as the ‘model farm’ that it was in its heyday around the first two decades of the twentieth century.⁸ The most bitter memory of Cummeragunja was of the authorities arriving to take the children away to receive domestic training at distant institutions. Aunty Theresa Clements remembers the time they took her

⁷ Rosalie Simkin & Lyn Loger, written using Hilton Hamilton Walsh’s own words and diction. *Double ID: life story of Hilton Hamilton Walsh; born 11th June, 1923, died 5th December 1997*. (Shepparton, Vic: Prominent Press, 2001) 21.

⁸ For example that in the period of 1896-1915 in terms of production, the Cummeragunja farmers’ annual returns were above the county average 9 out of 18 years, and below it only 6 years, despite lack of machinery and inferior land. Barwick, “Coranderrk & Cumeragunja”, 51.

daughters as ‘the most terrible thing that ever happened to me.’⁹ Although many escaped by swimming across the river, the fear that the authorities would return remained with many parents.¹⁰ Increasing numbers of residents had left as a direct result of other policies of the Aborigines Protection Board, such as the leasing out of most of the reserve to European farmers since 1921, the removal of all of the farm machinery to other reserves, and the ending of paid wages to residents for work since 1929.¹¹ A failure in the water supply had also been neglected, preventing residents from growing vegetables or green fodder for milk cows. The Depression affected all Australians, but it was particularly hard on Aboriginal people, who had been ‘thrown out of employment’ since 1928 as a result of the Workers Compensation Act and the obligation to pay award wages.¹² Opportunities for Aborigines to get ahead were not helped by the hostile and prejudiced attitudes of locals in the surrounding towns¹³ who had come to rely on the exploitation of Aboriginal manual and sexual labour.¹⁴

However, it was the arrival of manager A. J. McQuiggan to Cummeragunja in 1937 that made circumstances increasingly desperate for residents. Prior to the walk-off, they were living on the reserve in ghetto-like conditions, with 172 people crammed into 24 cottages, 113 more occupying huts of scrap iron and wheat bags and 50 ‘expellees’ camped across the Murray.¹⁵ McQuiggan’s authoritarian and aggressive approach did little to placate residents’ concerns and needs, and his use of the whip and the police force were unnecessarily harsh.¹⁶ McQuiggan threatened to expel residents and have half-caste children

⁹ See Margaret Tucker, “An aboriginal Girl’s Plea for Understanding”

¹⁰ The Yorta Yorta, whose traditional lands encompass either side of the Murray River, had a history of using the political boundary of the Murray River to their advantage, in order to escape to the Victorian side where the laws of New South Wales did not apply, or vice versa. Clements, 6.

¹¹ Barwick, “Coranderrk & Cumeroogunga,” 62.

¹² Cited in the notes from the Aborigines Protection Board in Barwick, “Aunty Ellen”, 187.

¹³ This attitude would continue to characterise the local people’s relationship with Yorta Yorta who settled on the outskirts of Mormon and Shepparton. Locals complained to Council of the unsightly and ‘dirty’ condition of the Riverbank camps, yet refused to support requests from Yorta Yorta people to the council to provide basic facilities such as toilets and rubbish collection. Ibid, 193.

As Melva Johnson remarks, prejudice was always rife in ‘any town that’s close to a mission.’ Cummeragunja Mission (videorecording).

¹⁴ Hilton Walsh remembers women ‘who became pregnant to some of the farm hands and whites of some description... these were actual things that happened at the time.’ Simkin, 21.

¹⁵ Barwick, “Aunty Ellen”, 190.

¹⁶ McQuiggan’s response to a case of Polio at the reserve was to quarantine residents on

removed, and reprimanded anyone who spoke out against him publicly.¹⁷ The event that arguably inspired the final courageous step to walk off the reserve in protest was the visit from Jack Patten, who spoke to residents about conditions on other Aboriginal reserves and explained to them their rights. Hilton Walsh recalls the ‘fantastic’ affect Patten’s speech had on people: ‘it was as though he opened the bloody gates and let us out and we had the outside world to look at.’¹⁸ With all diplomatic avenues exhausted,¹⁹ the people of Cummera resolved, not for the first time, to leave their home and settle elsewhere in traditional lands, as ‘illegal’ immigrants under white law.²⁰

Despite the bitter circumstances in which the walk-off took place in 1939, Cummeragunja is remembered by many Yorta Yorta with happiness; its narrative one of success and achievement. Ronald Morgan’s comment that ‘the people [of Cummeragunja] were not without their recreation’ is somewhat of an understatement: along with a football and cricket team and many champion foot-runners, Cummeragunja held a Sports Carnival at Christmas that included bike riding, wood chopping, and other athletic events.²¹ The Cummera football team was legendary and gave the people of Cummera great pride, along with individuals such as Doug Nicholls and Eddy Jackson in the VFL and Bobby McDonald and Lynch Cooper in running. Cummera was never short on entertainment; along with regular concerts and dances there were processions in which were shown the dresses that women had skillfully put together.²² From all

Cummeragunja, bringing in police to stop those who feared an outbreak and prepared to leave. ‘The Cummeragunja Strike, 1939’ from H Goodhall, *Invasion to Embassy: Land in Aboriginal Politics in NSW, 1770-1972*. (Allen&Unwin in assoc. with Black Books: St Leonards NSW, 1996) pp-247-258.

¹⁷ McQuiggan got hold of a petition to the Board that was signed by residents (aided by William Cooper and the Aborigines Advancement League), requesting his removal as manager, and punished the signatories. *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Simkin, 42.

¹⁹ McQuiggan had Patten arrested for ‘inciting’ protest and the Board ignored resident’s demands for a public investigation into the leasing of their land and the destruction of their homes as inferior education and job training and inadequate rations. Barwick, “Coranderrk & Cumeragunja” 190.

²⁰ The practice of walking off in protest was not a once-off in 1939: families had left Cummeragunja earlier in the 1920s when the Board started taking away ‘half-caste’ children, and before that at Maloga Mission, men walked off and abandoned their homes when a member was expelled for neglecting religious duties. Barwick, “Coranderrk & Cumeragunja” 50, 56.

²¹ Ronald Morgan, *Reminiscences of the Aboriginal Station at Cumeragunja and its Aboriginal People*. (Melbourne: 1952). 13.

²² Barwick, “Aunty Ellen”, 184.

accounts, music flowed through Cummera like the Murray itself, and while individuals such as Jimmy Little went on to achieve national fame, on the local level the Cummeragunja Mission Church Choir was (in the humble opinion of Hilton Walsh) ‘one of the greatest choirs you could ever imagine’, and toured the region during the war years raising money.²³ The hymns of Moody and Sanky, such as ‘Shall We Gather at the River’ were well known by all because they had been remembered and passed down since the Old Maloga days when they were introduced by Daniel Matthews.²⁴ Merle Jackamos recalls the festivity and excitement of Christmas, when families would share a meal at the bend of the river and sing such hymns while the kids were swimming. The achievements of political activists such as William Cooper, who benefited from the tuition of Thomas Shadrach James (‘Grandpa James’), long-time teacher at Maloga and Cummera, have been well documented. Yet on the level of day-to-day Cummeragunja people achieved immensely under the circumstances they lived in, whether it be the women who ‘made do with whatever they had – twenty cents of bones for a soup’²⁵ or the men who built up their houses with unpaid labour.

Cummeragunja represented change and adaptation to the new ‘white man’s ways’ but provided a space for the continuation of the old way of life. As Ronald Morgan points out, assimilation began from the entry of white men to our shores.²⁶ For men like Ronald’s father, Bagot Morgan, it was a case of survival and response to rapidly changing circumstances.²⁷ For the Yorta Yorta at Cummeragunja, the trade-off to learning the English language and becoming schooled in the European tradition was that the old language fell out of practice. Hilton Walsh recalls only one man that he knew of in Barmah – Bob Cooper – that could speak Yorta Yorta. Aboriginal people were forbidden to speak their language in his great grandfather’s time, so that by the time Hilton’s generation was born their parents could not pass it on. Merle Jackson laments that ‘they

²³ Simkin, 32.

²⁴ Nancy Cato, *Mister Maloga* (St Lucia, 1993). 81.

²⁵ Elizabeth Hoffman, “Cummeragunja” videorecording.

²⁶ Morgan, 23.

²⁷ Yorta Yorta man Ronald Morgan writes that his father, Bagot Morgan, ‘encouraged many of the aborigines to come and live on Maloga, to give up their ways of living, and learn of the white man’ Morgan, 2.

didn't teach any aboriginal history or culture' at Cummeragunja reserve. However, words of the original language and particularly stories survived and are well intact. For example, 'Algabohnyah,' a word often used by Yorta Yorta to mean good-looking or handsome, which refers to the green-grassed plain on the Murray River bank about two miles down from the Moira lakes.²⁸ Morgan can also recall the story of how the water rat came into existence. 'We have learned from our aboriginal people themselves that they had their customs and beliefs that were of a high order.'²⁹ Hilton Walsh laments the way in which a lack of formal western education divided Aboriginal people from the rest of society: 'lack of education caused lack of conversation, which causes lack of communication.'³⁰ Whilst he made up for his lack of education later in life, Walsh came to appreciate the education he received from Yorta Yorta elders who lived on the river banks just outside the township of Cummeragunja: 'I had this passion for old people. They were so interesting and they held my attention until I decided it was something good for me or it wasn't...I learned a lot listening to them'³¹ Situated on the Murray River, at Cummeragunja Yorta Yorta could fish and cook the way their elders had in the hunter-gatherer days: 'we used to cook turtle, fish, swan or ducks on ashes. We used swan and emu eggs (they're rich!) for cakes, birthday cakes. We used to have wonderful meals.'³² Although people adapted to a more sedentary life and were eager to learn European modes of production to sustain them into the future there was a continuity of traditional based customs and practices.

There is a central paradox to Cummeragunja: a home which Yorta Yorta people were forced onto, then had to fight for when it was taken away from them until authorities controlled their lives so much that they had to leave. A productive and exemplary farm in its hey-day that turned into more of a 'concentration camp,'³³ during the years of McQuiggan's rule prior to the walk-off. Yet Cummera meant nothing without the Yorta Yorta community that had lived there, and that stuck together even after the walk-off when people settled in

²⁸ Morgan, 19, 5.

²⁹ Morgan, 20.

³⁰ Simkin, 48.

³¹ Simkin, 35.

³² Barwick, "Aunty Ellen", 184.

³³ Godhall, 'The Cummeragunja Strike, 1939'

Mooroopna and Shepparton. Perhaps the best illustration of this resilience of the Cummera community is the image of Pastor Eddy Atkinson, conducting his services out in the orchards where the post 1939 walk-off community worked, bringing the 'old organ' out under the trees.³⁴ Recent commemorations of the walk-off (in 1988 old and new residents marked the 200 year anniversary of invasion by walking on to Cummeragunja, and in 2009 the 70th anniversary was celebrated with a re-enactment of the walk-off) are a reminder of the survival of this community and the ongoing nature of their fight for land rights-see Riverine Herald article below.



The screenshot shows the Riverine Herald website interface. At the top, there is a navigation bar with the date 'Saturday, February 07, 2009' and a user greeting 'WELCOME WAYNE (GUEST) - UPGRADE - PROFILE - LOGOUT'. A sidebar on the left contains links for 'NEWS', 'INDEX', and 'SPORT'. The main content area features a large headline: 'Hundreds gather for re-enactment'. Below the headline, the article is dated 'February 6 2009' and attributed to 'Riverine Herald'. The text of the article describes a re-enactment of the 1939 Cummeragunja Walk-Off, mentioning that almost 200 people gathered on Tuesday evening. It details the event's significance, including speeches from elders, the route from the community centre to Mooroopna Flats, and the historical context of the 1939 mass strike. The article also includes quotes from Yorta Yorta's Peter Ferguson and a statement from the current group of Yorta Yorta people.

February 6 2009
Riverine Herald

Almost 200 people gathered to re-enact the 1939 Cummeragunja Walk-Off on Tuesday evening.

The event included speeches from elders who were presented in 1939.

The commemorative walk started from the Cummeragunja community centre and finished at the former Mooroopna Flats on Wednesday afternoon.

In 1939, after enduring decades of mistreatment and culture repression, the first-ever mass strike of indigenous people in Australia involved more than 150 residents leaving the mission near Barmah in protest of the cruelty to their people.

This week's walk saw a police escort and support vehicles follow the trek.

Yorta Yorta's Peter Ferguson said there was much excitement and anticipation among the group.

"It was very much a happy event in stark contrast to that held 70 years previously," he said.

"The Commemorative Walk-Off was a heartfelt show of respect from the current group of Yorta Yorta people to the strength and integrity shown by our elders, then and now.

"There were several Yorta Yorta people who managed to walk the entire distance (85.1km) who absolutely deserve a medal for such a massive contribution."

"I would personally like to thank Kalun Atkinson, Tommy Baksh and Michael Cutmore from Rumbalara Men's Walking Group for creating such a memorable event."

Looking back, Cummeragunja's legacy is one of survival and continuity, as well

³⁴ Barwick, "Aunty Ellen", 192.

as pride and determination. The increased numbers of Yorta Yorta people, descendants of the pioneers at Cummeragunja, who are once again coming back to the reserve to live, demonstrate that in many ways, the Yorta Yorta never really left Cummera.

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