



URUNGA STATION

A STORY FROM THE PAST

This is the third in a series of reminiscences from Ex-Inspector E. C. Smithers, who retired recently from the Aborigines Welfare Board, after more than forty years in the service.

It was during the time that I was an Inspector of Fisheries at Urunga that I was asked to take over the management of the Urunga Aboriginal Station in addition to my normal Fisheries duties.

The Station had been built some years before, on a low-lying island, and through bad management the aboriginal population had dwindled until only 14 elderly people and 3 children remained.

When Mrs. Smithers, an ex-high school teacher, opened the Station school, she had only 3 children to teach. Not a very inspiring start for any teacher.

Within six months, however, our adult population had once again grown to 160 aborigines, and now we had more than 30 children attending school.

We purchased a launch and named it "Aleathea," and the boys and I would cross the Bellingen River Bar regularly to go fishing on the grounds outside for good hauls of snapper and other deep-sea fish. Eventually, some leading Bellingen people, including Dr. Myles, the Government Medical Officer, Mr. Mulhearn and Dr. Bull, began to take an interest in the aborigines and their deep-sea fishing, and on occasions would accompany us outside.



Their interest and enthusiasm was so great that they got together with our local men and collected enough money to purchase a fishing boat and net for the people on the Station.

We were thus assured of good hauls of fish at all time because if the weather was too bad to go outside, we could use the nets off the beach.

We had no need for a butcher's shop and for practically the whole of the fourteen years we lived on the Station we had plentiful supplies of fish and vegetables grown in our own gardens.

After we had been on the Station for several years we had a succession of floods and as we had to move the aborigines to the mainland in a hurry on several

occasions, I then reported to the then Acting Secretary (Mr. Foote) that the situation was becoming dangerous and he made a special visit to Urunga to have a look at things for himself.

It so happened that the very night he arrived, and was staying at our house, the floodwaters came swirling down and washed the house right off its foundation.

Fortunately, we had anticipated trouble and had moved all the aborigines to the mainland earlier in the evening (unknown to Mr. Foote), and we also had Jack Binalong and Stewart Bullock, two very fine aborigines, sleeping in the launch tied up to our back verandah so that when the house started to collapse, Mr. Foote and my family were able to step into the launch and be taken to safety.



This was perhaps the best illustration we could give anyone of the potential danger of the place.

After this incident, the Board decided to move the people to Yellow Rock on the mainland.

As we were only allocated about £100 for the purpose, we had to collect all the damaged material from the island houses, plus a lot of sawn timber that had drifted down the Bellingen River in the floods, and the boys and I built 23 two-roomed cottages on a ration basis payment. No money for wages . . . just rations. Those were the days when everyone was happy and willing to work and help each other.

At Urunga, we had our own oyster leases and also grew over 70 acres of corn using borrowed gear to till the land.

On one occasion, when we were at Urunga Station, the Pilot (Captain Dedman) phoned me early one morning to say the Governor, Sir Walter Davidson and Lady Davidson, had arrived in Urunga the night before and were worn out after their many engagements along the road. Captain Dedman said he could arrange to take Sir Walter out and asked if we could entertain Lady Davidson