

Tribes of Simpson Desert Trained Him in Bush Lore

A few weeks short of his 80th birthday, Mr. Michael Sawtell recently retired as a member of the Aborigines Welfare Board after 18 years' service.

But his term with the Board represents a mere fraction of the time he has spent working in the interests of aborigines all over Australia.

It was the bush life that lured Michael Sawtell away from St. Peter's College, Adelaide, at the turn of the century.

He grew to manhood with aborigine boys on the edge of the Simpson Desert—boys who taught him much about bush craft and aborigine tribal laws.

The spry Mr. Sawtell, who looks 20 years younger than his actual age, recently recalled those years as some of the happiest of his life. "Boys will be boys no matter where or what colour," he said. "And boys tell other boys much they would not tell grown-ups."

In 1901, Mr. Sawtell went to work for Cattle King, Sir Sidney Kidman, droving cattle. "I was a kind of white-haired boy with the Cattle King because I neither drank nor smoked," Mr. Sawtell said.

"Many things have been written about the late Sir Sidney Kidman, but there is one thing I would like to bring to people's notice. In his will the Cattle King ordered that all aborigines on his stations should be allowed to end their days there in peace and plenty."

Mr. Sawtell's early training with cattle was confined to the Birdville region, but at 21 he was probably the youngest pioneer in the Kimberleys—one of the wildest parts of the continent.

He was one of the first white men to settle in the wild Obagooma country, at the back of Yampi Sound, with its rich iron ore deposits.

"I lived alone 20 miles from the nearest white settler, surrounded by the suspicious Munjong tribe," Mr. Sawtell said.

"There I learned a great deal about tribal aborigines and how to make friends with them.

"In 1910, I took part in the agitation to have the chain gangs abolished and to get pay for aboriginal shearers.

"Those were the days when aborigine welfare was just a dream. Several times I discussed ways of helping them with that grand old lady of the Nullarbor, Daisy Bates."

Michael Sawtell hung up his droving boots and saddle in the mid-twenties, when he came to Sydney, married and started out in his own little business.

But he had not forgotten his old friends in the bush and was one of the prime movers in the campaign to set up the present Aborigines Welfare Board and gain full citizenship rights for aborigines.

He also joined in the battle for full Commonwealth Social Service benefits for aborigines, something they now have.

"Although I have resigned from the Board I am still interested in aboriginal welfare," Mr. Sawtell said. "The problem is no longer a matter of granting tribal people citizenship, but one of encouraging a detribalised people—many of whom are now nearly white—to take up the responsibilities of citizenship. This must be a labour of love, a service of intimate and understanding friendship."

Mr. Sawtell said that in his retirement, he planned to go on talking to leading clubs and organisations about aborigines and another of his pet projects, a big water scheme for the Inland.

As a hobby, he will continue to conduct the only Oratory Class, as distinct from public speaking, in Sydney, and remain active as a life member on the Council of the Shakespeare Society.

BOGGABILLA REPRESENTED AT SYDNEY CONFERENCE OF C.W.A.

The C.W.A. branch on Boggabilla Aboriginal Station chose Mrs. Leila Orcher and Mrs. Alice Haines, of Toomelah branch, to represent them at the annual State conference of the C.W.A. in Sydney, from May 7 to May 11.

Unfortunately, Mrs. Haines was ill for a couple of days which prevented her taking full advantage of the Sydney visit.

They met members from other aboriginal stations at the conference, including Mrs. Lang and Mrs. Morris, from Burnt Bridge, and Mrs. Simon of Purfleet.

The delegates also met Mrs. Fuller, Gwydir Group President, and Mrs. Brooks, who opened the Toomelah branch. Mrs. Smith and Mrs. Stamm, of the Boggabilla branch, were also present.

Mrs. Orcher reported back to the home branch that the C.W.A. proposed to sponsor a scholarship for an aboriginal girl's secondary education to be known as the Susie McGrady Scholarship.