

PIONEER YARNS



CONSTANCE MACKNESS & MARION RICK

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Sketches by Beach Historians

Constance Mackness wrote our first district history in 1959, *Clump Point and District – an Historical Record of Tam O'Shanter, South Mission Beach, Mission Beach, Bingil Bay, Garner's Beach and Kurrimine*. Her history is a treasure but is no longer in print. It contains some oral histories by pioneers and parts of four are revealed here for those who cannot access her book. Some are about Djiru people and despite her positive views on Aboriginal people, like Ted Banfield before her, she used language and stereotypes that are obviously unacceptable today. Times have greatly changed.

Bean Tree - Arthur Garner (sawmiller) and Len Cutten pre-1914

There were still a good many blacks camped on the foreshore of Bingil Bay, clothed, seemingly civilised and content. Yet angry mutterings came from them at the felling of a big bean tree. They had joyously accepted the regulation amount of flour and trade tobacco paid as compensation for the destruction of a native food tree, but, like children, they wanted both to eat their cake and have it. To the sawmiller their mood seemed an ugly one, but Cutten was quite unruffled. And the blacks went off, more or less pacified, after a few words of good-humoured argument from him. He admitted that, in the early days, the blacks had been 'a bit difficult' whenever a wonga tree or a bean had been cut down. 'Which probably means, says Garner, 'that they went close to tearing him to bits.' Cutten laughed at the suggestion: Bicton Blacks had never been really savage. 'It was just that they weren't exactly pleased about it – or with us.'

Fluke Shot - Leonard Cutten (lived here for 45 years).

*A huge crocodile ... appeared one morning ..., close in, and had nearly managed to breakfast off a blackfellow. An excited group came to Bicton to report it... Leonard seized his rifle to investigate; and lo! the monster's dark form was plainly outlined in the shallow, sunlit water. Idly, he lifted his rifle and fired. To his own amazement, the long shot came off: the bullet went through the creature's head, and there was *Crocodylus Porosus* thrashing the water to foam in his death agonies! So impressed were the blacks that they seemed to decide that nothing the white magicians chose to do must be questioned.*

Jailed... for being Aboriginal

Told by a lady from Narragon, in the early 1920s, who followed the old track (Cutten Walk of today) to call on Mrs. Garner.

Under shady trees on the northern foreshore of Bingil Bay, there was a solitary gunyah, with a rough lean-to against a tree. A pink silk umbrella hung from a limb, and from near the two lowly dwellings there poured out a stream of lean and hungry dogs, snarling or barking furiously. Out from the gunyah came a plump cheerful looking old gin, pipe in mouth. She ... turned to reassure her white sister in surprisingly good English: 'No need to be scared, Missus: they wouldn't hurt a flea even – just barking for something to do.' The gin's black mate was spearing their dinner. Seven smallish fish the visitor counted. Whereas he was garbed in the briefest of shorts and nothing else, his good lady wore a pair of moleskin trousers, with a floral frock that covered them to the knees. It was the Bay's last sight of these simple, kindly people: the police came along during the week to take them to Palm Island Aboriginal Settlement.

The Jokes on Frizzy - L O Mackness and Edmund Frizelle (Frizzy) chat in the early 30s.

He proudly showed a big and gaily coloured moth of which America badly wanted a specimen. For years he had sought it in vain at night, and now he had come upon it by some happy chance in the daytime... From admiring it, they passed to talk of one thing and another, till they turned, just a second too late, to see that a starveling stray dog had crept up behind them and was making an appetiser to its next meal of the moth's plump body. Comical were the bereaved collector's bilingual execrations as he gazed at the shining fragments of his lost treasure; but he shrugged it off with a grin and said: 'Ah well! A good yarn is worth the loss, anyway!'

Frizzie was an Oxford scholar from Ireland who came to Mission Beach in 1911 and died in 1959 aged 90, so he lived here for 48 years. He collected moth and butterfly specimens for the Rockefeller Foundation in the USA.

Thank you, Constance... you inspired us to continue your wonderful work and capture our stories of the past.

Marion Rick, who came to Mission Beach in 1951, also had a few yarns to tell, especially about her friend and neighbour Rupert Fenby...

Marion and Rupert – Marion Rick's recollections of Rupert Fenby.

One day my children asked me if they could visit Mr Fenby. I said yes. Some time later, my six year old daughter stamped into the house and declared "he is the rudest man I ever saw." When I enquired why, she said he had no clothes on. Rupert had a bottle with the bottom out of it hanging from a tree. Visitors were supposed to blow through this bottle to give Rupert a warning that someone was coming. He kept a pair of pants handy to pull on as in the seclusion of the bush he just went naked. On the day when the children went visiting him, it had been very windy and he thought it was just the wind blowing through the bottle.

The children did not visit him on many occasions after that but always found him with his clothes on. I was quite happy for the children to visit him as he was so knowledgeable and every time they would get together it would turn into a nature study. Rupert's mode of travel was a racing bike. It was a sight to behold, Rupert's skinny legs pedalling the bicycle and his hat which was supposed to be on his head, flying out behind him secured to his neck by a piece of string.

At certain times of the year, we get plagued with March flies at Mission Beach. One day when I was growling and smacking at the flies, Rupert came along and told me they didn't bother him. He said the cassowaries followed him around and picked the flies off him. Can you visualise it? The mind boggles at the skinny old gent stark naked chipping his garden and the cassowaries following him around waiting for a fly to land so they could snap it up.

Although Rupert only talked to the children about birds and trees, with me it was a different matter. Rupert had embraced the idea of communism and received a great deal of literature on the matter. He was forever trying to convert me, and we had many debates about it. I would close the debate when he tried to declare there was no God, communism was the answer to the world's problems. We always remained friends despite our different philosophies. Rupert would retreat to the bush and return when I had cooled down.

Despite his denial of God, I knew he would arrive on Christmas Day, gather up my children and any others around and buy them all a glass of lemonade to drink a toast to Christmas. Perhaps he was just baiting me and looking for an argument when he tried to convert me.

Marion Rick lived for 68 years at Mission Beach and died here aged 97.
Rupert Fenby lived here for over 50 years and died in 1960 at age 84.

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