THE CUMMERAGUNGA STORY

In 1939 the migration of the native population of Cummeragunga Aboriginal Station from the north bank of the Murray across the river into Victoria created a little inter-State incident of which the background is given by Ronald Morgan in "Reminiscences of the Aboriginal Station at Cummeragunga and its Aboriginal People" (Fitzroy : Fotoscreen Process Printers; limited edition for presentation only). By I.M.

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MR. MORGAN, A three - quarter - blood aborigine, was born in the community of which he tells the story. His father, Bagot Morgan, a Yorta Yorta half-blood, was born in the 1850's, and in 1874 built with his own hands the crude bark hut in which originated the Maloga Aboriginal Mission of which Cummeragunga was the successor.

Mr. Morgan possesses a photograph of the bark hut, with an inscription that tells much of the story:

"The Maloga Mission. Interdenominational. Founded by Mr. and Mrs. Daniel Matthew, June, 1874. Branches: New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia. Objects: The social and moral elevation of the blacks in all the colonies, the protection and care of young children, training and Christian teaching in village settlements. Supported by voluntary subscriptions. No salaried officers. No official collectors. Daniel Matthew, Director. Headquarters, Argyle Villa, Barry Street, Carlton."

Maloga

Maloga seems to have been a big place, carrying Yorta and Yullaba Yullaba people and aborigines from as far away as Sydney. A clergyman was in frequent attendance to marry and baptise. The few Maloga people who remain tell of its strict rules, the daily worship, the rigid Sabbath, the popularity of the Matthewes, and the prosperity of the settlement.

But the settlement was cramped. Matthew opened another one at Warangesta, on the Murrumbidgee. When the N.S.W. Government took over Maloga in 1883 they transferred everything a few miles up river to an area of some thousands of acres at Cummeragunga.

The various localities are full of memories for Mr. Morgan; the river landmarks up and down from Barmah and the Moira Lakes, the old burial ground at Maloga "obliterated by the ploughs of more recent owners and fortune hunters," the original aspect of Cummeragunga, once dense with black and grey box, yellow jack, Murray pine and red gum, but thoroughly cleared for many years now.

Settlement at Cummeragunga began with an incident which left sore feelings. The part called Ulunja had to be abandoned for community settlement, as being too far from the river water. But it was too good to leave idle.

Independence

It was therefore divided between the ablest aboriginal men to clear and work for themselves by way, it seems, of setting them up as small independent farmers. These blockers worked hard at clearing, ploughing and sowing, and went out shearing and harvesting when they could. Many got their first crop.

Then arose a difficulty which was to make difficulties for small farming in other countries as well as Australia. The blockers had no horses or implements and the station, it was said, had only enough for itself.

The Aborigines' Protection Board did not hesitate. Ignoring the labors and hopes of the blockers, it repossessed Ulunja, now beginning to blossom like the rose, into the general Cummeragunga holding. For more than 30 years now Ulunja has been in private, white hands.

But for a couple of decades or so Cummeragunga was to be a prosperous collective farm. Of its large native population, the majority of the men worked outside, coming home on Saturdays for family [illegible] for Station amenities, which were considerable.

There was medical attention for all with a weekly doctor from Echuca and interim attention from the colored schoolmaster, who operated the dispensary.

There were two stores, one selling clothes and groceries, the other issuing free rations. The Station's flocks and herds furnished plenty of meat and milk.

Sport

Cummeragunga turned out champion cricket and football teams, famous runners and, later on, hardy soldiers. It put on concerts, dances, pageants, a Christmas Sports Carnival with bicycle races.

Increasing prosperity brought new teams of horses, new ploughs, disc cultivators, drills, combines. While wheat was the major product, there was also a surplus of cattle and sheep to sell.

But in 1910 there came new management, in 1913 the beginning of a three-year drought, in 1914 war, and Cummeragunga was in decline.

Few people received rations, more had to work outside, friction arose between manager and natives, rules and regulations were tightened up, young and old were summoned to court, gaol or fine was usually followed by a ticket of expulsion and altogether it looked as if things were working to put an end to the Cummeragunga experiment.

After 1910, "there was unrest on Cummeragunga for many years. The aborigines had had a taste of civilisation. . . . They knew too that not far away was something that people called democracy . . ."

Then came 1939 and the walk-out. Today Cummeragunga has some 30 aborigines where once it had many hundreds.

But Mr. Morgan's hope is not, ultimately, in segregation but in assimilation. For assimilation, he points out, "began from the entry of white men to our shores."