

Canberra Times 4 June 1954

CANBERRA MAY HAVE BEEN NAMED AFTER TREE

The possibility that Canberra was named after a native tree not unlike the English cranberry was suggested by Mr. A. Percival, former Commonwealth Surveyor-General, in an address to the Canberra and District Historical Society last night.

The meaning of "Canberra" is unknown, but has generally been regarded as a derivative of an aboriginal word, or from the Kamberra tribe or blacks whom one authority described as roaming the Limestone Plains in 1850. Mr. Percival said Canberra's title had always puzzled him. He had not found any native record of it.

In the original notes of the first surveyor, Robert Hoddle, who started the first detailed survey of the surrounding district in 1832, there was reference to the Limestone Plains, Mr. Percival said. Working towards Queanbeyan, Hoddle had also spoken of the area to the north as the "Cranberry Plains" probably because of a small tree with red berries similar to the English cranberry.

"I have seen the trees on the slopes of Mt. Ainslie," Mr. Percival said.

Mr. Percival, who was in the original Commonwealth survey in the A.C.T., said he located some of Hoddle's boundary marks made about 80 years ago. In one instance he had to cut deeply into a tree to find it. The tree had overgrown the mark.

ARDUOUS SURVEYS

Mr. Percival illustrated his talk with slides which indicated the conditions under which survey crews had to work. They worked in intense heat and cold, with rabbits so thick they could be knocked over with sticks, and ibises so numerous that when they flew they formed a cloud that blotted out the sun.

Every contour line at five feet intervals for the city area was "run" on the ground, and the work was carried out with infinite accuracy. - A nine-mile traverse from the bench mark on Queanbeyan station closed to within a quarter of an inch. This bench mark, 1,905.05 feet above sea-level and just opposite the station bur -was the basic point for the Canberra survey.

Working long hours, often with 3,000 observations a day and computation and plotting at night; the contour plan for the city area was finished in five months.

I

Mr. Percival gave many amusing instances of life in the bush with a surveying party. In one case a bushman with an artistic flair carved the features of a number of neighbours in large tree stumps near his bark hut. In some instances relations became strained. So skilled were his charcoal sketches that the late W. B. Griffin, the originator of the Canberra plan, purchased all of them on a visit to the Brindabella range.

Another farmer offered as dowry 20 cattle and £500 to the man who married his charming though husky daughter. Then there were two elderly women whose shooting prowess enabled them to cut out the brand of a small tin in four shots from 50 yards.

One night he saw two of his men racing through a wheat field after a station dance. It transpired they could dance better than the rest of the men, and attracted the girls, including the belle of the district. The objections of the remaining men were violent.

Mrs. Percival shared most of the rigours of survey camp life with her husband, one particularly nerve-racking period being during a flood when water lapped the mattress of the bed on which she lay with a sick child, Mr. "Percival's unique photographic record of early Canberra awed by many of the audience, whose families have been resident in the A.C.T. for generations.