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National Inquiry into the separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait
Islander children.

Submission by Mervyn Pattemore

INTRODUCTION: My name is Mervyn Pattemore. I am a retired missionary having served with the Aborigines Inland Mission for 45 yrs., briefly in N.S.W. and Qld, then in the N.T. for 44yrs plus. I served in the N.T. at Phillip Ck, Newcastle Waters, Delissaville, Borroloola and for 18 yrs as superintendent of the Retta Dixon Children's Home from 1st July 1962 till the closure of the home in 1980. I then served till retirement as the Northern Area Superintendent for the A.I.M., travelling to Borroloola in the Gulf, Camooweal and Dajarra in Qld, Alice Springs in the South, V.R.D. in the West and station itineration East and West of the Highway.

CHANGE: There have been many changes in that time both in **Government Policy** and in the **attitude** of the Aboriginal people generally.

e.g. At one time, to be called an Aboriginal, by many would not be accepted and could invite a fight, whereas today it is the "in" word.

Also at one time, a Missionary was generally regarded by the Aborigines in the highest esteem. I recall the words of Nat, Warramunga tribal leader and head man at Phillip Creek saying on one of my pastoral visits, "Mr Pattemore, we were glad when the missionaries came." Sadly, especially among urban Aborigines, it would seem that, to use a Biblical phrase, 'there arose a Pharaoh who knew not Joseph' so that the word Missionary has become a 'dirty' word.

It is apparent that many today who are most-vocal, have not the least conception of the conditions that prevailed in those early years among primitive Aboriginal people.

The picture on the wall of the girls' dormitory at the original R.D.H. could be described as 5 star accommodation compared to the environment from which some of the children had come. Sleeping accommodation was a wind break of brush, grass, pieces of iron or tin, to shelter from the prevailing winds and piercing cold. *Fires & blanket days*

The only children that our mission accommodated who came from what has been termed 'the stolen generation' would have lived or died under these harsh conditions.

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PHILLIP CREEK: In reference to those children, 16 in number, were placed in R.D.H. by the Native Affairs Branch. Anticipating the move, Miss Shankleton, the then superintendent of R.D.H., went to Phillip Creek for a period of approximately 2 weeks, and with another Missionary, acquainted the parents of the children with the projected move. I understand that all parents consented to the removal of the children.

No doubt there was pain and trauma at the actual parting but the missionaries did their best to soften the ordeal. The parents knew where the children were going to and for what purpose.

Of those 16 children who came to R.D.H., 5 have since deceased, 3 are resident in Tennant Creek, 5 reside in the Darwin area, 1 in Victoria, 1 in W.A. and one in Sydney. Many have held good responsible jobs.

During my service at Phillip Creek, over 1 year, I did not hear a complaint or a murmur of discontent from parents, though I taught daily in the school, and visited parents in the camp, twice each week.

RETTA DIXON HOME: Much adverse criticism has been levelled at the Home, particularly in more recent years. Some of this criticism has a smattering of truth, but much of it I consider to be unfair, unjustified and untrue. This irks me somewhat, especially as I know of the commitment and self sacrifice of most of the staff who sought only the benefit of the children in their care.

Miss Shankleton was held in the highest esteem by ex-residents, so much so that on her retirement, she was presented by them, with an expensive lounge chair. As a last gesture of love and appreciation, upon her death in Sydney, ex-residents were responsible for flying her body back to Darwin for burial.

KEEPING CHILDREN OUT: I served as superintendent at R.D.H. for a period of 18 yrs from 1962-1980. During that time one of my greatest responsibilities was to keep children out of the Home. There were so many calls and requests to "put my kids in the Home", that we could have filled the Home twice over, were all requests accepted.

COTTAGE SYSTEM: At that time the "cottage system" was regarded as the ultimate in Child Care procedure, hence a new Home was established on these lines.

Eight cottages, each designed to accommodate 12 children with a married couple and a single worker to care for the children.

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We did not always attain to that level of staffing, and often accommodated up to 15 in a cottage if the demand was justified.

OBJECTIVES OF THE R.D.H: The following objectives were set out in a hand book prepared for cottage parents.

a) To provide a home for children in need of love, care and training, providing for boys and girls of any age up to 18yrs. To approximate a normal home life as far as possible for the children in a family unit.

b) To establish each child in the normal way of Christian living, so that each child will be equipped to take his or her place as an active and useful member of the community.

c) Our motive stems first of all from the compassionate, constraining love of Christ, His love outpoured which works for love's sake alone.

d) Our deep desire and constant prayer is that every child will come to accept Jesus Christ, but even if he or she does not, we still care for them for His sake.

With these objectives in mind, the Mission Headquarters were at great pains to accept as cottage parents, only those who in the estimation of the council members, could meet these goals.

Sadly, some mistakes were made, and some criticisms of the Home in this area were justified. To quote Robbie Burns, "the best laid plans of mice and men, shall oft a gang a glee". For this we humbly apologise.

STAFFING: Staffing presented problems, but every effort was made for adequate care and supervision of the cottage family. European staff and Aboriginal staff served on an equal basis. Aboriginal staff comprised of 2 married couples and at least 12 single workers. Some of these staff workers were ex R.D.H. children themselves.

A living allowance was made available to staff, bearing in mind that they had accommodation and food provided - the same fare as provided for the children.

CHILDREN ACCEPTED FOR ACCOMMODATION:

1) Those who had been committed to the Director of Child Welfare by a Children's Court (state children)

e.g. family--- children could have died

2) Those who had been placed by parents or parent for various reasons

3) Children deemed to be in need of care

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Those children placed by Govt. Department were financed accordingly.

Those children accepted by the Superintendent of the home were a mission responsibility.

Requests were sometimes made by ex residents of the Home to accommodate their children thus resulting in a 2nd generation of "Home" children.

Most R.D.H. children found little difficulty in obtaining employment. Particularly for the boys, station owners appreciated their honesty and adaptability and were keen to employ them.

One young "ringer" spoke to me in appreciation of his care and upbringing at R.D.H., "One thing you did for us at R.D.H., you taught us how to work!"

While many have voiced appreciation of their care while in the Home, there is a vocal adverse minority which is heard. Too many people today, via the media, only hear the negatives. I would like today, to present something of the positive, however inadequate that presentation may be.

To illustrate and conclude, I submit the following 2 items which I consider to be a fair comment regarding the issues involved.

1) A letter written to the N.T. News by an ex-resident and my reply. In keeping with the policy of the inquiry, his real name is not disclosed.

read: "Here is my side of the story." by 'Jack'.

read: My answer- (substitute 'Jack')

2) The final are excerpts from an article, again presented by the N.T. News dated 9/5/1970 which, in the light of, and because of, added adverse and misleading criticism that had been printed, I challenged the Editor to rerun. This evidently was not acceptable to him.

read article: "There's no place like home.....but some places go close."

submitted by
Mervyn V. Pattemore

ex superintendent R.D.H.