GROWING UP IN QUEENSLAND

Bowman Johnson talks to Andrew Markus

Andrew Markus was in Brisbane to gather material for *Australians 1938* in the series *Australians: A historical library* (Fairfax, Syme & Weldon, 1987), when he talked to Bowman Johnson at the Born Free Club in December 1983. A copy of the transcript of the conversation is deposited with the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies.

In 1906 Cherbourg, part of the original large Barambah holding 250 kilometres north-west of Brisbane, was reserved for an Aboriginal settlement. William Porteus Semple was superintendent from 1924 until the early 1950s. 'Bjelke' refers to Sir Joh Bjelke-Petersen, former National Party Premier of Queensland. Cargoon Station is about 140 kilometres west of Charters Towers.

I was born on Cherbourg on the first of January 1924. It was called Barambah then. I was born in the Aboriginal hospital, the one they had before they built the new one. One of my parents came from nearby and the other one from Clermont, Blackall, in the central district of Queensland, from the best part of Queensland. People on my side, they were all rounded up. My father told me they brought him down in chains. They just ran them up, they took my father into Cherbourg on a chain. He must have done something. I can't give you the full impact or anything, because it's too hard to understand. My parents never talked much about the old days. The old people don't think there is anything left to talk about the old days. They shot them down. It must have been hard, because they couldn't even understand, what was what, who's who, just walking into a place, taking over from them and they don't even understand what you are trying to do, and you don't understand what they are up to, it must be terrible, it must be awful. We wouldn't know how them old Aborigines felt. They wouldn't know what they shot them in the first place for. They even poisoned the water hole, poison the flour. We don't understand them things, why they do it.

There wasn't many houses then on the mission, a few houses for the white officials, and for the school teachers. When I came along my parents were living in a house, the second house from the end, at a place called Broadway. The house had a veranda on it, a dining room and a kitchen. Veranda onto the kitchen. Used to be a lot of people living in the place, a lot of people from my mother's and father's places. Some people had huts and things like that. I seen a lot of people live in the huts, tin huts and like that. There were dormitories for the boys and girls. That's mostly for children who didn't have parents, some wayward children.

There was a lot of people there, it was getting onto the thousand mark when I was running around. They had jobs and my father used to do a lot of ploughing around the place, and before that he was a carpenter. He built the place we lived in; he was on the carpenter gang that built that place. My father did a lot of ploughing on the reserve and a lot right around the district, for different people. They grew peanuts and potatoes and some lucerne,

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all of them kinds of crops around that district.

People lived in different parts of the reserve. The old people mixed pretty well. They did not teach the young boys in my day. They just mostly talked in language when I was young. We just grew up and learnt from them, that's all. We learnt the way we learn English, the same way; just listening to them and watching them they had some things they went through. They didn't teach us their language, only bits here and bits there. They didn't teach us because the white race took over, that's what really happened, that's what all the things about today, like Bjelke and them say we got no claim on this land now but the point is they took the land off us in the first place. The old people they just gave things up, didn't bother to hang on to their tradition once they got sent to the Cherbourg Aboriginal settlement. But they used to have a lot of corroborees, pretty well every week, and we used to go and see them. The superintendent didn't try to stop them. The parents would go to the corroboree. They used to have corroborees pretty well every week, different tribes. Some corroborees they had they didn't allow us to go and see. That was from the old tribal people. They would say to keep away. It was taboo or whatever they called it. Then the young people used to go and play leaper [leapfrog?], what you call the game leaper, go and play that till the corroboree finished and then go home with the parents.

The old people gave us a little bit of lesson, education. That's it. We had no way of getting in correspondence with each other whatsoever. You only have to take my grandmother and my grandfather, they couldn't talk one word of English. I didn't have anything to do with them, just what my parents told me. The old people couldn't talk to anybody but to themselves, and they didn't all talk the one dialect. They couldn't talk to the superintendent and all that. He couldn't understand what they were talking about and they couldn't understand what he was talking about. They didn't explain things that was wrong and all that. And just imagine before that when they used to roam the country free, how could they understand what the white man wanted, and the white man understand what they wanted. There was no way they understood each other.

Cherbourg or Barambah as it was called then, that's mostly made up from half-caste people. There were very few full-blooded people there. Black people that had half-caste children, they used to round them up, that's where most of the reserves started from. There weren't too many full-blooded when I was going to school, and I think there is less now. They also took kids away from their parents. I wouldn't know why, I just know that it was done. There was a lot we didn't know. Put them in homes down here in Brisbane. Because they were fair children, they took them away from their parents. Mostly fair children. They were taken away when they were babies, small. A lot of them don't even know their parents. They used to put them in homes, reserves and all that. They used to have a lot of them children at Purga, outside Ipswich, that was a home for Aboriginal Children run by the Salvation Army. They also took them when they were older. They sent a lot of people to Palm Island settlement when they got older. Perhaps they couldn't control them or thought they couldn't control them.

When we were kids there we did a lot of swimming in the reserve, go down to the gully to do swimming. There was plenty of water there when I was young; even after school we would run down to the gully and have a dip, have a swim around. Then mostly the weekend in the pond. We always been go out in the bush when we were young, travelling around. But it was totally, completely different to what the old fully-blooded Aboriginal went through.

They used to give us rations. Yes, we used to get rations. Rations were alright, I never

went short of food. We had clothes to go to school every year before it starts school, they used to give us clothes. They look after us. They were alright. I wouldn't exactly say that the education was the one that Aborigines wanted, really wanted, but they just wiped it all to make out they didn't understand. They still try to make out that we do not understand what we really want.

I was going on six when I went to school and I went for eight years. Before I turned fourteen years of age we didn't have no work, we had school to attend to. We went five days a week, from nine in the morning. Lunch at twelve, go back in at one and out at three. Something like that. They had three teachers and they had a couple of teachers' aides, the aides were Aboriginal people. They treated us alright. I got treated alright by my teachers. It was just like any other school that you went to, you just learnt in them days, no matter if you went to white school or not. You still had slate and pencil, you didn't have books then, you could rub anything out that was wrong, and start all over again with the slate and pencil. We only went up to fourth grade. You went for eight years and it only took you to fourth grade.

They taught us to read and write. To go to Sunday School on the Sunday. We had different churches there. The ministers and the priests and all of them came from Murgon to teach you. We used to hold services then like they hold services here, no different. You go if you want to go. Most people used to go in those days.

The superintendent of the reserve, Semple, he was alright to me. If he done something wrong to someone else its not my place to say so. He had a very big interest in Aboriginal people, old Semple, I'd say that about him. Most of the people running the reserve, they had an interest in Aborigines because that was their job, but because you were black they thought you wasn't as good as what they were; they treated you as like you don't come up to their expectations, just something down there and that's it. You don't become aware of it until you start to get up a bit in age. If you couldn't talk for yourself you were just treated like, you can say, an animal as far as I was concerned. You seen it happen often enough. I couldn't describe that, such an incident, because the feelings totally different to what you going to describe it. I haven't the faintest idea why they used to do those things, I haven't the faintest idea why they do them today.

I used to go off the reserve with my parents when they used to go around to the different farms and all that, working. When my mother and father used to travel around we used to go around in a buggy; it was my father's buggy, and horses. I would be out there with him for a few weeks or a month or two. We used to go around from places to places, he used to work on the farms. You were lucky to get work in those days, and a few bob is all you'd get.

As we grew up, well, just before I left the settlement, we had to get permits just to walk into Murgon, that was three and a half mile away. And if you left the reserve in them days, they used to give people exemption papers, but that paper wasn't much good 'cause they could give it to you at any time and they could take it back from you any time. The exemption was supposed to mean that you were entitled to the same thing as everybody else, all white people. They could take it back off you any time they wanted to. It wasn't worth the thing it was written on.

You wasn't free to do what you wanted to do. You had to get a permit to go to Murgon, well some people they bothered about, but some people didn't. They didn't bother about when I left the mission. I left the mission a few times and they never bothered me because I always went out to work at wool or to find a job and all that. If you wanted to go to Brisbane

you mightn't ask 'em, you just buzz off, then they'd get white police after you then, but if they didn't care about you they wouldn't bother to get anyone looking you up. They had black and white police on Cherbourg when I was young. There was a few, half a dozen, six or seven. They had gaols. I was in and out of there, I suppose for disobedience, trying to overstep the rules. The policeman or the superintendent, they'd say lock him up and they have to turn around and lock you up. They just put me in there, they never bashed me up.

I was fourteen when I finished school. I then went to work on a station, outside of Charters Towers. The employers used to write into the settlement for workers. They would write letters from all over the place. The overseer on the mission, he would find out who's leaving school and what you want to do, and they send you out to these jobs what they got there. You tell him, I'll take that job. They used to send you out, I forget what they call them, but they used to give you papers and you used to take them out to the people that sent in for you. They used to send out a paper which you give to your boss where you're going to work. It was a position. You go out there, you had to stay there what was stipulated, they made you stay there for that time, for six or twelve months. If you got sick of the place you couldn't leave. If you tried, they would send you to Palm Island. That was a penal settlement.

At first I worked on a cattle station. Done all cattle work. Ride bucking horses, mustered up cattle, go out mustering nearly all the time, we were out mostly a week, sometimes two weeks. You mustered up all the cattle, bring them back in, dip them all and take them back from where you got them from. I enjoyed it. It seemed alright to me.

I worked for these big money people, their name was Manning, they owned a lot of property. They owned Cargoon station, they had race horses and everything. They used to go away and buy prime bulls and that, from the exhibition show here in Sydney [Brisbane?], they were rich people I worked for. They were pretty good to me. They use to take me into Charters Towers, the boss and that. There were four of us there at the time, I was the youngest. We lived in a little room for stockmen. I lived in there, and we had a room to ourselves, and some others had two in one room. Depends what size the room was and all that. All the stockmen were living together. But when I first went out to the station with this joker, I can't remember his name, there was a chap there that was born there, around there, he used to sit in the kitchen. They used to serve him meals in the kitchen, with all the white stockmen, which they didn't do to me and my mate who went there. We sat out in the veranda, in the shelter there. They didn't serve us in the kitchen when they served all the others, there was something like this out on the veranda, we had a table. We had proper tucker there. Except the trouble they had all our plates and mugs and things marked. They did that because we were black, separate plates and things for blacks.

I can't remember what I got paid. It was about 70 cents a week. Some of it went to the bank and the Aboriginal Affairs Department. Say you got paid 60 cents, well they would take something like 20 cents out of that. That's all they used to take out of mine. Something to that effect. You didn't know how much you had in the bank, but you had a fair idea. I got most of my money back when I grew up. I got what I thought I had. I don't know why they took it out, but I suppose they took it because they had to pay for yourself to live on the reserve.

Then when I was about fifteen, still in my teens, getting up in the late teens, I came back to Barambah, Cherbourg. I didn't like being way up there, I wanted to go home to my people. I went to rural school then. That's where they taught me carpentry and all that. This school was on Cherbourg. I never went to the one in Murgon. See, they used to send them

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in to Murgon, but there was no need when they built their own. The teachers were all white. I've been in and out there for years, I just go off to work and then come back and get that job again.

I went out to Springsure too, I forget what's there now. That's when I was blacktracking there, and that's when they fed me on the tank stand, gave me my meal under a tank stand. I worked there with the police. You would go out with the policeman, he goes to the cattle station and you go with him, to check up horses and cattle station and what's happening to them and all that. Not like today you just phone them up. Then in 1947 I went to Melbourne. I was down there then and came back in 1948. Tracking just seemed to come naturally to black people. They just followed tracks and then see what makes them tracks and see if a little fresh or cold, something like that. No one teach you tracking, just pick it up yourself. When I was young, I have been out hunting with the old people. We used to go out mostly in the night-time, go out for porcupines; mostly had dogs then time, the dogs would get the porcupines. Might'en be much good at it, but I've been working with police force and tracker boy. The police treat me properly, the only thing I had against them was giving me meals on the tank stand. I didn't think that was right. I'd sooner have meals on the cell veranda, but that was it, you couldn't tell them in those days what was what. You can't tell them today what's what, they don't want to listen to you. I don't see where we have advanced at all, only in education, not in being recognised as a human being in Australia, the only thing we have advanced was a bit of education. That's all I can see the difference.

Cherbourg, Queensland, 1949; the babies in class in the sun.
Photo: Dixon collection, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies.