

Norseman Mission

Norseman Mission is in Ngadju country which covers about 10,258 square kilometres, according to the Goldfields Land and Sea Council, and extends from Israelite Bay to Balladonia and Norseman. Some of the camping areas of the Ngadju / Marlba people are in the vicinity of Norseman town.

In 1935, Doug Nicholls, Aboriginal footballer and Church of Christ leader of his people in Victoria came to Perth by train with the Victorian State Football team and was so concerned for the Aboriginal people he saw across the Nullabor that he asked the Churches of Christ to do something to help them.

1936 to 1942

In 1936, two Churches of Christ women missionaries came to Norseman, though the exact dates and details of how they ended up there together are unknown. Miss M D Eadie from New Zealand had been working with AIM amongst Aboriginal people in NSW, and Miss Ethel Bentley came from Victoria. They came to commence an independent work amongst the Aboriginal people without any financial support from any organisation.

By this time, a number of the Ngadju people lived a cultural, semi permanent lifestyle at the Old Reserve at Norseman, while they continued to do seasonal work for the pastoralists. They were conversant in English, while retaining their own language, Ngadjumaya. Of benefit to their need for water was the extending of the Goldfields Pipeline from Kalgoorlie to Norseman in 1936.

Miss Eadie and Miss Bentley finally had to enlist the help of their Member of Parliament to get WA Government approval to commence this independent work at Norseman, and they were granted permission to travel between Coolgardie, Norseman and Balladonia for this purpose. After living in Norseman town for a time, they also gained permission to live at the Norseman Reserve three and half kilometres out of town, and they shared a tent together for several years. They had no transport until two bikes were purchased as a gift for them in 1939.

These two ladies lived amongst the Aboriginal families at the Reserve helping them where they could with medical needs and in other practical ways including an advocacy role, given the outworking of the WA Government Administration Act of 1936, and giving school lessons to the children and older ones living at the Reserve. They also taught the Bible to the people and by 1939 there was an active 'bough shelter' church of more than 20 people at the Reserve. On at least one occasion, when more than half of the Aboriginal people living at the Reserve went to the stations out as far as Balladonia shearing, Miss Eadie was given permission by the WA Government, and welcomed by the pastoralists to travel with them, continuing school lessons for the children. Miss Bentley remained at Norseman and continued school lessons, medical and other help for those who remained at the Reserve.

With the close proximity to the Reserve of the growing number of gold mines, the Reserve was moved to 7 kilometres out of town. In 1940 the two ladies purchased a small galvanised, unlined building which was transported to the Reserve. It was used mainly as a school room / church meeting room, with a curtain partitioning a small area as living quarters for themselves.

1942 to 1945

In 1942 Churches of Christ Federal Aborigines Mission Board Inc. formally commenced a ministry amongst Aboriginal people across Australia. The two independent single missionaries who had been working at the Norseman Reserve for more than five years needed to leave for personal reasons, and they offered the responsibility for the work to COCFAMBI.

Two single young lady COCFAMBI missionaries were appointed to Norseman to continue the work at the Reserve. The first one who was a teacher from Kalgoorlie arrived in January 1943 and the second one came from Sydney in April 1943. By this time the school at the Reserve had been established for more than 5 years and operated out of the small building purchased in 1940 and transported to the Reserve. A small area partitioned with curtains served as living quarters for the two missionaries.

Caring for children

During 1943, these two missionaries commenced caring for a small number of children, mostly at the request of their parents so that they could attend the Reserve school. One child whose parents worked a distance away, came to stay and then a second child whose parents had died a year before asked if he could stay. Because there was no accommodation for these children, a small 2 roomed office was purchased from Norseman for this purpose and sited next to the school room at the Reserve.

Then the parents of a third child who was older asked if she could stay while they worked on a station 200 miles away, and a fourth child was brought by his mother whose desire was for him to continue his schooling at the Reserve. Around 1943, a pipeline was laid by volunteers from the Goldfields pipeline to the home at the Reserve. In 1944 a larger building was established for the care of a growing number of children and by the end of 1945 there were 12 children being cared for.

1945 to 1984

The move to the Mission property 16 kilometres north of Norseman town

With increasing numbers of children, it seemed appropriate that a larger tract of land should be made available. On 20th July, 1945, after one year of negotiations by COCFAMBI, 19475 acres 16 kilometres north of Norseman on the main road, were approved by the Department of Lands and Surveys, with 100 acres as a Reserve and the rest a pastoral lease.

The transfer of the two buildings from the Reserve out to the Mission site commenced immediately and the missionaries and children moved out to the Mission property. With the assistance of work parties from the Churches of Christ churches, further buildings were built as the number of children increased, and basic infrastructure was established. They faced the challenge of obtaining building material during and after World War 11.

Children from Cundeelee came to stay at Norseman Mission for schooling in these early years, some because of a severe drought at Cundeelee resulting in a lack of water. This continued for those doing High School until the Mission closed. From 1967 when the first teenager came to Norseman Mission from Warburton Ranges until the Mission closed, teenagers from the Northern Goldfields and Western Desert communities were sent by their parents to Norseman Mission for High Schooling in the town. Younger children from Esperance to north of Kalgoorlie were also cared for at Norseman.

Quite a number of children who came to live at the Mission were Wards of the State and some of them had serious medical problems. Some came at the request of parents and many were funded by Commonwealth Education to attend High School at Norseman. In later years, some of the parents of the children had been cared for at Norseman Mission when they were young.

In the 1970's

To accommodate the change to the Cottage style of caring for the children, new childcare homes were established and two of the original childcare homes replaced. The main dining room closed in 1975.

In the early 1970's, a childcare home next to the old Convent in the town was purchased.

In 1974, a large transportable childcare was established just inside the Mission gate.

In 1975, a block of bedroom units were established near the old church and the tennis court and used to care for special needs children

In 1976, the original Bethany home was replaced with a large transportable childcare home.

In 1977, a new office and home for the Superintendent was built on site by voluntary helpers and the missionaries. This building was next to the old Superintendent's home which was demolished.

In 1977, the original "school and Boys' and Girls' home" which had been extended and renovated for the large Boys Home was demolished and replaced with a large childcare home.

In 1978, a smaller home for children operated in the town near the hospital for a short period of time

The Care of the Children

Up until the early 1970's, children were cared for in the big Homes at the Mission with a missionary couple and one or two single lady missionaries in each home, all of whom worked fulltime from early morning until things were finished at night. A smaller home named Bethany cared for some of the little children for a period of time. Boys and girls lived in separate homes but, apart from some of the small children, they had all their meals together in the main dining room. They travelled on the Mission school bus together and played together during the day. The missionaries all lived away from their extended family and most had young children of their own so they helped and watched out for each other's families of children. This formed a close knit community where the all children in care were free to spend time with each other and

they formed close bonds that is very evident in their adult lives, including some of the children of the missionaries.

Many of the missionaries were under 30 years old when they first came to the Mission from all parts of Australia. The Churches of Christ Carnarvon Mission, Roelands Village and Fairhaven and Bamburra Hostels cared for the children and operated in a similar way. The ladies cared for the children, including their own, and the home. The men usually stayed at home until the children went to school, and then returned home when the children came home from school. The men were responsible for the supply of power and power plant, the building and maintenance of the homes and the maintaining of the vehicles, school bus driving, care of the chooks and pigs and many other things needed to maintain the community.

The care of the children as individuals was the focus of the missionary houseparents and included attention to their daily care and wellbeing, involvement in their schooling, opportunities for times of fun and relaxing together and all the other things that parents do. The practical caring for a large family of up to 20 children including their own, like washing, ironing and mending of their clothes and cleaning, kept the missionaries busy 7 days a week. Routines in each of the homes revolved around the hours that the power plant provided electricity for the Mission. The care of their homes were the responsibility of the houseparents.

Dining room

The children had all of their meals in the dining room every day. Initially a smaller dining room was built and it was renovated into a home for children when the main dining room was opened in 1955. Those who were old enough, both boys and girls, were rostered to help in the kitchen and diningroom, setting the tables and helping with preparation of the meals, and doing the dishes afterwards. School lunches were also made in the Diningroom. The single missionaries had their meals in the diningroom, sharing a table with some of the children. Specific missionaries were given the task of cooking for the diningroom for up to 100 children and adults. The married childcare houseparents prepared their meals in the home for themselves and their own children. The food for everyone came from the Food Store at the Mission and was ordered from WA Government Stores.

Change to Cottage Homes.

In 1975 all of the homes at the Mission had been changed to the Cottage style of caring for the children and the main diningroom was closed. There were a smaller number of children, usually about 8 to 10 including families of children, both boys and girls. The houseparents were responsible for the total care of each child and teenager and most of the married houseparents had young children of their own. A small number of single missionaries cared for children. There were six homes caring for between 8 and 12 children including a hostel in the town as well as several children cared for in two small homes.

Meals were prepared in the home and mealtimes shared together around one big table as well as barbecues outside in the winter months. As in any home with a large number of children, the children were asked to look after their bedrooms and help with some of the tasks around the home according to their ages, usually with a rotating roster eg. hanging out some of the washing, setting the table and doing the dishes after a meal and they loved to be anywhere where there was food being prepared! Visits to the doctor, supervision of reading for the younger school aged children and homework as well as involvement with the school concerning their children were the responsibility of the houseparents, as was the general health and well being of everyone in their home.

Sport, fun times and holidays

Most of the children excelled at sport and were encouraged to be involved in the town sports teams and carnivals. Around 1960 one of the young single lady missionary introduced women's basketball (netball) to Norseman and she and other missionaries played in teams with the girls from Norseman Mission. The missionaries made the uniforms. This continued for many years.

The boys enjoyed participation in the football teams in Norseman and when Little Athletics started in Norseman on Friday nights in the 1970's, most of the children were involved, as were most of the missionaries.

The swimming pool in Norseman opened in 1957/8 though initially the aboriginal people were not allowed to use the pool. When this was lifted, the children regularly visited the pool during the long hot summer months. The diningroom was often used for film nights and everyone looked forward to these especially before there was TV – and even then there was only black and white ABC for most of the time. Later there were also regular film nights at the church in town on Saturday nights when the children were able to catch up with family. Games nights, socials and dress up nights were organised in the Mission diningroom, with the children and the missionaries having a lot of fun together.

On the weekends, the routine relaxed for everyone, and the children were free to spend time with others in their homes at the Mission. Week about, either the boys or the girls were able to walk in the bush on Saturdays, taking their lunch with them if they wanted to. This gave them opportunity to experience something of their culture and they often came home with the day's catch to be cooked. Tongues of shoes were made into gings. Picnics in the bush and on the salt lake as well as trips to the camping areas where the old people camped were enjoyed, often with the children from another home and sometimes with large group travelling in the Mission bus to Esperance, Kalgoorlie or Coolgardie.

As often as it was possible, or approved by the WA Government, children went to family for the school holidays. Those who came at the request of parents for High Schooling returned home every holiday. In the early years at Christmas, the children who stayed at the Mission during holidays went to Esperance, camping out and spending their days at the beach and fishing. In the early 1960's COCFAMBI purchased a holiday home close to the centre of Mandurah, and the children went on the Mission bus for 4 weeks of swimming, outings, visits to places of interest and interaction with the children from Carnarvon Mission who were holidaying in Perth. The short school holidays often saw the children and houseparents with the Mission bus loaded with food and bedding camping in the bush for several days. Later, when there were smaller numbers of children, holidays were enjoyed in another town or place of interest.

All of the houseparents cared for their children for 24 hours every day, apart from one weekday each week when they had time off from when the children went to school on the school bus in the morning until they returned home on the bus in the afternoons. School holidays sometimes gave them more time to catch up on things left undone. Each year missionaries took the 4 weeks of holidays that they were entitled to, when some of them who came from the Eastern States returned home, usually by car, to visit family. On occasions, missionaries whose family lived in the Eastern States were able to gain permission to take the children in their home to visit their families and experience life in a different state.

Food

A central Food Store operated, with non perishable food ordered from Government Stores and a weekly Food Order from each home was filled, ensuring that good meals were provided for everyone, supplemented with fresh tomatoes and vegetables from the Mission when they were available, and eggs.. Poultry and sheep provided fresh meat for the Mission family. Good use was made of the big bags of apples, pears and oranges which were donated regularly and came freight free on the train. When there was an over supply of fresh vegetables or fruit, they were frozen for later use.

Clothing

From the very early years, a personal Clothing Parcel every year was provided for every child in the five residential childcare centres in WA (up to 300 children at any one time) including Norseman Mission, from one of the Churches of Christ Ladies groups around Australia. This variety of clothing gave each child the opportunity to be an individual, knowing that they were given to them personally. The Church Ladies groups also supplied bed linen, blankets, bedspreads and towels for the children in care and tablecloths for the diningrooms and curtains for the Homes.

To avoid the clothing having names written on them, a system of coloured dots, a different colour for each child, indicated ownership of the clothes, and the dots could be cut off and used for another child if appropriate. This system was used at the other COCFAMBI childcare centres. The lady missionaries got together one day a month with their sewing machines to tackle the pile of mending together

A central Clothing Store with new and secondhand clothing was available to the houseparents to ensure that all of the children were well dressed in appropriate clothing. A Secondary Grant Clothing Allowance provided school uniforms, shoes and other things necessary for the students at High School in later years.

From the 1940's the Churches of Christ churches around Australia were practical and financially supportive of their childcare centres in WA and the children at Norseman Mission benefitted through their interest and involvement.

Schooling

The school for the children had been already established at the Reserve, and when the Mission was established, it was then transferred to the Mission property. As had been happening at the Reserve school, the missionaries continued to teach the children and later Government teachers were appointed to the Mission School. The Mission school was involved in the Sports Carnivals and won most of the trophies over the years. With regular schooling, the children achieved a good standard of schooling and many went on to employment and further education in later years. Sonny Graham and one other were chosen to be the first students to attend the School in town in 1952.

A newspaper article in 1952 reported that "Sonny Graham had an easy win to top the class in the half yearly English exam, scoring 39/45 and seven ahead of the next student." Sonny went on to complete a 4 year course at a Bible College in Melbourne from 1959-1962 and apart from 7 years, has spent his whole life in leadership in the Norseman/Esperance area, including being the Superintendent at Norseman Mission between 1972 to 1981. He then studied at the Notre Dame University and worked as a language teacher at the schools in Esperance from 1994 to 2008. Sonny is a recognised Elder of the Ngadju / Marlba people.

By 1955 all of the children at the Mission attended the school in town. Over the years the missionaries actively encouraged the teachers to visit the Mission, inviting them for meals and promoting good relationships with the school.

Every effort was made to find work or a training opportunity for the older young people at Norseman Mission who were leaving school. In 1954, the Wongutha Farm Training School just out of Esperance was opened for Aboriginal young men to receive training for farm work and other skills. Some of the boys from Norseman Mission who were leaving school, were able to gain a place at Wongutha. In 1965 when the COCFAMBI Fairhaven Hostel opened, the older girls from Norseman Mission were able to move to Esperance to complete their High Schooling, or for work opportunities while boarding at Fairhaven. In 1970, COCFAMBI Bampurra Hostel in Perth provided a further opportunity for older girls to do further training or education. Some of the young men stayed on at the Mission and worked in the town or stayed at the Mission when they finished their seasonal work. Some of the older girls stayed at the Mission and helped with the care of the children. The teenagers who had been sent to Norseman for school from the outback communities, returned to the communities/

Parents of the children in care

In the early years, some of the parents or grandparents of the children being cared for stayed for periods of time near the Mission. This provided the children with ongoing contact with families, language and culture as had been the case when the children were living at the Reserve and gave the missionaries opportunity to learn of the culture of the Aboriginal people and form friendships with them. Some of the families from Cundeelee also came to stay here to assure themselves that the children were being well cared for. Whoever stayed at the nearby camp were a welcomed part of the Mission and some of the men helped with the fencing of the property.

On many occasions, when the Mission school bus took the children into town for school, some of the parents and grandparents went back to the Mission on the bus to spend time with Sonny Graham and his wife who were missionaries there, as well as with the others who cared for the children. This was a special time for the pre school children at the Mission as they were able to spend time with their families. The adults had lunch with the missionaries and returned to town when the bus went to bring the children home from school.

Close contact with families living locally in particular remained a strong connection for all of the years of childcare at Norseman Mission. The town was small enough for the families to meet up with the children and missionaries regularly, and at least some of the people from the Reserve came out to church at the Mission. Parents and families were welcome to visit the children at the Mission at any time and when the Cottage Homes came into being, they were able to have meal with their children in the home..

With the approval of the WA Government Welfare authorities for the State Wards, the children were able to spend time with their families in town for the day, and the missionaries took them into town on a Saturday to visit with family. Parents visiting from out of town were welcomed at the Mission.

A weekly 15 minute Radio programme was prepared at Norseman Mission and broadcast over 6KG Kalgoorlie on Sunday mornings, specifically to keep in touch with the parents in outback places and the young people who had left the care of the Mission. This continued from the late 1950's until 1983.

Once a year, a Sunday School Anniversary weekend was held, and parents and families from near and far came to Norseman to spend time with their children.

Missionaries Visiting Parents with tribal Elders from Norseman

From the mid 1960's, a small number of tribal Elders from Norseman and the male missionaries who, with their wives, were caring for the High School young people from the outback communities, commenced visiting the parents and communities a couple of times a year. Roads were unsealed and appropriate

vehicles were not available to start with, but meaningful contact was maintained with the parents and families. These visits included someone from the COCFAMBI Fairhaven Hostel from when it opened in 1965, with a large number of teenaged girls from the outback communities at Fairhaven for High Schooling. Regular contact was maintained until 1987.

Medical

For most of the years there was a missionary who was a trained nurse who cared for the medical needs of the children – and staff where appropriate. Immunisations were kept up to date via a visiting team. Medical needs were attended to each day. The doctor (and Matron at the hospital when there was no resident doctor) were visited when it was needed and as there was no chemist in town, the Matron dispensed the medicine. Further medical care and a dentist were available in Kalgoorlie and Esperance had a hospital. Children needing specialist care usually needed to go to Perth which was a frightening experience for them.

The missionaries had to go to Esperance or Kalgoorlie to give birth to their children when there was no resident doctor, and should their children need hospital care away from Norseman there were times when they also had to go alone.

Church and Christian Centre

From when the Mission was first established, Sunday School for the children and church services were held and some of the adults came to the meetings.

In the early 1960's, as some of the Aboriginal families started to move into town from the Reserve, a small shopfront building on the edge of town known as the Christian Centre, was purchased along with a house next door, and a missionary couple moved into the house to be available for the people. Their role was to assist the adults and families with the every day concerns and problems, the filling in of various forms, access to medical help and many other issues they had to come to terms with in their new environment - without having access to any of the Government funded organisations that are available to them today. It was the husband of this couple who went with the Norsemen Elders to visit the families of children from outback communities with the Norseman Elders, visiting the parents of the children living at the Mission.

A block next to the 'old' Christian Centre was purchased and a new and much larger church, also known as the Christian Centre was built. It was at this time that the Church at the Mission closed, and the children in care and the missionaries came into town for Sunday School and Church and combined with the local Aboriginal Christians and others in the town. This was another regular opportunity for the children in care to meet up with family.

The closing of childcare at Norseman Mission

Following a change of WA Government policy, the childcare at the Mission was closed at the end of 1984 and most of the missionaries left or were transferred to other places.

1985 to 1987

One of the experienced childcare missionary couples who had been at Norseman for many years, stayed on to work with the local people in a transition to the property being used for Aboriginal families.

On the 25th June 1987, the Mission property and its management was transferred to the Earagul community by the Hon Ernie Bridge, Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, with the name Tjirntu Parapara on the official plaque.

On 27th November 2013, The Ngadju /Marlba Aboriginal people were granted Native Title to their land.

About 400 people belong to the Ngadju group at the time of this decision by the Federal Court. It is significant that the Lease on which Norseman Mission was built and which was transferred to the Earagul Community of Norseman in June 1987, forms part of the Ngadju Native Title land.