

Roper River Mission

1908 – 1988

Other Names: • Ngukurr

Details

Roper River Mission was established in 1908 by the Church Missionary Society at Mirlinbarrwarr. It included a school and dormitories for Aboriginal children aged 5 to 18 years. Between 1924 and 1933 some children were moved between Roper River and Groote Eylandt Missions. After severe floods in 1940 the Mission moved to Ngukurr. During World War II many children were evacuated to a temporary home in Mulgoa, New South Wales. The Government took over the mission in 1968 and in 1988 the Yugul Mangi Community Government Council was formed and the township became known as Ngukurr.

The Roper River Mission was the first of five Missions to be set up by the Church Missionary Society (CMS) in the Northern Territory. It was established in 1908 by the Church Missionary Association of Victoria (CMA) which was later to become the Victorian Branch of the CMS. Situated in Arnhem Land, 110 kilometres upstream from the mouth of the Roper River, the Mission covered an area of 320 square km with 16 km of river frontage. According to John Harris in *We wish we'd done more: Ninety years of CMS and Aboriginal issues in north Australia* this area was known to local Aboriginal people as Mirlinbarrwarr. The land was leased to the Mission by the Government of South Australia. The Commonwealth Government paid an annual subsidy of £250 to the Mission.

The Roper River Mission was intended to bring 'Christianity and civilisation' to the Aboriginal people of Arnhem Land. To this end it was to be an industrial and agricultural station as well as providing spiritual instruction and Western education. According to Harris, the CMS also intended that the Mission be a safe haven for Aboriginal people where they could be protected from massacre by white settlers.

Three Missionaries from Victoria and three Aboriginal Missionaries from Yaraba Mission in Queensland arrived at the Roper River site on 27 August 1908. By 1909 there were 200 people staying at the Mission.

Within a year of its establishment a makeshift school was being run at Roper River. A 1911 Mission report stated that 33 children were living at the Mission station separately from their parents and relatives. It noted that:

The most hopeful feature of the work is that among the young. The year closed with 17 Boys and 16 Girls in residence... We owe thanks to the resident Protector for the help rendered in influencing the parents to leave their children at the Station ...

By 1913 the number of children had nearly doubled to 63 including 26 girls and 27 boys between the ages of 5 and 18 years. The Mission was paid a Government subsidy for approximately 10 of the children who were deemed at the time to be 'half-caste'.

Dormitories had been established prior to January 1913. Miss Elsie Masson, after visiting Roper River in July 1913, was asked to present a report to the NT Administrator regarding the Mission. In outlining the work being done with the children at the Mission she stated that:

The object of the Mission is to educate these children, instruct them in practical and religious matters, eradicate their savage instincts, and make them capable of looking after themselves. ... All the children attend the school, which is divided into three classes. Here they learn to read, write, tell the time, do simple arithmetic, and learn by heart. ... Before breakfast, and for two hours in the late afternoon the boys work in the vegetable garden or at carpentry. The vegetable garden is irrigated with water pumped from the river. ... The boys look after the engine that pumps the water, of course, under supervision. Their carpentry consists of making plain benches and seats. The girls all learn housework, taking their turn at different kinds. They begin with sweeping the yard, bringing in wood, etc., and go on to laying the table and helping in the kitchen. ... They do all the washing and are learning to iron...

The Bishop of Carpentaria visited the Mission in 1914 and described some of the buildings including the dormitories:

The outward appearance of the Mission has enormously improved since my last visit three years ago. With the exception of the boys' dormitory, which is utterly worn out, and the ladies quarters, which are old and dilapidated, the buildings are good and substantial, and everything is tidy, well-arranged, and in good order, and kept clean... The girls' dormitory is a good useful building, and in the absence of a church or schoolroom, has to be used for all services. The windows, however, ought to be made much more secure than they are.

In 1918 the Reverend E.H. Warren, who was Superintendent of the Mission, wrote to the NT Administrator to say that police at Newcastle Waters wished for the Mission to take 20 Aboriginal people that they considered to be 'half-castes'. Warren expressed concern about the number of Aboriginal people of mixed descent at the Mission and asked for a government subsidy of five shillings a week for each 'half-caste child on the mission.'

By 1920 the CMS were considering moving the entire Roper River Mission to Groote Eylandt due to poor soil quality and damage to the buildings and crops caused by white ant infestations. The Rev Warren also considered it important to segregate the Aboriginal people they deemed 'half-caste' from what he called the 'degrading influences' of white settlements.

In 1924 35 children and young people from the Roper River Mission, who were at that time considered to be 'half-caste', were transferred to the newly established CMS Groote Eylandt Mission at Emerald River on Groote Eylandt. At the time the Reverend Warren was the Superintendent of both Roper River and Groote Eylandt Missions, Nine years later, in 1933, after changes in CMS and government policy, 14 school aged Aboriginal children considered to be 'half-caste' were moved from Groote Eylandt back to the Roper River Mission with the intention that they would be taken to the government-run Kahlin Compound in Darwin and the Bungalow at Alice Springs. However, fears that some of the children might be suffering from leprosy meant they were not moved on and they remained at Roper River.

A compound for people suffering from the disease leprosy was situated at Roper River Mission in 1928. Government documents and newspaper articles show that some residents at the Missions discovered to have the disease were taken to the Mud Island Lazarette and after 1931 to the Channel Island Leprosarium.

The Superintendent of Roper River Mission from 1931 was Keith Langford-Smith. He was a missionary who rose to fame in the 1930s when newspapers published his accounts of flying across Arnhem Land in his plane. He was dismissed as the Superintendent in 1933 following allegations of financial misconduct and sexual abuse of some of the Aboriginal women at Roper River. Langford-Smith later went on to establish Marella Mission Farm in

New South Wales.

In 1937 responsibility for administration and staffing of all CMS Missions fell to the Federal Council of the CMS. This included Roper River. Severe floods destroyed the Mission entirely in 1940, forcing it to be relocated to higher ground at a site known as Ngukurr.

In 1942 after the bombing of Darwin during World War II, many Aboriginal children and young people who were considered to be 'half-caste' were evacuated from Missions in the Northern Territory. Children from the CMS Missions at Roper River and Groote Eylandt were moved to a temporary home in Mulgoa, west of Sydney in NSW known as the Church Missionary Society Home for Half-castes, Mulgoa. The children lived there until they were again relocated in 1948 and 1949. The majority of the boys from Mulgoa were transferred to St Francis House in South Australia and many of the girls went to St Mary's Hostel in Alice Springs. A few older young men and women remained in Sydney.

Records suggest that during World War II the CMS was unable to keep the dormitories at their Missions operating because of a lack of staff. After the war the dormitories for older girls were reopened for a time before being phased out by the late 1950s.

In 1968 the administration of the Mission at Roper River was handed over to the Welfare Branch of the Northern Territory Administration. In 1988 the Yugul Mangi Community Government Council was formed. It took over control of the former Mission and the township became known as Ngukurr.

Gallery



The Roper River Mission.

Description: This image is of the Roper River Mission, established by the Church of England in 1908. The purpose of the buildings behind the children and whether or not they would have housed the children in care on the Mission is not known. The attached description notes the difference in clothing colour as an indication of the age of the children.



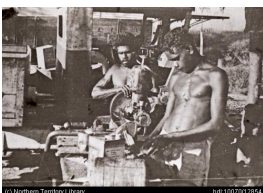
Roper River Mission

Description: Children in the classroom at Roper River Mission.



Workshop

Description: The description reads: Workshop and tractor, at mission.



Workshop

Description: This image shows men working on engines at Roper River Mission.



Hospital

Description: This image shows the outside of the Roper River Mission hospital.



Roper River Mission [altered from original title]

Description: This image shows the buildings that were used to accommodate people affected by Hansen's Disease.



Roper River Mission - Church of England



Mission Church - Roper River

Description: This image shows people standing outside the church at Roper River Mission.



The dormitory, Roper River

More info

Related Entries

Run by

- [Church Missionary Society of Australia \(1916 - current\)](#)

Related Organisations

- [Church Missionary Society Home for Half-Castes, Mulgoa \(1942 - 1949\)](#)
Residents of Roper River Mission were moved to the CMS Home, Mulgoa, as part of Northern Territory evacuations during WWII.
Date: 1942 - 1949
- [Channel Island Leprosarium \(1931 - 1955\)](#)
Residents of the Roper River Mission suffering from leprosy were moved to Channel Island from 1931.
- [Mud Island Lazaret \(1889 - 1931\)](#)
Residents of Roper River Mission suffering from leprosy were moved to the Mud Island Lazaret until 1931.
- [Marella Mission Farm \(1953 - 1978\)](#)
Keith Langford-Smith, who ran Marella Mission Farm, was previously the Superintendent at Roper River Mission
- [Groote Eylandt Mission \(1921 - 1978\)](#)
Aboriginal children were sent from Roper River Mission to Groote Eylandt Mission in 1924. A number of school aged children returned to Roper River Mission in 1934.
Date: 1934 -

- [Milleewa Home for Boys \(1919 - 1966\)](#)

Children and some mothers from Roper River Mission were evacuated to Milleewa Home for Boys in 1942.

Resources

- Love, J. R. B., [The Aborigines : their present condition as seen in northern South Australia, the Northern Territory, north-west Australia and western Queensland](#), 1915
- Harris, John, *We wish we'd done more : Ninety years of CMS and Aboriginal Issues in North Australia*, 1998
- [Aboriginal Day at the Dentists \[title altered from original\]](#), Daily Mercury, 8 September 1942

Other Resources



Title: Roper River Mission Station NT Part 1 (1907-1914)

Type: Image

Date: 1907 - 1914

[Details](#)

Records

For more information and to access your records, follow the links below:

Records

- [Church Missionary Society of Australia, North Australia Committee \(1907 - 1989\)](#)
- [Copies of review inspection reports - Hermannsberg \[Hermannsburg\], Oenpelli, Yirrkala, Elcho Island, Groote Eylandt, Finke River, Roper River, Milingimbi and Port Keats \(1959 - 1959\)](#)
- [Correspondence files, single number series with 'B' \[Child Endowment\] prefix \(1904 - 1974\)](#)
- [List of Northern Territory evacuees, World War II \(1942 - 1942\)](#)
- [Correspondence files, class 1 \(general, passports\) \(1892 - 1970\)](#)

You can view this page online by visiting <https://www.findandconnect.gov.au/entity/roper-river-mission-2/>