

'Aborigines at Platt's Estate'

'Attempt to move Aborigines'

These two captions headed reports in *The Newcastle Morning Herald* dated 6 and 9 September, 1943. The Newcastle Council's Chief Health Inspector, Mr Meddowes had acted to have Aboriginal families removed from the Platt's Estate camp at Waratah. This camp had long existed. It was one of the twenty three infamous unemployed camps which housed the homeless and out of work from the 1950s. 20-30

Before, during and after the so-called Great Depression, many white people, because of unemployment and poverty experienced what it was like to be fringe-dwellers. Scorn, pity, criticism, charity, or help well-meant, all seared hateful memories into whites. This for years. They gained some insight into what it was like for our Aboriginal brothers and sisters who endured dispossession, racist decimation, cultural and religious destruction for generations.

In 1943, Platt's Estate housed in 'rough shacks and humpies more than 200 hundred people...' including six Aboriginal families, varying from 'twenty to forty in number'.

Set this against Australia's acute housing shortage, estimated to be 400,000. War-time reports of overcrowding and lack of homes were frequent in the Newcastle press. Post-war reconstruction plans listed housing as a priority. So camp people, black or white, clung fiercely to whatever shelter they had, no matter how meagre. Platt's Estate Crown land was divided into about sixty allotments. About forty were occupied and for 'permissive occupancy' some paid 2/- weekly ground rent; some bought their buildings from previous owners. (Purchase of camp 'houses' was common in the great depression. VFD) Other occupied land was owned by the Great Northern Land Company.

Almost sixty years later the varying 1943 reactions stir our resolve:

Firstly, Mr Reynolds, the Waratah West (Platt's Estate) branch delegate to the ALP Waratah Electoral Council 'defended the ways of life of the blacks on the estate... there were six families...all the men were in employment...(though) The Chief Health Inspector described their living conditions as abominable... he had not investigated any of their places... simply drove his car through the estate'.

The ALP Electoral Council Chairman, Mr M. Fitzgerald said: 'The Aborigines should be allowed to stay...only until provision could be made for them elsewhere... Mr Meddowes was doing his job reporting the presence of a black's camp in a populated area...now is the time for action, not in a few years when the presence of a large number of blacks would present a big problem...nobody can defend a black's camp close to a residential area. Back in the bush is the place for the blacks. There is no need for me to say what happens to blacks who come into close contact with whites. There remains a lot of work for the Government to do in protecting what remains of the aborigines'.

The ALP Council decided to: 'ask the Minister for Lands not to move the aborigines who had come from the North Coast and to discourage settlement...by other aborigines by refusing permissive occupancy'.

Aldermen Protest:

With the matter before the Greater Newcastle Council, Alderman Higgins protested against the Chief Health

Inspector's actions: "Aborigines should be treated as humans not as pariahs...(I have) had a good deal of experience with aborigines. They have as much right to decent conditions as white men.' Alderman Stevenson: 'Leave them alone; give them a chance'.

Health Inspector Meddowes: 'the conditions in which the aborigines lived were well below the standard of a fifth or sixth rate country town...he had considerable experience in Lismore Council...Parts of Platt's Estate resemble Nobbys Camp...it took five years to get that lot cleaned up'. Alderman Young added: '...We made no bones about clearing people off Nobbys Camp and they were white...' (Most of the Nobbys people moved to Platt's Estate in 1937. VFD)

The Mayor, Ald. Dunkley and Ald. Scott-Daisley supported Mr Meddowes. Ald. Higgins, though supported by alderman Richards and Stevens, was defeated. The Health Committee Chairman, Ald. Jenner said the committee would make an inspection.

On 22 September, *The Newcastle Herald* reports: 'Half-caste aboriginal women left a prayer meeting at Platt's Estate City Mission to plead with the Health Committee not to send them away. The majority had lived there two to three years. The woman showed the alderman through their iron and bag shacks, crudely built, but spotlessly clean, each with a vegetable plot. One woman said: 'Why can't you leave us in peace? We should not be penalised because we are coloured.'

The walls of another shack were lined with newspapers, over which were printed Scriptural texts. An Aboriginal woman said: 'God sees no difference in us. Why should you?' A male Aboriginal interjected: 'It is a pity the bible is not read more in the world today'. Sister Durban, in charge of the City Mission described 'the behaviour as excellent'. One referred to the squalid condition of some white-occupied places. Another woman declared her intention to 'fight for my home. I'll never leave here.' When leaving Ald. Jenner told the Aborigines that the committee 'wanted to see for itself the conditions.'

By late October the Health Committee decided that 'no evictions be permitted'. As well no further sub-standard homes, no change of occupancy be permitted and so on. In early December the ALP Electoral Council receives as 'satisfactory' a letter from the Minister for Lands, Mr Tully which states in part: 'No assurance can be given that no further permissive occupancies will be granted to persons of aboriginal blood...the men are employed in essential industry... it is only natural... they should desire to live close to their work...families are of good character...homes maintained well...(their) presence and homes cannot in any way be regarded as objectionable.'

It was Moya Farrell's wish, conveyed to me by Margaret Henry, that the Aboriginal association with Platt's Estate be researched. This, because of objections by the Maroba Nursing Home to the Awabakal Land Council's development application. Following mediation the objection has been withdrawn. Memories of other Aboriginal occupants which are being gathered by John Maynard will give us a more complete story. Also reading of Professor Henry Reynolds 'This Whispering in our Hearts', 1998 and 'Why Weren't We Told?' 1999, reveals Australia's long-hidden history.

It is my belief that what we variously know as Platt's Estate, Waratah West or Braye Park, was used by the Aborigines long before white invasion. I wonder if, before extensive stone quarrying, there were carvings there? Its high terrain gives wide views of the land, ocean and far horizon. Such was a typical sight for carvings and gatherings of Aboriginal people. It was so in the Manly-Warringah-Pittwater area where I lived for many years and took classes of children to view the carvings as part of their school curriculum.

Not all of the above attitudes have perished. We have progressed. The tide of time has flowed; the tide of justice and reconciliation for indigenous people is in flood.

We cannot let it be dammed or diverted!

Vera Deacon — 27 March 2000