

# Old photos revive mystery of Aboriginal artefacts

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Staff Reporter

MYSTERY surrounds the apparent disappearance of a collection of valuable Aboriginal artefacts once on public display in Hunter St West, Newcastle.

The story of the artefacts surfaced again recently with old glass plate negatives supplied to Newcastle art gallery by historian Mr Bert Lovett.

When photographs were produced from the negatives they showed part of the display in the old technical college building in 1896. Such genuine artefacts are now in big demand.

The artefacts were known to be stored upstairs in the old Newcastle Technical College and Museum building (as it was then). But from there they seem to have vanished.

Friends of the late Mr Perc Haslam, a noted authority on Aboriginal culture, said he had tried without success to trace the collection.

It was then described as a good collection but he held fears that it might have been broken up.

Aboriginal artefacts don't appear on any technical college inventory, but building functions change. In the 1930s many items are known to have either been returned to their original owners or destroyed.

Many people who now have Aboriginal artefacts keep quiet about their collections. This is often because they are concerned they might have to return items to the descendants of Aboriginal tribes.

Inquiries into Newcastle University archives and among district Aborigines have shed no further light on the matter. And a study of loan records over the past week at the Australian Museum in Sydney into travelling exhibitions has drawn a blank.

But the TAFE Regional Director, Mr Gordon Gilroy, recently gave an insight into past practices.

'I suspect that that sort of material would be transferred around, but the pre-

war era (1939) was also when a lot of Aboriginal museums were withdrawn and closed down,' he said.

'My father was an outback policeman then and such material was required to be destroyed, if not returned. It was Aboriginal property and we whites had no right to retain it, we were told.'

'There was a shed full of spears and boomerangs. I was young, but I remember burning them. And at Cobar there was a 12 by 12 police cell half full of old wanted posters made of linen dipped in plaster of paris for strength outdoors when nailed on trees.'

'I got paid 10/- to go out and burn them.'