Members of the Nerang River tribe at their campsite near Southport, circa 1889.
THE GOLD COAST: ITS FIRST INHABITANTS

by R.I. Longhurst B.A. (Hons) A.L.A.A.*

We know very little about the aboriginal inhabitants of the Gold Coast, or at least much less than we know about neighbouring areas where tribal members survived to be interviewed by scientific researchers this century. Much of what we do know comes from the memoirs of early European settlers who more often than not regarded the few surviving aborigines as pitiful novelties, the objects of charity in the form of ragged clothing and alcohol. Only a very few, such as the early timber-getter Edmund Harper, ever tried to understand and learn from them.

Certainly, by 1900 there remained only a few full-blooded natives of the original South Coast tribes. The 1901 Queensland census was the first to actually provide statistics of the aboriginal population of the state. In the Logan statistical division of which the Gold Coast was only a very small part, eighty-one aborigines, both full- and half-blood, were counted. This figure comprised forty-nine males and thirty-two females.¹ This compares with an estimate of 1500 to 2000 natives living in the watershed of the Logan, Albert, Coomera and Nerang Rivers in the 1850s.² Harper, reminiscing in 1894, recalled the 'Tulgigin' tribe of the North Arm of the Tweed, numbering 'some two hundred. The men were nearly all big stout fellows, some of them over six feet in height, and weighing up to fourteen stone'.³ Laila Haglund's archaeological studies of burial sites at Broadbeach and Bundall and of a shell midden at Cascade Gardens, again in Broadbeach, have provided concrete evidence of continual tribal occupation of the one area, following the same funeral practices, from the ninth to the late nineteenth centuries, and the same pattern of diet until the latter period when bones of imported animals such as the European hare appear.⁴ Obviously the Coast provided an abundance of shell fish, particularly the yugari, whilst the river valleys enjoyed a high rainfall and a fertility which supported numerous species of animals and edible plants. Honey from the nests of wild bees and soft grubs were delicacies abundant in the district, the open wallum forests behind the northern part of the Coast provided numerous kangaroos, wallabies and pademelons, the swamps provided duck and other waterfowl. The native inhabitants of what is today Southport presumably followed many of the dietary customs of the Stradbroke Island tribe, which received far greater attention from nineteenth century writers. The dugong and turtle were then recorded as part of the basic diet in the southern part of the Bay, and both were still being caught by Europeans in fair number in the 1890s. The natives caught them mostly in hand nets, made from the fire vine, cotton tree and brown currajong.

*Deputy John Oxley Librarian
'Bullum' or Johnny Allen, a native of the Wangeriburra tribe. Much respected throughout the Logan and Albert districts, he worked for most of his life as a stockman for the Collins family on Mundoolun and Nindooinbah. Shortly before his death in 1913, he assisted John Lane with the compilation of a Wangeriburra vocabulary, one of our few guides to the language of the vanished South Coast tribes.
Pairs of nets formed in tow-rows were also used to catch mullet, the season for which was a major event amongst the coastal tribes. A number of early sources suggest that the Stradbroke tribe was assisted in their fishing by friendly dolphin.\(^5\) When the schools of mullet appeared, the aborigines would call for the attention of the dolphins by striking the water and prodding the sand with the shafts of their spears. The dolphin would then drive the mullet towards the natives' nets, and would be rewarded with gifts of fish, offered on the end of a spear. The extent to which dolphins were venerated may be seen in the legend of a Nerang River hero named Gowonda being transformed after death into such a fish.

The few surviving photographs of Nerang River aborigines, taken by a Beenleigh photographer, Will Stark, in the early 1890s, do, fortunately, assist us in gaining an impression of the form of shelter constructed by local tribes; a framework of small branches covered with bark and saplings. This, again, conforms with the better documented designs of the Stradbroke tribes, with which the Nerang aborigines maintained contact. Amity Point natives were reported by early cedar-getters as continually visiting Tweed River camp sites. Bora rings, surviving today at Burleigh Heads and Tweed Heads South, are reminders of the ceremonial importance of the district. Settlers of the 1860s recall numerous well-attended intertribal corroborees and fights. Tweed and Nerang aborigines, moreover, occasionally featured in tribal fights in the Brisbane area, and travelled north to that great event in aboriginal southeast Queensland - the bunya nut feasts.

There is little agreement upon the original tribal names for the area. Archibald Meston, writing in 1923, called the Nerang tribe the 'Talgiburra', whilst in John Allen's 1913 description of his Wangeriburra tribe of the Albert River, he refers to the Nerang tribe as the 'Kombumerri'.\(^6\) One might prefer to take the word of an actual native inhabitant as was Allen (or 'Bullum'), however the word Talgi appears in a number of early maps of the Nerang River district, and still exists as a place-name. Recent linguistic studies of the area, using a few surviving wordlists compiled by early residents, suggest that the Gold Coast and Tweed tribes were part of a larger tribal and linguistic area stretching from the Clarence to the Logan River. Terry Crowley has suggested that this linguistic area, known as Bandjalang, was divided into numerous dialect areas, roughly approximating tribal borders. The Ngarahngbul dialect of Bandjalang was spoken between the Logan River and Point Danger.\(^7\) Between the Coomera and the Logan one dialect of Ngarahngbul was spoken, between the Nerang and the Tweed, another. This latter dialect, had some 75% of its words the same as the Tweed River Nganduwal. None of these dialects was related to the Brisbane language, known as Yugarabul or Durabul. A list of Gold Coast and Tweed area place names and their suggested meanings is appended to this paper.
What happened to the aboriginal population? Both Uniacke and Rous wrote in the 1820s of Tweed River tribesmen gazing in wonder at their boats; twenty years later as the Tweed and south coast rivers were invaded by the cedar-getters, these same tribesmen were receiving the dubious benefits of European civilization - measles, influenza, venereal disease and alcohol, against which they were unable to resist. Until well into the 1860s the area remained free of the hand of the law, and timber-getter and squatter could well inflict injury upon local aborigines with little fear of having to account for their deeds, or of any record ever being kept. The only word we have upon European - aboriginal relations for this period comes from reports of hostile attacks by blacks, for example the murder of two cedar-getters on the Tweed in June 1846, and the harassing of Mr. Lyons by Tallebudgera Creek aborigines in 1853. Europeans, however, as in so many other areas of Australia, used these and much more trifling incidents, as an excuse for outright genocide, in most part ignored or even condoned by the authorities. Harper refers to the shooting of numerous aborigines after the 1846 Murdering Creek incident, as the local tribe fled towards the headwaters of the Richmond.

We allowed the Cudgen and Murwillumbah tribe amongst us to work about nine or ten months after the murder. None of the actual murderers suffered for their crime. A member of the same tribe (big Yerrill), his gin, and cher-chum (child) were poisoned, but that was for theft. He stole a hundredweight of flour from a white man's humpy, but never stole any more.

In John Allen's 1913 report to the Queensland Parliament on the tribes of the Albert River, we can at least point to a specific incident, remaining in his memory from childhood, which suggests the fate of the coastal tribes:

The accursed thing happened on the bank of Nerang Creek in or about the year 1857. A party of "Alberts" among whom was the old blind Nyajum, was there camped on a visit to their friends and neighbours of the Nerang and Tweed. There had been a charge of cattle-killing brought against the local tribes and someone had to pay. The police heard of this camp, and, under command of Officer Wheeler, cut it off on the land side with a body of troopers. The alarm was given. The male aboriginals plunged into the creek, swam to the other side and hid in the scrub. The black troopers again were bad marksmen - probably with intent - as the only casualties were one man shot in the leg and one boy drowned. The old blind man had been hidden under a pile of skins in a hut, but was found by the troopers and dragged out by the heels. The gins told the
troopers he was blind from birth. The troopers begged the officer not to order the poor fellow to be killed. The gins crowded around Wheeler imploring mercy for the wretched victim; some hung on to the troopers to prevent them firing. But prayers were useless; Wheeler was adamant. The gins were dragged off or knocked off with carbines, and the blind man was then shot by order of the white officer.

This probably occurred after an event on William Duckett White's Murry Jerry run on the Nerang. White and earlier offered to pay for the upkeep of troopers to guard against theft of cattle on his Beaudesert head station. Allen also recorded the death of some thirty to forty aborigines in the Nerang-Albert area during the search by police for the murderer of a German woman, Mrs. Klump, near Jimboomba in August 1857.

Aborigines on the Tweed had early on assisted the first cedar-getters in guiding them to valuable stands of timber, in return for rum and tobacco, and until the arrival of settlers under the Robertson Land Acts in the early 1860s, the isolated timbermen became acquainted with the blacks, their language and customs. Isolation from European women over many years meant that aboriginal women provided an available means of sexual release. Both William Duncan and Edmund Harper, moving onto the Nerang from the Tweed in the late 1840s, were strongly attached to the local tribes; Harper could perform corroborees dances and relate tribal myths in the traditional manner. His half-caste son, Billy, was a well-known boatsman on the Nerang in the early 1870s. Gradually, however, the original inhabitants disappeared, as a result of extermination, interbreeding, and the most fatal cause of all, European diseases. Few full-blood natives remained by World War I, with the last full-blood Tweed female dying at Fingal in 1933. By 1913 the Wangeriburra or Albert tribe was 'almost extinct'; by 1923 Archibald Meston could state that the Nerang tribes had 'gone hence into the Eternal Silence'. An early Nerang River pioneer, Carl Lentz, recalled seeing the 'last biggish mob' of aborigines in the district in 1884, around which time the only determined effort to assist the local blacks, a Lutheran mission on the upper Nerang, came to a disappointing end. The recent studies of the Bandjalung linguistic area have had to rely upon the only surviving concentration of aborigines in the region - on the upper Clarence, where peoples of various dialect groupings live at Muli-Muli (Woodenbong) settlement with the Gidabal dialect of Bandjalung predominating. As this area borders upon the dialect area of Allen's Wangeriburra tribe, it can fortunately still assist us, however belatedly, in gaining some small idea of language and tribal divisions upon the Gold Coast and Tweed.
Two bora rings, a few words, bones and implements are all that today remain of what may have been one of the most concentrated aboriginal populations, given the small area involved, in Australia. Europeans have, in the space of little more than a century, destroyed the swamps, altered the course of rivers, built on the dunes and wallum plains, reconstructed the beaches, and consequently eradicated the wildlife which sustained the aborigine and had a spiritual significance beyond our understanding. Highways now pass over burial grounds, and the Burleigh bora-ring, where young males were once initiated into the secrets and responsibilities of adulthood, is increasingly surrounded by more motels, flats and apartment buildings. The spirit Jabreen, who in the dreamtime created Jebbribillum (Little Burleigh) and Jellurgul (Burleigh Head), is forgotten.

ENDNOTES


3. Harper, E. 'Early days on the Tweed' The Queenslander 1 September 1894, p.410


10. P.J. Robinsen to Colonial Secretary, 10 June 1845, quoting W.D. White. (N.S.W.A.O. 4/3103, In-letter 4289 of 1845).
Aboriginal Place Names on the Gold Coast and Tweed with suggested meanings

COOMERA
1. Fern (Allen 1913)
2. Originally 'Kummera-kummera' meaning wattle (Hanlon 1935)

COOMBABAH
1. 'Koomboobah' Place of cobra worm (Allen 1913)
2. 'Koombahmbah' Place of turtles (Gresty 1947)

MOONDAREWA
'Moondherraba' Place of mosquitoes (May)

LANDS END
Called 'Waroojra', a leaf (Hanlon, 1935)

SOUTHPORT

DEEPWATER POINT
1. Called 'Carragho-nhumbin' meaning sand drifts (Meston, 1905)
2. Called 'Karrahbahndeen' meaning grass tree (Hanlon 1935)

LODERS CREEK
1. Called 'Biggera' meaning ironbark (Hanlon 1935)
2. Called 'Talgalgan' meaning 'waist deep at high tide' (Meston 1923)

AREA OF OLD PIER (near present Olympic Pool)
Called 'Goo-een' after the name for the Moreton Bay Ash Tree (Hanlon 1935)

MAIN BEACH
'Kulgeragah' after the Kaloon tree (Hanlon 1935)

SITE OF THE SOUTHPORT SCHOOL
'Koongoongah', pine tree (Hanlon 1935)

BENOWA
Corruption of 'Boonow', red bloodwood (Hanlon 1935 and Gresty 1947)

SURFERS PARADISE

MACINTOSH ISLAND
'Geegee' after a bushy scrub bearing blue berries (Hanlon 1935)

MYERS FERRY (western end of Cavill Avenue)
'Karrungul' Hardwood scrub tree (Hanlon 1935)

ETCHELLS OR SECOND BLUFF (near Paradise Island)
'Moombee-moombee' (dead huts) referring to deserted shacks of early European settlers, obviously a word only current ca. 1870 (Hanlon 1935 & Hannah mss.)

BOOBIGAN
1. Corruption of 'Boobaingun', porpoise (Gresty 1947)
2. Ashes of a fire (Hanlon 1935)

KARARA
Long flat (Gresty 1947)
WORONGARY

'Woorongary' vine used for climbing
(Hanlon 1935)

MUDGEERABA

1. Place of infants' excrement (Allen 1913)
2. 'The place where someone told lies'
   (Hanlon 1935)
3. Place of sticky soil (Watson 1944)

NERANG RIVER

(All earlier writers suggest that the river was named by Europeans after the local
dialect word 'neerang' meaning either little
(Gresty 1947, Hannah 1946) or shovel-nosed shark (Meston, 1905). The river was named
the Barrow by Robert Dixon in 1840, by 1861
the name Nerang was being used in official
publications.)

To the local aborigines the river was referred to as
1. 'Mogumbin' (Meston 1905)
2. 'Been-goor-abee' (Meston 1923)

The Tweed tribes called the river 'Talgi'
(Meston 1896)

NERANG

1. Site of present township called 'Birribi' after spirals of dead bark hanging from
eucalypts (Hanlon 1935)
2. Site of present township called 'Eejung',
   wet grassy flats (Gresty 1947)

MOLENDINAR

'Jerringan' stringy bark tree (Hanlon 1935)

GILSTON

1. 'Booiee-booiee' native apple tree (Hanlon 1935)
2. 'Win-win' white oak (Gresty 1947)

DUNBIBLE CREEK

'Choombiba' black apple (Gresty 1947)

NORTH BURLEIGH HEAD

'Jabbribillum' the fighting waddy of the
god Jabreen (Hanlon 1935)

BURLEIGH HEAD

1. 'Jellergul' unknown meaning (Hanlon 1935)
2. 'Jayling' (black) or 'Gumbelmov' (rock)
in the Tweed language (Meston 1923)

WEST BURLEIGH

'Caningeraba' oyster ground (Gresty 1947)

TALLEBUDGERA CREEK

1. This was an introduced title, using a southern dialect, possibly of Sydney tribes, where 'boodjerie' meant good. This was probably an expression introduced to the area as early as the 1840s by cedar-getters who misinterpreted the local phrases 'chaloom woojerie' (fat fish) (Gresty 1947) or 'challobujuro' (place of urinating)
   (Allen 1913). The body of water we know as the Tallebudgera was referred to as 'talgalggn' meaning it was waist deep at low tide?
2. Rotten or decayed trees, probably applicable to several locations on the creek where aboriginals left timber in the water to rot and become infested with cobra

**TALLEBUDGERA**

The site of the township was 'Gullunbee', a thorny vine (Hanlon 1935)

**CURRUMBIN**

1. A species of pine tree (Hanlon 1935)
2. Emphasis on the um indicated the presence of dangerous quicksand at the mouth of the creek (Meston 1923)

**CURRUMBIN ROCKS**

'Gillama-beljin' unknown meaning (Meston 1923)

**TUGUN**

From 'Toongoon' waves of the ocean (May)

**BILINGA**

From 'Bilinba' bats- (Gresty 1947)

**POINT DANGER**

Called 'Booningba' place of porcupine (Meston 1893)

A cave in Point Danger was known as 'Mony-nogumbo' black dog (Meston 1898)

**COOK ISLAND**

Called 'Joongurra-gnarrian' Pelican Island (Meston 1898)

**CUDGEN**

Red clay (Meston 1923)

**TUMBULGUM**

Small leafed fig (Gresty 1947)

**MURWILLUMBAH**

From 'Murro-waloom-ba' place of face on rock (Meston 1923)

**KYNUMBOON**

Place of possums (Hanlon 1935)

**UKI**

From 'Yukai' bandicoot (Gresty 1947)

**MOUNT WARNING**

'Walloombin' (Meston 1898)