



ISLANDS APART

The Australian South
Sea Islander journey

Acknowledgements

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MARABISDA

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Queensland State Library

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Mackay 1863 – 1873

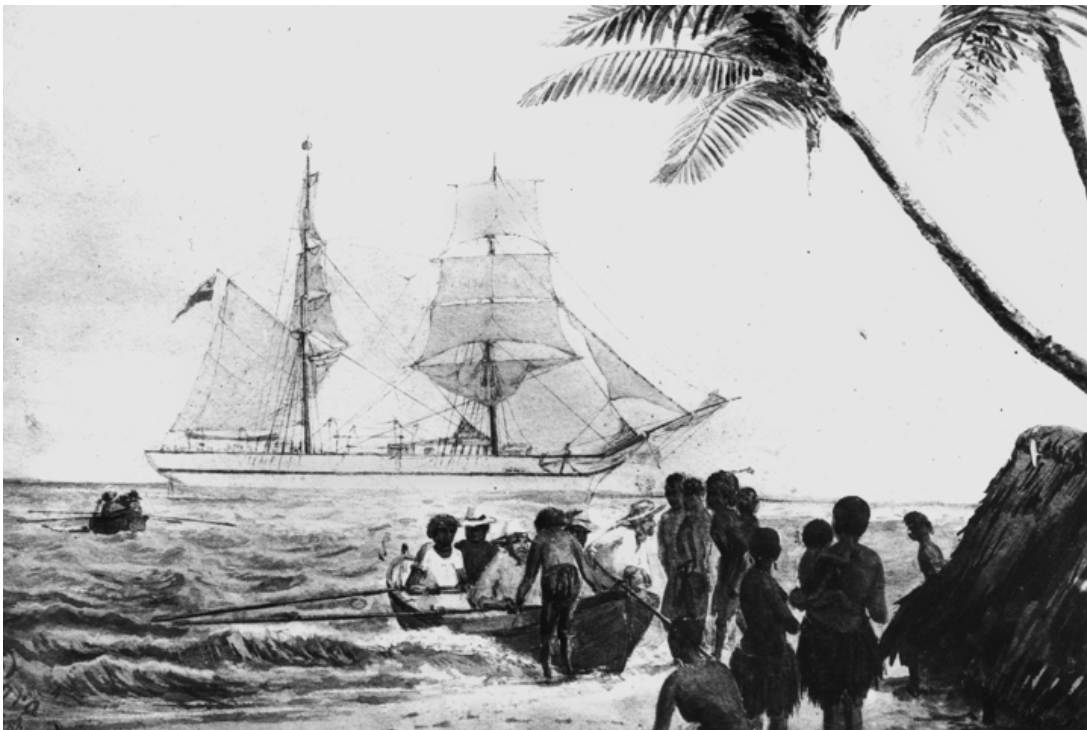
Gabriella Haynes

The Islanders who crossed the Pacific Ocean and were put to work on Queensland's cane fields passed through different worlds. They left their own villages and families, and entered the world of the ship, in which conditions were cramped and dangerous, and sometimes violent. When they stepped ashore in Australia, first in 1863 in Brisbane, followed by other towns along the coast, they were on a completely different planet. Islanders stepped onto land that had only recently been populated by Europeans, though they now controlled much of it. The Indigenous owners had been made to live on the edges, surviving as best they could in the new order.

In Mackay, those that arrived were registered using their thumbprint and assigned to different plantations. Then, again, their worlds were fractured as they found themselves in different parts of the district and assigned to barracks or left to build their own huts. In these different microcosms, conditions were harsh, violent and contained. The death rate was high and cultural dislocation almost complete. The world of the Islands was a long way away.

Yet many South Sea Islanders did not allow this to end their connection with home and family, and they began to build their own lives. Gardens began to appear around the huts, and taro was grown in the creeks away from the eyes of the bosses. Though they were not meant to speak language, there were ways to communicate and move that happened away from watchful eyes.

People survived and the worlds created by those small communities in the plantation have been expanded and opened and are reflected in the following stories. The memories of today's South Sea Islander community show the strength of their survival and ability to thrive while maintaining a connection to each other and their culture. While the labour trade continued through the late nineteenth century, people continued to adapt and make their way in this new world and make it their own.



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The work of Frangipani Arts and other groups who celebrate the achievements of the South Sea Islander community continue the legacies of those who came before them, and continue to ask those outside the South Sea Islander community to weave this story into all of our histories. This book is a way to begin understanding and embracing 150 years of memories, contribution and survival.



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Australian South Sea Islanders 1894 – 1903

Rhiannon Minniecon



I was born in 1983 so nearly 100 years after this period of history. After lots of thinking and research about this period of history, I remembered a quote by Albert Einstein: ‘the only source of knowledge is experience’.

This quote has taken me to an experience in my life that has taught me about the history of my forebears from the years of 1894 to 1903. In 2005, I was asked to be involved in documentary through re-enactments and voiceovers. The documentary was to retell Australian South Sea Islander history through the eyes of ASSI community elders and the stories that they held dear.

One of the significant events within this period was the introduction of the Pacific Islander Labourers Act 1901 was designed to facilitate the deportation of most of the Pacific Islanders working in Australia. Along with the Immigration Restriction Act 1901, it formed an integral part of the White Australia policy. In 1901, there were approximately 10,000 Pacific Islanders working in Australia, working as indentured labourers. The Act ultimately resulted in the deportation of approximately 7,500 Pacific Islanders.

I recall filming a scene in ‘Stori Blong Yu Mi’ where the islanders held a meeting to discuss the recent introduction of the Acts and the deportation that was going to occur. We recorded scenes where islanders were standing in the rain at a public meeting speaking about signing a petition to stop deportation and the words spoken so strongly still ring in my ears, ‘It ain’t justice...It ain’t our justice’.



Image taken during the filming of Stori Blong Yumi. Photo supplied by Rhiannon Minniecon.

I will forever be grateful for the experience I had in ‘Stori Blong Yu Mi’ and the teachings from my elders that I was able to learn firsthand through the stories they told within the film. 1884- 1903 was very uncertain time for the South Sea Islander community in Australia and I can only sit here 130 years later and imagine what this would have been like.

Torres Strait Islands 1903 – 1913

Miseron Levi



Although there had already been some movement of South Sea Islanders to the Torres Strait before 1903, it was around this time that the Australian Government stopped the labour trade from the South Sea Islands to Queensland and deportation of the Islanders began. Consequently, South Sea Islanders were relocated throughout the Torres Strait. It is said that this created tensions between the islanders and as a result there was land made available for South Sea Islander families to settle on Moa Island.

The following is a story from a descendant of one of the South Sea Islanders who lived in the Torres Strait.

A boat full of South Sea Island people were taken to, or through the Torres Strait Islands. Five men jumped off the boat during the trip. Three men made their way to various Islands within the Torres Strait Islands and two stayed on Mabuiag Island. These two men originated from Tanna Island. One of these men is my great-great Athe (Grandfather). His name was Kaio! He had married twice. He had four kids from his first marriage and 29 grandkids including my Aka (Grandmother) who was my dad's mother. He then married again and had five kids and 32 grandkids. Our family is large, loving, caring, amazing and originated from Tanna Island!



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No. 702

COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA.
The Pacific Island Labourers Act 1901-1906.

~~~~~  
**General Certificate of Exemption.**  
~~~~~

Whereas CALLEYHO
a Pacific Island Labourer within the meaning of the *Pacific Island Labourers Act 1901-1906*, has proved to my satisfaction that he has been continuously resident in Australia for a
period of not less than twenty years prior to the thirty-first
day of December, One thousand nine hundred and six.

Now therefore I do hereby, in pursuance of the said Act, grant to him this Certificate exempting him from the provisions of Sections 7 and 8 of the said Act.

The acceptance of this Certificate by the said CALLEYHO
is an admission that he is not entitled to claim from the Government of the Commonwealth or the Government of Queensland a free return passage to the island whence he came to Australia.

Provided also that this Certificate may be cancelled at any time by the Minister if he has reason to think that it was obtained by false and fraudulent representation.

Dated the 4th day of May, 19 07.

John G. Macdonald
Acting-Minister for External Affairs.

C.13057.

By Authority: J. Kew, Acting Government Printer, Melbourne



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Queensland.
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Sunshine Coast 1944 – 1953

Leona Byquar



During this time frame there were many South Sea Islander families living on the Queensland Sunshine Coast, at places such as Buderim, Woombye, Nambour, Diddillibah and Bli Bli.

Ernst Henry Byquar married Norah Hope Lammon (known as Ernie and Hope, to family and friends) in 1927 in Ingham North Queensland before relocating to the beautiful area of the Sunshine Coast. Both were sec-

ond generation South Sea Islanders, and together they raised seven children – Leslie, Noel, Valerie, Desmond (known as Sonny), Victor, Adele and Dale.

During 1944-1953, the Byquar family lived in Buderim, then moved to nearby Woombye. At that time they were the only South Sea Islander family to attend the Woombye State School and were accepted and well known in the community.

In August 1948 at the age of 14, Sonny worked for the Moreton Central Sugar Mill Co. in Nambour. The Mill's extensive cane field area was situated from the eastern side of the Blackall Range and extended to the coast, comprising rich and fertile land between the Maroochy River, Petrie Creek and Paynter's Creek, producing a lot of cane for the sugar industry. He received his first Gross Earnings of £4.50 after

which a tax of £0.40 shillings was then deducted. This was paid by the employer in the form of a Tax Stamp, which was stuck onto the back of his Annual Income Tax Assessment Form. It was also at the Mill, that he joined the Qld Branch of the Australian Workers' Union.

Sonny enjoyed his time growing up on the Sunshine Coast with fond memories, as there was always plenty of things to do. Quite often with his mates and other South Sea Islanders, they would love nothing more than going fishing and crabbing along the Maroochy River and end the day having a big cook up with enough food to feed everyone at the camp site on “Lot 71” Bli Bli. He enjoyed sports and played Badminton with the Woombye and Buderim Clubs and also, Rugby League for the Yandina Club.



Byquar family
photos. Supplied
by Leona Byquar

The 1950s was an exciting time for music for the teens on the Sunshine Coast, as Rock n Roll spread throughout the world. Australia's king of Rock n Roll, Johnny O'Keefe emerged as the first modern rockabilly, playing a fusion of rock and roll and country music, which was propelled by catchy beats, an electric guitar and an acoustic bass, played using the slap-back technique. Sonny said it was certainly a great time to be in and before long he had joined up with the Jimmy Kerr's Hawaiian Band, singing and rocking their way around the Concert Halls and Hotels. Sonny was also involved with the Ambulance Concerts – which consisted of most of the Ambulance workers getting together to hold Variety Concerts all over the Sunshine Coast, which proved to be a lot of fun. These concerts were always a very popular form of entertainment for everyone and also helped to raise money for the Nambour Ambulance. They eventually raised enough money to buy a new ambulance for the Station. Also, back then there was little funding available for the Ambulance Workers, so to help supplement their wages, they would have to stand in the street with collection boxes.

Sonny's dad Ernie, had served with the Australian Light Horse and then the Royal Australian Infantry. Hence, Sonny followed by joining the Australian Army Reserve. In 1952 he was called up for National Service or "Nasho" as it was nicknamed. It was the first Australian scheme of its kind, which started in 1951. All men over eighteen were called up for compulsory training in the armed forces. National Servicemen were given the option, at call-up time, to volunteer for service anywhere overseas if war occurred, and most of the Nasho's volunteered. Sonny was sent to Wacol in Brisbane for his training, where he excelled in the National Service and was promoted to 'Lance Corporal'.

Adele Byquar was learning ballet and tap dance at the Norma Edwards Dance School in Nambour. She was so talented that she received a scholarship at the age of 15 to go to the National Academy of Dance in Melbourne.

Dale Byquar also learnt ballet and tap dancing in Nambour, as well as attending The Marching Girls Association in Nambour. She loved going with the family to The Annual Nambour Show, being a big draw card at that time and acquired a new outfit as a must have for each year.

Victor Byquar was able to leave school early as he obtained an apprenticeship with Les Cahart to be a carpenter in Woombye. He was quite a character and enjoyed playing the odd joke on his boss and work mates. He later left his apprenticeship to join the Australian Regular Army and also went on to serve overseas.

The Byquar family were a happy and loving family; who made their own fun and always made friends easily. They didn't experience any social problems and enjoyed being South Sea Islanders growing up on the Sunshine Coast in 1944-1953.

Mackay 1954 – 1963

Harvey Quakawoot



I was born in Mackay in 1950 and had three brothers and four sisters. This was probably about the average family back then. South Sea Islanders mostly worked in the Sugar Industry which was seasonal work.

Back in that era things were pretty tough compared to current times. Lack of money was a big issue for us growing up and jobs were predominately in the cane fields, so we had to survive best as we could like

everyone else in the same situation. Families would help each other to make life a little easier. I remember as a small boy we had no electricity, telephones, bitumen roads, septic toilets or other conveniences such as showers, washing machines, driers and other items and devices we take for granted today. Transport was taxis, bicycles (if you could afford them), walk or catch a ride with someone that had transport. I remember the wireless we had was powered by a battery, but a different type of battery to that used today. My brothers, sisters and I walked to Farleigh State School which was approximately 5 kilometres each way.

All cooking was done on stoves and open fires, fired by wood. The women were very good cooks and Christmas was always a special occasion. We looked forward to Christmas as this was the only time you

got a present. Christmas dinner was also special as it consisted of ham, chicken, pork, roast beef, vegetables, soft drink and of course not forgetting the plum puddings with threepences and sixpences inside. If you were lucky enough to get a piece of pudding with the coins inside you get to keep the money. You never had this variety of food throughout the year. It was very sad for people who couldn't afford it. Lamps were used as the main source of light. There was a safety problem as the lamps were fired by kerosene fuel. If the lamp was to fall or knocked over this would start a fire. Our water came from a well 200-300 meters away. Our father would carry two buckets (referred to as kerosene tins) by hand or on a Yoke (a stick across the shoulders with a bucket on each side for balance). These buckets/tins held ten litres each and were approximately 40 kilograms in weight. As we had no showers in my early years we used to bath in a galvanized tub or wash in a galvanized bucket. Washing was done by hand or banging against rocks down on the river banks. There were washing boards but I didn't see any South Sea Islanders using them. Toilets were located at the rear of properties. Drums were used as bowls under the boxed seat (wood). The drums had to be emptied once or twice a week. To dispose of waste a hole was dug and the waste was emptied. The drum was cleaned by washing and toilet was washed before replacing the drum.

Most of the people worked in the cane fields. I worked with my two brothers cutting cane, this was my first job, in those days the cane was burnt before harvesting. Cutting cane by hand was really tough going especially when you had to get up early (4-5am) in winter, and in summer when it got really hot. Before tractors came in to the sugar industry, horses was used to haul the cane to the sidings where they were transhipped on to cane wagons and the stream locos (trains) would collect and take it to the mill.

We didn't go to town often as we would have liked as taxis were not cheap. When we went to town, we enjoyed it as we would spend most

of the day shopping or just window shopping. Some nights we would go to town which was really good, as we would go window shopping, and we use to have ice-cream which was really tasty. Ice-cream was a treat back then.



Quakawoot family
at Erakala

As the years went by life changed for us as progress made way for new opportunities, and jobs and transport became more accessible to us. Some took apprentice jobs, others became farm workers all year round and others became machine operators, including cane harvesters, mine machinery, administration work, supervisors, managers, and also truck drivers. I was fortunate to operate cane harvesters before I left the sugar industry. This was a huge turnaround from cutting cane by hand in my first job. This change also provided the ability to purchase cars, houses and other goods we couldn't afford before. Whilst we had hard times early in my life we all took it in stride as we were born into that lifestyle. The lifestyle was basically a flow on from our parents and as progress gave us opportunities it also gave them a better lifestyle as well, compared to how they were brought up.

Halifax 1964 – 1973

John Cassady



In the year of 1964 I was a 16 year old working on a sugar cane plantation or cane farm as they are now known. I started as a 14 year old dropping out of school because the headmaster seemed to me to be a very strict man. I often found myself and other black boys in my grade standing in front of the class hands held out and receiving six of the best across the palm of our hands for no reason, and other not so nice things he inflicted on us mainly black kids. In hindsight I now realize he was

a racist man who couldn't stand black people. So, that was the main reason I was working in the cane fields at such a young age. We lived in a community called "The Gardens". My mum was one of seven sisters and another four of her sisters and their husbands made up the community.

My time spent at the gardens were the best years of my life. We hunted, fished, spent family days at the beach, camping, we did and had it all. But all that began to tail off when we moved from "the gardens" into town (Halifax/Ingham), where the entertainment was; fetes, the annual carnival that came into town in winter and movies. After the movies we would hang out at the local milk bar or fish and chips shop, we would occasionally visit "the gardens" where we would sit around a bonfire and listen to our elders tell stories, fact & fiction.



Halifax Gardens

We continued to work the cane fields, which was seasonal work, so, we worked six months and were on government benefits for the other six months. We would also get casual work with the council doing rock pitching; building rock walls on the riverbank. As we headed into the 1970s we found work on the railways and we then gradually moved out of the town of Halifax to the city of Townsville, where most of our family now reside. Only one of the seven sisters is alive today (Betty Barrett). All the rest of the sisters and all the husbands have passed on, we all have families of our own and just recently thanks to the efforts and hard work of my cousin Michael Barrett we erected a Plaque in the Town of Halifax in recognition of the huge contribution South Sea Islander people made to the sugar industry in the Herbert River District. So, from Cairns all the way down the East coast to Tweed Heads South Sea Islander people can hold their heads high and proud to be descendants of the Sugar Slaves.

Rockhampton 1974 – 1983

Randall Warkill



The Rockhampton Australian South Sea Islander community was changing its way of thinking during the 1970s. Australian South Sea Islanders were moving from labour-intensive employment to trades, office work (administration and clerical work), university study and business. There was a shift of families moving from the safety net of Australian South Sea Islander kinship communities into mainstream suburbia.

We had moved from living in Rockhampton's Kanaka Town (Creek Street) to Dawbarn Street (Lakes Creek). The house we moved into was one of the first houses built by OPAL (One People Australia League), an organisation to advance Aboriginal issues. Through my school years until 1974 Australian South Sea Islanders were eligible for ABSTUDY (study and apprentice scholarships for Indigenous people). Our identity was included into Indigenous culture. But a separate identity for Australian South Sea Islanders was also emerging.

The Rockhampton Australian South Sea Islanders had to fight through discrimination and prejudice in that era and I saw leaders like my Uncle Merv Vea Vea and Joe Leo take up that challenge. Sport in Rockhampton was and is significant in the understanding of cultures as Australian South Sea Islanders, Aborigines, Torres Strait Islanders and White Australians all had to compete on a level playing field.



Photo supplied by
Randall Warkill

I believe employment and sport provided the vehicle of understanding for Australian South Sea Islander culture in Rockhampton. I also believe the vision of our leaders (elders) was a defining factor for change in Rockhampton.



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Image no. 84644.
Mackay.

Mackay 1984 – 2003

Rowena Trieve OAM



I am 80 years old and I am happy to share milestones and events I was involved with in some capacity. In the late 1980s many things were being raised in relation to the Australian South Sea Islander community. There had been attempts made from the late 1970s to have a representative body of Australian South Sea Islanders to present to Government and be a channel of communication between the Governments and the Australian South Sea Islander people. This eventually caused

splinters in the community and it was being recognised that there did need to be an accountable organisation who could raise the Australian South Sea Islander profile and lead the communication. The politicians of the day also advised that there needed to be one organisation who Government could liaise with and who could be responsible for filtering information to the Australian South Sea Islander community.

This is when local and state government and community development organisations assisted the Mackay community to develop a new organisation. This sort of assistance was happening in some capacity across the state of Queensland. Many of the organisations would have struggled without their help, particularly the Mackay and District Australian South Sea Islander Association who eventually took on a lead role in the process. There was a real call from the communities



Outside Lagoons
Meeting House with
previous Mayor of
Mackay Julie Boyd.

wanting the Federal Government to give formal recognition to the descendants of the South Sea Islanders who were blackbirded to this country to develop the cotton and in particular the sugar plantations. The Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission had done research into the plight of Australian South Sea Islander descendants and their findings were that Australian South Sea Islanders were indeed the “Forgotten People” of Australia.

Mr Ray Braithwaite at the time put the recommendation to the Federal Government to give Federal recognition to the Australian South Sea Islander communities as distinctly unique and culturally diverse. The Labor Government at the time gave bi-partisan support to the recommendation.

As Hansard will show it was after much deliberation and a committed promise by our elected member Mr Braithwaite, Federal Government recognition was given to the Australian South Sea Islander community on the 25th August 1994 by the Keating Government. This was a memorable occasion and the Mackay City Council assisted some of our Mackay community to attend the Parliament session on that day. Each year on that date, Australian South Sea Islander communities get together to mark the event in various ways.

Unfortunately for the Australian South Sea Islander people recognition, whilst something we all wanted, didn't bring with it any sustainable funding, education, training, employment opportunities, housing or health initiatives. The Australian South Sea Islander people as a community have struggled to have the Governments of the day recognise the value of their contribution to the agricultural industry. We are not a new or emerging community and English isn't our second language but despite the contribution of our ancestors who were mostly blackbirded to the country we are still being treated differently to other communities.

In the late 1990s into the early 2000s the Queensland Government had started meeting with the Australian South Sea Islander communities across the state to develop an Action Plan and a Queensland Recognition Statement. These documents had bi-partisan support within the Government and had special support of Mr Tim Mulherin MLA, for the Australian South Sea Islander people. Mr Peter Beattie then Premier of Queensland announced the Queensland Government Recognition Statement in Parliament House on 7th September 2001. Many of the Australian South Sea Islander community attended the ceremony as it had been long awaited by them. The Australian South Sea Islander Scholarship Foundation was set up at that time with Mal Meninga as its patron. Many students have gained tertiary qualifications with the assistance of the \$5000 per year scholarship.

In 2000 a reference group with formed to develop a protocols document for Government to communicate with Australian South Sea Islander people. Mackay and District Australian South Sea Islander Association (MADASSIA) was given the role of facilitating the process due to its long term resourcing of Australian South Sea Islander projects, access to community development staff and our location. The LAMP and Community Development positions in Mackay City Council led the consultations. The document came to fruition in the July 2000.



Interdepartmental committee convened to discuss Australian South Sea Islander Recognition.

A personal achievement for myself was in 2003 when I was honoured with an Order of Australia medal (OAM) in the Australia Day Awards. I was the second Australian South Sea Islander to receive this esteemed recognition for services to the Australian South Sea Islander community. Mr Joe Leo of Rockhampton had already received his award. We have spoken of the pride we felt when accepting our awards and the profile it raised for our people.



Courtesy of John Oxley
Library, State Library
of Queensland.
Image no. 608036.

In 2004 we were recognised by the Federal Government through Centrelink in Mackay with a ten year dinner. There was an opportunity for some community members to receive awards for their contribution to the community and also try and encourage other Government departments to make some commitment to the Australian South Sea Islander community.

Hope was raised between early to mid 2000s with a number of projects being funded across the state. Whilst not concurrent they did bring some training and employment opportunities for some in the community. In Mackay we were given some excellent direction and assistance from State Government (DETIR) and Mackay Regional Area Consultative Committee. By this time we were also being asked to share our history with school children and some of the Elders would be happy to give their time to do this. This still happens today.

We had also been given funding to engage a CAMS worker specifically for the Australian South Sea Islander community. This is a well utilised state-wide position and is now under the auspice of Mackay Regional Council. This position could be the key driver for communication with Governments. The Australian South Sea Islander community are quite vocal in suggesting this but as only funded for 18 hours a week, it places limitation on the program.

Some things have changed for the better, others not so, but I will pass on this food for thought with a quote from one of our long passed community Elders as it is still relevant today.

The Australian South Sea Islanders grew up in families where traditions of the islands were strong. As adults, some have visited the islands where their parents and grandparents were born. They have experienced the contrast between “what could have been” for themselves and “what will be” for their children in contemporary Australia. The value of our cultural heritage for our own children and grandchildren in a time of rapid change is a perplexing issue. May God help us all.

Rockhampton and Districts 2000 – 2010

Joanne Warkill and Mr Warren (Joe) Leo OAM



Joe: Our organisation, the Australian South Sea Islander United Council Independent Rockhampton and District Inc. were successful in obtaining a grant from the Department of Employment and Training in 1999 to train and obtain employment for Australian South Sea Islanders.

We were so successful in obtaining great outcomes we received the funding for 9 years in total from this Department.

Between 2000 and 2009 our people were lifted up because they received employment and training and this stabilised their lives. Some of our clients went on to other and better career aspirations and some even began studying at Central

Queensland Universities around Queensland. From 2002 onwards we assisted others to gain training and employment but the majority of those assisted were Australian South Sea Islanders.

Joanne: My Dad, Joe Leo OAM, who is still the President of Australian South Sea Islander United Council Independent Rockhampton and District Inc. stands proud that our organisation could do this for our people. He is now 80 years old and a bit frail but will never lose the fight for his people.

In the year 2000 we also saw the State Government recognise our people as a disadvantaged cultural group and to have our own identity. This came after the 1994 Federal Recognition. There are still times when we are still mistaken for another culture.



Courtesy of John Oxley
Library, State Library
of Queensland.
Image no. 604537

Joe: Our organisation also carried out other projects in that decade, transporting ni-Vanuatu people over to Rockhampton from Vanuatu to educate wider community on cultural and history. Our organisation then developed a cultural workshop package and would take packages into childcare centres, schools, Queensland Health agencies, Centrelink, and other government agencies to educate their staff and clients.

Our organisation also transported little children (pikininis) around Queensland to pass cultural dancing and singing onto communities, which was handed down from the chiefs and dancers from Vanuatu. Joanne was their Manageress.