

Rules and Regulations

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Like other missions and reserves in Queensland, Mona Mona had many rules and regulations, which minutely governed the lives of the Aboriginal people consigned to its care. Its rules fell into two general categories: those imposed by the Government of Queensland, and those created by mission staff to regulate the day-to-day behaviour of the Aboriginal residents and church members. Such was the power of the superintendents that some academics have controversially compared missions and reserves to “total institutions,” with strong similarities to prisons, asylums and concentration camps.¹ While some ex-residents, including Lucy Levers, Emma Johnson and Edgar Davis, thanked God in later life for Mona Mona,² more than one resident has described the mission’s regime as coercive, and across Queensland it was common to refer to residents as “inmates.” In keeping with this terminology, Barambah’s dormitories are said to have paralleled 19th-century reformatory institutions including female factories, women’s reformatories and Magdalene homes.³

Missionaries themselves have used the analogy of reformatories, although they insisted that the detention was an act of benevolence and not because Aboriginal people were criminals.⁴ In the case of nearby Yarrabah Mission, correspondence between the Anglican Board of Missions and the mission superintendent described the work as “to a large extent reformatory work if not actual ‘prison work’ involving priests to enforce ‘severe discipline’ and give out ‘civil punishment.’”⁵

Government Rules

Government authority was exercised through the formidable powers of the chief protector, and it underpinned many aspects of life at Mona Mona. Entire tribal groups and families were taken by force to the mission, although in some cases, individual children like Ronnie Richards were traumatically removed from their families and sent alone or with siblings.⁶ Within the “self-contained colony,” the superintendent was expected to bear “the responsibility of administering discipline and dealing with offenders, including those who are not members of the church.” This arrangement specifically required that “the native community assigned to Mona Mona live on the mission property, unless granted special permission to move elsewhere.”⁷ Once under the *Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act, 1897*, the mission superintendent was required to strictly supervise the access of Aboriginal persons to the outside world, usually through the issue of travel permits and work contracts.

Many Mona Mona residents have testified to the inflexible permit system that treated adults like children and often resulted in harsh penalties if residents overstayed their permitted time or left without permission.⁸ Requests for what some called a “ticket of leave” often had to be submitted a week in advance,⁹ and these were granted under tightly controlled conditions. Finlay Grogan remembered:

If we come to Kuranda for the day, then you get permission. You gotta be back there—little ticket you know, you go into Kuranda for a day—couple of day, then when your time’s up, you gotta go back home. If you’re not home that certain day, you’re in trouble. You might have to go to jail for a couple of days.¹⁰

The chief reasons for issue of temporary travel permits were to reward good behaviour, facilitate mission trade, enable medical treatment and accommodate the desire of some residents for limited autonomy. In the case of outside work contracts, the burden on the mission was to generate income for its considerable costs; only incidentally were residents’ needs or career aspirations taken into consideration. However, especially in the 1940s and 1950s, a good work and behaviour record in these places could lead to a highly prized exemption, allowing the individual or family to live and work in places of their choice, no longer under the authority of the chief protector or mission superintendent. For many, this independence was a singular goal.¹¹

The distress caused by government restrictions on living location, travel and relationships lingers in the memory of former residents. When asked what he would change if he could, Glenn Williams said:

I would let everybody have their freedom to live their lives how they want. Sometimes people were forced into marriage with their own relatives, the old people knew that was wrong but they couldn't stop it. Also we needed a permit to go into town or fishing, we were always under Government control.¹²

May Franks spoke of her father, Dick Richardson, who had a cooperative relationship with the mission authorities. According to her, "Dad would have changed the policy that stopped the Aboriginal people from coming and going as they liked."¹³

In the early years, when removals were still common, a significant proportion of Aboriginal people proved resistant to European influence and ways of living. These reluctant residents might have been offered "precious opportunities of directing them to the One who came to seek and save the lost."¹⁴ However, mission leaders worried that compulsory residence was "more or less a handicap to the prosecution of spiritual or evangelistic work."¹⁵ The unease of the mission leaders is evident in the observation that conditions were "not... ideal, either from the standpoint of our missionaries or the people themselves."¹⁶ Some residents struggled with the rigidity of rules and routines and found it difficult to give up habits incompatible with moral and lifestyle expectations. Nurse May Totenhofer observed:

It is sad to notice that the vices of the white people are to be found among these dark-skinned natives of Queensland. Smoking and drinking are habits hard for them to give up, and some even are victims to the morphia habit. But God is able to do for them abundantly more than we ask or think if we take His promises and believe them, for He has done it for others.¹⁷

Mission staff were not merely responsible for the discipline of their Aboriginal residents but also had a duty "to see that they have the necessities of life."¹⁸ In 1925, the government's woefully inadequate subsidy of one shilling per week per capita led a visitor to describe the mission as "largely an industrial enterprise" that was struggling to ensure its residents "share the responsibility of earning that living."¹⁹ As the government was eager to avoid shouldering its share of the costs, and also because the Seventh-day Adventist Church could not afford to subsidise Mona Mona to any great extent, farming and timber-cutting became central to the mission life. A strict work regime ensured that Aboriginal labour was not rewarded with wages but merely with food, rations and the necessities for survival. Punishments for not working and pressure to work outside the mission under contract became a matter of economic survival.

From the 1920s, the authorities required the establishment of a jail or watchhouse at Mona Mona to detain offenders in transit to other sites or to enforce mission rules. Accounts of detention in the dark and cramped cell with only dry bread and water have featured in the narratives of many former residents, for crimes as trivial as squabbling, speaking unkindly about a white person or being out of the dormitories after dark. According to Milton Brim, "we were publicly flogged and then put in jail. That was the punishment and it happened to a lot of people that I know."²⁰ Waving to parents or boyfriends as they passed the dormitory could result in stern disciplinary action and stealing a watermelon landed one resident in jail for a week.²¹

Other punishments included caning, with 24 hits recorded in one incident. Some residents recalled being forced to wear hessian bag clothing and having their heads shaved, which the victims referred to as being made "baldy." These punishments were often delivered publicly as part of a deliberate shaming.²² Similar practices occurred at Cherbourg Reserve. When Rita Huggins and two dormitory friends were caught trying to visit some boys, their heads were shaved and they were jailed for a week with only a single blanket and pillow provided. The punishment also involved a diet of bread and water and daily work scrubbing the dormitory floors with their bare hands.²³

In later decades, the regulations were policed by selected Aboriginal men tasked with enforcing law and order. Foremost of these was Harry Grogan Senior. While granting them local police status, complete with uniform, might have appeared to be a way of entrusting key residents with a level of responsibility, in effect it forced them to be complicit with the regime of control. In some cases, this led to the arrest, caning and jailing of their own family members.²⁴ Some residents felt the role of the Aboriginal constabulary was more or less ceremonial. The son of one police sergeant saw his father and the other five policemen as mere puppets of the superintendent, and themselves as "forced to obey" the rules. Another boy, whose father was also a policeman, saw the police as "more or less a figure[head] than scaring or protecting things."²⁵

Mona Mona's jail was not unique among missions. At nearby Yarrabah, detention occurred in a watch-house and was "seen by some young men 'as an initiation... you are not a man unless you go to goal.'"²⁶ Perhaps because of higher education levels and a decline in the number of missionary staff and white workers during the war years, by the late 1940s a residents' council was guiding the actions of the native police at Mona Mona in disciplinary matters.²⁷ In any case, government authorities were impressed with the community policing. The Queensland Government Native Affairs

Department reported in 1947 that the “native constabulary” was doing “an excellent job” and said so in the context of girls breaking out of their dormitories.²⁸

From the mid-1930s, legislation made the superintendents local protectors, formalising their status and power. Although Mona Mona and many other missions were not formally licensed, the superintendents were required to monitor Aboriginal sexuality to ensure that marriages between “full-blood” and “mixed-descent” people did not occur. Marriage partners were regulated in an attempt “to breed the black out of them.”²⁹ One resident reported that in earlier times, the mission had brought in young men and matched them with young women to marry, although she was quite relieved to have been able to make her own choice of husband.³⁰

Another grievous policy was the forbidding of residents from speaking their Indigenous languages and from learning traditional skills, with a consequent loss of heritage and identity. Residents were “robbed of [our] culture,” as Harry Grogan put it. “They took everything away, they weren’t even allowed to speak the language,” one woman remembered, while another recalled, “there was this old man missionary, who was determined to cut us off from our language, and when he caught us speaking our dialect he would give us six cuts of the cane on our hand or our backside.” Despite the damage done, Joyce Riley “remembered how to speak Djabuguy and so I’ve done my best to teach the young people of today how to speak it and carry on our language.”³¹ For some, speaking English became a social marker of being civilised, while speaking an Indigenous language was a matter of shame.³²

Ironically, the final chapter in the distress caused by government regulation was the closure of Mona Mona in 1962, without consultation with its residents. Despite all that had occurred, for many residents Mona Mona was more than a mission: it had become central to their history and identity, signified by the graves of family members and friends located nearby. One found it “frightening to enter a different world,” while Mervin Riley considered it “a very spiritual place to us”.³³

Understanding the Mission’s Rules

Many white Australian Adventists—and certainly some of the missionaries—shared the prejudices of the broader population. This emerged as seeing Aboriginal people not as the earliest form of the human species and society as suggested by secular evolutionists, but as the lowest form to which humanity had sunk because of sin.³⁴ Particularly in the first 20 years, missionary rhetoric painted Mona Mona’s residents as poor benighted souls, steeped in the darkness of idolatrous ignorance and simplicity, incompetent

at even basic survival unless guided by the benevolent hand of the mission staff whose task it was to introduce cleanliness, order, morality and a good work ethic. According to such accounts, Aboriginal people were shiftless, dirty, ignorant, improvident, incapable of elementary reasoning, having an aversion to discipline both mental and physical, with a “propensity to do evil,” and “always need[ing] someone to supervise them.”³⁵

Working closely with Aboriginal people was not a sure means of reducing prejudice. After three years working with Aboriginal people at Barambah and Mona Mona, Superintendent Rudge wrote, “I am only beginning really to understand the depths to which these people have sunk in ignorance and superstition, and how difficult it is to reach their beclouded minds with a single ray of gospel light.”³⁶ Not all accounts were so negative. May Totenhofer was impressed on her arrival in 1915 that about 30 women and children regularly attended afternoon school “and manifest an earnestness in learning the lessons allotted to them that little white children often lack.”³⁷

The tools of reform were evident to both government and missionary: “A patriarchal system of control must be followed in dealing with so primitive a people,” wrote two early leaders.³⁸ This pattern of interaction was to be modelled on the relationship of protection evident between a father and child,³⁹ leading one scholar to observe that “authoritarian power was thus exercised in the guise of paternalistic concern for family relations.” And yet, one missionary admitted that traditional Aboriginal society could be very satisfying, with many “contented with their lot.”⁴⁰

Contented or not, Mona Mona’s European missionaries strove to imbue Aboriginal people with their own aspirations and an overtly Western, Christian lifestyle. Australian Adventist prejudice was softened only by the concept that all humanity had fallen and was in need of salvation. Hence, though many white Australians considered Aboriginal people as irredeemably primitive, Adventists believed that they were capable of redemption, although this benevolence was often expressed in ways that were condescending, patronising and paternalistic.⁴¹ This can be seen in the lack of respect for traditional Indigenous leaders whose authority was not recognised. When the Minister for Health and Home Affairs for Queensland visited the mission in 1941, he wrote:

At the time I visited the mission the king of the local tribe had quite recently died and I was somewhat surprised when a deputation waited on me to ask if I would perform the ceremony of crowning the new monarch. I naturally consented. The natives all gathered round. I took the brass plate which signified the high office of king, and attached it by a chain to His Royal

Highness's neck, shook him warmly by the hand, and wished him a long and prosperous reign over his people. The brass plate adorned his noble chest quite adequately and everyone seemed as delighted with the simple ceremony as if it had been accompanied by all the pomp and ceremony imaginable.

Later I asked the superintendent what powers or authority the new king had. I was told he had none. But the tribe still insisted on having a king.⁴²

Like the government, the missionaries believed in the value of a generational break from the superstitions and practices of traditional Aboriginal culture. "To convert Aborigines to Christianity it was necessary to reconstruct the Aboriginal family," wrote one perceptive commentator. And thus, "[t]he success of both transformations required segregation."⁴³ In this way, the missionaries resonated with the government's desire to destroy Aboriginal culture and replace it with Western habits and values, seeing it as kindly to separate Aboriginal children from the "evil" or "debased" influences of the older generations, teach them the Western values of hard work, timeliness and discipline, and regulate marriage.

Although the white mission staff lived in the students' dormitories in the early years, over time four people-zones were established at Mona Mona, "to define social use and to mark status distinctions."⁴⁴ The first was the area of housing for the mission workers, all of them of European descent. This became a no-go zone for most Aboriginal residents unless they worked as domestics in those homes for the missionaries.⁴⁵ For one academic writing in the 1970s, this separation was one of the key attributes of total institutions: a division between inmates and staff.⁴⁶

The second zone encompassed the dormitories and living areas for the school-aged Aboriginal children and unmarried youth. Throughout Mona Mona's history, this space was the most highly regulated, resulting in the children's being separated from their parents, initially in order to remove "the influence of the native gunyahs," which were seen as "sufficient to neutralise to a great extent all the instruction given in school and church."⁴⁷ Children were usually taken into the dormitories at the ages of five to seven and often remained there until married. Conveniently, this arrangement not only increased the likelihood of children adopting Western ways, it also freed their parents to labour for the mission's economic survival. It is surprising that some residents have reported dormitory life as "fairly happy with close peer-group friendships being made," despite the "austere and often cramped accommodation."⁴⁸ For others, the experience was deeply traumatic.

After admission to the dormitories, children and parents were kept apart, except for visiting privileges one afternoon a week, often under

the watchful eye of staff. One resident resented having access to her mother limited to only one day per week, comparing this to the Stolen Generations.⁴⁹ Other contact with parents could be organised through special permission, but illicit contact, including provision of food, was subject to punishment. At times, younger children had more access to parents but were distressed when they were denied access once they reached their teen years.⁵⁰ Especially in the early decades, contact between children and the inhabitants of the camp, where residents lived a much more traditional lifestyle, was heavily monitored and restricted, lest the work of "civilising" should be undone and "bad" native habits be adopted.⁵¹

Dormitory life ran on strict timetables. In 1928, the day began when a morning rising bell was rung at 6 am (although at one stage, "prayer bands" were run at 5.45 am.), followed by worship, duties such as milking, then breakfast and work in the gardens until lunch. Two hours of schooling followed for younger children, then two more hours of work before dinner at 5 pm and worship. As was common in many educational institutions of that era, the girls were locked into their dormitory overnight, a measure designed to protect them from inappropriate relationships with boys, and lights out was at 9 pm.

This schedule changed in the 1950s when school hours increased to an equivalence with schools across Australia.⁵² While other Adventist boarding institutions were strict, spartan, hierarchical and sometimes cruel, it is also true that boarding schools for white Australians generally had a more liberal approach to parent-student access.⁵³ For Sutton, the segregation of Aboriginal children in dormitories served "to break down traditional kinship and cultural systems through segregating the children from elders and also separating younger and older girls."⁵⁴

The third zone consisted of very basic, two-room housing with "rudimentary" furniture and no internal facilities. Personal cooking was done outside.⁵⁵ Homes were built on a Western model for Aboriginal families who were willing to adopt the mission's values and culture. As the mission progressed, many of these were adults who had finished school, and gotten baptised and married. There were some levels of autonomy for this group, though housing was scarce, cramped and primitive when available, and food was served at the communal dining hall. This community was subject to restriction of movement, but members were able to live as semi-independent adults, provided they lived up to the basic values of Western society and the teachings of the church, and contributed to the work program.

The final group was composed of those residents who preferred a traditional lifestyle, numbering about 40 in the 1920s but dwindling to a

handful 20 years later. These people lived on the fringes of the settlement and occupied traditional-style homes, described by mission staff as “humpies.” While they were given food and tobacco by the mission, they had their choice of minimal interaction with the white staff. Although they often worked at the mission, they were granted little contact with the Aboriginal children, often their own relatives, who were held in the dormitories. Of course, they also subject to the strict rules forbidding them to leave Mona Mona without a permit. Maintaining as much traditional culture as they could, they performed corroborees on a regular basis through the early years, and to the disgust of some of the mission staff, continued with hunting and collecting bush food, keeping traditional crafts alive, and practising Aboriginal ceremonies and burial rites in the face of opposition.⁵⁶ However, if the missionaries thought that mission rules were being flaunted, the offender was punished or threatened with being sent to Palm Island or some other place of detention.⁵⁷

Outside of these four zones were various shared spaces, particularly where work occurred in gardening, farming, animal husbandry and timber-cutting and processing, as well as areas of untouched bushland that were available for recreation and hunting. The camp’s fringe dwellers were largely left to their own devices as irredeemable cases, but those living in the dormitories and in mission housing were forced to eat collectively in the dining hall, unapologetically segregated by gender, marital status and race. At a separate table at the head sat the superintendent, with the dormitory residents at tables running down from it, boys on one side and girls on the other, while married residents in mission housing sat at the foot.⁵⁸

The hierarchical dining practice adopted at Mona Mona was patterned after the system employed in many British boarding schools and universities where it continued until the 1960s. Initially dining in the communal area, missionary families nevertheless had the privilege of preparing their own food and eating in the privacy of their own homes.⁵⁹ The intention of communal eating for the Aboriginal residents was, according to an early superintendent, for “running the domestic part of the mission as much as possible on family lines, all coming together for meals and family worship.” This arrangement was designed to be economically efficient, by cutting down on wastage of time and food that would supposedly occur if preparation and consumption was left entirely to individual Aboriginal families.⁶⁰ However, the communal space was actually out of bounds for residents outside of meal times, thus regimenting even the commonly accepted communal space of the dining table.⁶¹

Segregation took multiple forms for residents. Not only were children separated by age-group, but also by gender. Outside of the classroom,

boys and girls were kept apart as far as possible. Work placements were often segregated by gender, with girls doing housework for missionaries, attending to cooking duties for the dining hall, or gardening and milking, while boys typically undertook heavier physical labour on the farms and building projects.⁶² The intention was to prepare them for the gendered roles in Western society, where men were breadwinners and women homemakers, although labour shortages in the early days meant that work roles were often shared.⁶³ Like mission and reserve staff elsewhere, those at Mona Mona were also eager to discourage pregnancies occurring outside of marriage, largely because of their Christian values, prevailing social norms and the practical challenges associated with providing ongoing support.

The rules of the mission reinforced the notion that traditional Aboriginal ways were generally bad and that Aboriginal people needed rigorous training and instruction in personal hygiene in order to become functional citizens. “Unless our women and girls are taught housework, they cannot make good wives,” wrote one missionary. “When their homes are untidy and dirty, they seem to have no desire for anything better; but if we can teach them to make their surroundings pleasant, and their homes clean and neat, that in itself helps to raise them from the depths to which they have sunk.”⁶⁴ The missionary went on to deplore Aboriginal cooking, eating and hygiene. Elsewhere, hygiene and personal tidiness were stringently policed. A former resident of the boys’ dormitory at Cherbourg recalled one matron who policed the children with a five-foot lawyer cane. If children were dirty or their clothes unclean, they were “whacked or boxed on the ears.”⁶⁵

The behaviour of the students at school was almost always reported as excellent. “When school was first opened, they were unruly at times, but we see great improvement as we go on,” reported the first teacher, adding that attendance was “very regular.”⁶⁶ Another early teacher found obedience to school regulations a “very commendable feature,” with students working “quietly and willingly.”⁶⁷ Orderliness was a key feature, and regulating the lives of the students from dormitory to school to church made it easier to produce the desired effect. A visiting educator noted that paired rows of students moved “in orderly groups with unhurried gait—no racing or shouting or straggling” everywhere they went, “proceeding to dining hall, worship, work, or church. . . . Viewed from the superintendent’s elevated balcony, they looked for all the world like strings of black ants.”⁶⁸ However, this level of regimentation aroused anger in some residents who have since interpreted marching children as treating them “as slaves” and forced “to march two by two, march back two by two, which is ridiculous but that was how we were taught.”⁶⁹

It is not surprising that a close watch was kept on relationships between boys and girls. Every effort was made to prevent or restrict contact between the genders, including locking the girls' dormitory overnight inside its fenced enclosure.⁷⁰ Sex education was limited to delivering "a strictly enforced moral code." Boys and girls could talk to each other, but only by appointment. "One night a week, courting couples were allowed to sit on the verandah of the superintendent's house and talk, but these occasions were organised by the superintendent and always took place under his supervision."⁷¹ Inevitably, despite these efforts, friendships were formed, often leading to disciplinary action. Of course, there was nothing particularly unique to Mona Mona about these rules; much the same existed at Avondale College and other Adventist mixed boarding facilities of those decades.

What was different was the punishment meted out for breaching the rules. Merely talking to a boy or girl over the fence could lead to time in jail, with the punishment increasing for repeat offences.⁷² "Minor moral transgressions" led to public shaming, shaving, caning or jail. Adultery was similarly punished with some jail terms stretching to three weeks. Unmarried girls who got pregnant were sometimes publicly shamed and sent to Palm Island as punishment. While forced marriages were not unusual for couples who found themselves pregnant during that time, by some accounts and perhaps not through the full history of Mona Mona, such weddings were sometimes conducted in private with the bride dressed in hessian and humiliated with a shaven head.

Work on the mission was usually carried out under supervision by a white person.⁷³ Early missionary observers commented on how incompetent Aboriginal workers were, not to be trusted with any task requiring any level of thinking, and needing close monitoring to do such things as washing clothes in boiling water, setting a table or preparing basic food dishes.⁷⁴ Hence, work roles allocated to residents were low-skilled, repetitive tasks at the bottom end of the economic scale.

Only when residents were given outside work did some manage to occupy roles that offered levels of work satisfaction and gain recognition for their skills. On the mission itself, roles of some responsibility were at first only entrusted to Aborigines of mixed ethnicity or to those who adapted best to mission expectations.⁷⁵ For example, Dick Richardson, the son of a Chinese father and Aboriginal mother, was employed for his carpentry skills and later selected with his wife to be the first Aboriginal Adventist missionaries, spending a number of years in Papua.⁷⁶

The rigidity of the system at Mona Mona began to ameliorate over time, with some suggesting it began as early as the late 1930s. War-time

conditions reduced the number of missionaries present and increased the levels of responsibility allowed to Aboriginal residents, who assumed leadership roles in farming, timber-cutting and blacksmithing. Nearby Army camps, especially American, dramatically increased interaction with outsiders and offered a market for souvenirs that generated a cash income for residents, which also increased their autonomy. Certainly, the post-war years saw some of the more restrictive policies dropped or softened.⁷⁷ This was due in part to changing government regulations, in part to there being fewer non-Europeanised Aboriginal people, whose presence and influence was on the decline, and in part to more liberal social expectations in both Australia and Adventism. One scholar suggested that perhaps the missionaries recognised that example rather than rule enforcement was a more effective way of converting residents. In any case, the artificial barriers between missionary and Aboriginal residents came down, collaboration more often replaced direction, and "[r]estrictions on residents' lives were relaxed and steps taken toward independence in decision-making implemented."⁷⁸

Church Rules

Church officials were resolved that the whole purpose of the mission was the salvation of its Aboriginal residents and fretted over the possibility that mere economic survival might displace this objective.⁷⁹ At the same time, the leaders were also clear that they would not impose religion on unwilling residents. The choice to worship and convert to Adventism had to be made from free will, the leaders declaring, "Although we have full control of these natives, we do not believe in forcing them to attend our religious services."⁸⁰

However, Adventist culture affected residents in various ways. While tobacco was issued daily to those who wished to have it, in accordance with government regulations, mission staff did what they could to discourage it and were pleased to find its use diminishing. The annual government report of 1955 stated that smokers were "a definite minority," and those who did persist with the habit were using tobacco "with a great deal of timidity."⁸¹ In addition, alcohol was strictly banned on the mission. This pleased both the staff and the government inspectors, who noted with satisfaction that this was a major factor in the very good behaviour at Mona Mona.⁸²

Government regulations required residents to be issued with meat. However, mission staff forbade the use of "unclean" meats such as pork, and did their best to discourage the eating of traditional foods such as kangaroo, goanna and some fish that did not meet Levitical standards. This provoked a negative reaction from some residents, who objected

to being micro-managed according to standards they did not accept.⁸³ Gambling and swearing were also discouraged with reports to the chief protector indicating that at least “a few were dealt with for immorality and gambling.”⁸⁴ Strict policing occurred among dormitory residents and those in mission housing, while camp residents were less closely governed and generally only received punishment for offences if they disturbed the peace or threatened to influence others. For dormitory residents, worships were compulsory, as was church attendance, and they were expected to conform to the “strict” standards of behaviour considered appropriate for the Sabbath hours. Punishments were meted out for playing sport or swimming on Sabbath during the annual camp at Kuranda.⁸⁵

Behavioural standards were highest for those who converted to Adventism. The mission constructed “a distinction between residents who were ‘saved’ from those who were still vulnerable to Satan.” For “acquiescent” Aboriginal residents, power was shared in the spiritual sphere, and they were offered subordinate leadership roles in services and programs but remained “subservient in status to that of European church leaders.” Mission leaders worried over the degree of “heartfelt conversions” and struggled to account for low church attendance. If anything, this made them even more protective of Adventist standards and “[t]he possibility of backsliding in religion or morality was monitored with vigilance by staff.”⁸⁶ Surviving extracts from the church records from 1952 to 1962 show numbers of members disfellowshipped or censured, with membership suspended for 6 to 12 months for “fornication” or “adultery.”⁸⁷

Crime, Punishment and Compliance

Words commonly used by former residents to describe the discipline at Mona Mona are “strict,” “hard,” “harsh” and “severe.”⁸⁸ One resident recalled hunting for forbidden food such as pig, kangaroo and wallaby, in part to make up for the meagre meat ration parcelled out to families, and partly out of anger at being told what meats he could not eat.⁸⁹ Others stole food from the gardens or fruit trees, driven in some measure by a perpetual state of hunger.⁹⁰ Sometimes it was high spirits that led to punishable behaviour. One boy remembered going for illicit horse rides after school, while still in uniform. Coming home late led to punishment, especially on Friday evenings. Sometimes he was beaten, other times his policeman father locked him up.⁹¹

Mission residents often felt for those in jail and sometimes risked punishment to help. One woman recalled throwing guavas, lemons and mangoes into the jail to alleviate the bread-and-water diet of family and friends suffering inside.⁹² For others, the only real solution was to try

to leave the mission as soon as possible. Deep resentment over petty restrictions drove one young man to work hard for exemption, which he gained at the age of 17. A mother gained exemption in order to be able to work, raise her children her own way and have freedom of movement, for example, to be able to go fishing without needing to ask permission.⁹³ Several women sought a measure of independence from the constrictions of dormitory life through marriage.⁹⁴

The rule that residents must eat together in the communal dining hall eventually reached a flashpoint when, according to one source, families in the village went on strike. Although there might have been more to the story, according to Julie Finlayson, “[t]heir action expressed a bitter resentment of the different standards determining the conduct of mission life. To most adults the communal dining room perpetuated and symbolised their lack of status and their position as dependents.”⁹⁵ By this account, the mission allowed them to cook at their own homes—on outdoor fires, as the homes lacked internal cooking facilities—provided they shot most of the dogs, to prevent the residents from giving their food to the animals. At one stage, the mission passed a rule restricting each family to just one dog in an attempt to rein in what they saw as wastefulness.⁹⁶ Both boys and girls were known to have escaped the dormitories at night⁹⁷ and several times residents ran away, either to experience a bit of independence, cook food stolen from the gardens, or simply because they were sick of the hard work.⁹⁸

Many other grievances fed resentment. One elderly woman compared the one blanket she was permitted on cold nights to the several blankets missionary children had and also noted that those children had lots of toys but she had none.⁹⁹ The pettiness of the discipline was a constant irritation. Men were not allowed to accompany women when they went to town, flogging or jail terms were imposed for criticising mission staff, talking to family or someone of the opposite sex without permission, or returning from leave even when only a few hours late. Sometimes an entire family was disciplined for the offences of just one of its members. Sixty years after the event, one resident remembered the pettiness of being ordered to pick up litter by a missionary who had just dropped it.¹⁰⁰

One of the greatest resentments arose from working for no pay or, if paid, having the money controlled by the superintendent who issued “pocket money.” One former resident recalled going to the bank but being told there was nothing in his account, while another felt insulted over a pitiful \$7000 being paid to her decades later by the Queensland Government as compensation for eight years of work.¹⁰¹ Without pay, residents sometimes expected privileges instead. Superintendent J L Branford found himself besieged by the Aboriginal men on his return from

a month away, each demanding a month's leave in reward for their good behaviour during his absence. "They are very persistent when they want anything for themselves, and can put up very plausible reasons," he noted wryly but rather unsympathetically.¹⁰²

Examples of more serious punishments can be found in the Mona Mona Advisory Committee minutes for 1953.¹⁰³ Even as late as this, when conditions at Mona Mona were reputedly easier than in earlier eras, the penalties make for distressing reading. A sample of entries follows:

March 8, 1953: a woman given three weeks solitary confinement and one month's hard labour for fornication; another resident given one week's solitary confinement and a one-month good behaviour bond for disturbing the peace; two men publicly whipped with six strokes on the buttocks and three on each hand for breaking and entering and theft from the Mission store.

July 31, 1953: a man sentenced to two week's solitary, plus cutting a specified volume of firewood for Resisting Arrest, Assault of Police and Disobeying a Lawful Command; The penalty set for a first charge of adultery to be three weeks' solitary confinement.

November 5, 1953: "Following the Chairman's remarks concerning the seriousness of the work of this Committee in dealing with sin in the camp" came a long list of penalties, including Confined to Barracks for up to 12 months, and compulsory church attendance.

December 4, 1953: penalties awarded for bad language, adultery and fornication. In two cases the caning was to be administered by the miscreant's father or a police officer (i.e. an Aboriginal).

Various mission staff held different opinions on the severity of punishments required. In his role as acting superintendent in 1953, headmaster Dawson took deep offence to a "strike" by six boys, resulting in substantial punishments and a letter to the Director of Native Affairs requesting they be transferred to other settlements. Soon afterwards, Superintendent Zanotti also wrote to the Director, defending five of the boys and requesting that they stay on the mission. For example, of one lad aged 20 he said:

[He] has generally speaking, been a good boy. Last year he showed himself rather unreliable in his work but has not in any way been difficult to handle. He has sweetheart problems but is getting married shortly and I think should settle down.

In summing up the matter, I would say that the main trouble has been the indiscreet handling of a disciplinary problem by

the Acting Superintendent. I think the intention was very honest and sincere but lack of experience and knowledge caused the trouble.¹⁰⁴

With the introduction of cash wages in 1956 and with more residents working off the mission, problems of gambling and alcohol use increased. Perhaps the most significant discipline problems, however, arose from those who wished to live more independently. The one young man who Zanotti thought should be transferred elsewhere would certainly have fit this category. Zanotti conceded that the lad was both capable and independent, writing of him:

[He] has always been a trouble maker and leader in insurrection.

He is an extremely difficult boy to handle... he has expressed a desire for exemption. He was at the time cane cutting. He is capable of very good and intelligent work... quite capable of looking after himself in the outside world as he is an intelligent half-caste. When cane cutting finished, he was returned here and was the leader in the "strike" by the six boys... I would recommend that either he be removed to another settlement or that we be given power deal with him in a more severe way... i.e. twelve months confined to barracks with hard labour and no privileges. We... would prefer if you if you could remove him to another Settlement and give him an opportunity to make good if he wishes and then apply for exemption.¹⁰⁵

Reflecting on Mona Mona's Rules and Regulations

Mona Mona residents varied in their reaction to the mission's rules and regulations. Of a "promising girl" who came to the mission voluntarily but sadly died in the first year of the mission's operations, the superintendent wrote, "She was very obedient to the rules, and did right as far as she understood. We know that the Judge of all the earth will do right; and we hope that we may see Molly in the kingdom."¹⁰⁶ Government reports on Mona Mona noted the good behaviour of the bulk of residents over several decades, concluding in 1958 that "most of the natives are making a more decided effort to co-operate in all sections of activity daily performed on the station."¹⁰⁷ This might reveal that the behaviour and attitude of its residents improved as the rigidity of Mona Mona's rules eased and the likelihood of being granted exemptions increased.¹⁰⁸ Ultimately, good behaviour and a good reputation were required to be allowed to leave the mission and this must have added some incentive.

Several former residents have expressed gratitude for having been taught right behaviour. "I learnt to love Jesus," Florence Brim recalled. "I learnt

respect; I learnt discipline—just like all the elders here. I wouldn't be here today if it wasn't for the upbringing the Mona Mona people gave me.”¹⁰⁹ Another said, “The missionaries were strict but I think looking back it was a good thing because all that made people better for it,” adding that their treatment was typical for Aboriginal people everywhere in Australia.¹¹⁰ Walter Snider observed that he was “born in 1952 under the SDA law and I appreciate the rules, directing me where to go.” He added, “Maybe some other people have other views of it but to me I love everything about Mona Mona.”¹¹¹ When asked what he thought, Clem Riley simply said, “When you do the wrong thing, you have got to be disciplined.”¹¹²

Despite some injustices and harsh punishments that residents are reluctant to talk about, many have been generous in their understanding of the conditions under which the mission superintendents ran Mona Mona, recognising that it was a different era and behind their decisions was the need to comply with government regulations. As one resident explained:

One thing that I can say is that, that mission wasn't only governed by a Seventh-day Adventist mission, it was governed by the Government as well and the rules and regulations were all set out for every mission, and the Superintendent had to obey and abide by. That's why a lot of people ask me “Do you blame the church for all that happened to you out at Mona Mona?” And I say, “No, I don't blame the church, the church had to abide by the rules and regulations that the government had set out for that mission.”¹¹³

Another observed a difference in how the mission approached discipline compared to what the government required, pointing out that the church sometimes helped people by not sending them down to Palm Island or Barambah Mission and sometimes dealt with serious cases internally.¹¹⁴ Others were not so sure, wondering, “[B]ut whether they had to follow Government rules, I don't know, but I think that happens all over.”¹¹⁵

Of course, it is impossible to reach a definitive conclusion about the appropriateness of the rules at Mona Mona, as so many experienced rules and methods of discipline in different ways, under a variety of superintendents, over a 50-year period. Claims that Mona Mona was a “total institution” must be viewed cautiously, for although the missionaries sought to reform and change those in their care, a close reading of their publications suggests that they were motivated by paternalistic concern and what they would have called Christian love. What is clear is that the superintendent, as the local protector, had enormous powers over Aboriginal justice, and sitting alone, without legal training, could pass sentence on the residents who had no rights of appeal.¹¹⁶ The participation

of Aboriginal leaders on the advisory committee in the 1950s did not necessarily lead to softer punishments.

The complete authority of mission staff ensured that traditional law, justice and authority was thoroughly replaced at Mona Mona with Western rule and authority. Obviously, many who ran the mission acted in good faith for what they believed was best for those in their charge. Many residents resented these attempts to regulate their lives, carrying a sense of injury into adulthood, while others felt that the mission set them up to live well. Speaking in 2017, Mervin Riley said, “I wish it was still open. But our young people today, descendants, if they were at Mona Mona, I don't think they'd be taking up this drinking and you know, drugs and all that stuff.”¹¹⁷ And there were those in between, whose verdict might best be summarised by one former resident and respected elder, June Grogan, who noted even-handedly, “[S]ome things were good and some things were bad, not all good like they say.”¹¹⁸

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