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Fun Times and Good Memories

Daniel Reynaud

Adventism in the first half of the 20th century was earnest in tone and inclined to cast a jaundiced eye on purely leisure activities. Arguably, this was a legacy of Ellen White, who had studied the life of Christ and found no instance of his devoting time to play or amusements. Earnest in her defence of a Protestant work ethic, she wrote, "Diligent study is essential, and diligent hard work. Play is not essential."¹ However, despite its rules, regulations and focus on hard work, there were times of relaxation, fun and laughter for Mona Mona residents. Prior to its establishment, church leaders had anticipated the need for leisure activities, voting that although the mission should be "reformatory," it would allow magic lantern and cinematograph entertainment, as well as "less objectionable games," including cricket and football.²

James Branford actively encouraged participation in sports. In 1919, a *Northern Herald* reporter described "considerable amusement and interest" for Mareeba spectators of football matches between mission youth and local boys. He issued a challenge on behalf of Branford who promised to "send a team from the mission to Oaklands to compete with any team visiting there, and the boys would clear a suitable ground and possibly arrange a good corroborree."³ While Superintendent Borgas showed much less enthusiasm for sport, and eventually brought corroborrees to an end, this did not stop later cricket games by the mission team against the Mantaka Cricket Club, near Kuranda.⁴

Especially from the 1940s, mission staff organised a range of fun

activities, as well as providing some free time that could be filled with sport, hunting, swimming and music. Mervin Riley recalled playing with soldiers camped nearby during the war. “[T]hey came over and had a game with us,” he said. “I think that was good fun that day.”⁵ Naturally, the residents also created their own fun, sometimes in breach of the rules that forbade activities like gambling and boxing. Certainly, by the 1950s, the range of options available to residents was broad enough for some ex-residents to remember them with great fondness. “Those were the good old days,” Walter Snider stated.⁶

Official Fun

In the early days, mere survival limited the scope for organised recreation, although Rudge argued that residents were happy because “there [was] an abundance of sport” and “many thousands of acres of land” to roam.⁷ One non-religious leisure activity proved especially popular: a yearly picnic. At first it was a one-day affair, which the staff considered to be “a success,” as well as “an excellent means of keeping the natives from the vice and allurements of the towns during the holiday season.”⁸ By 1922, with the help of donations, the mission staff were able to give each child a present for Christmas. The gifts were not frivolous toys but “nice, useful things,” probably clothes and educational materials such as books and stationery.⁹ No mention was made of the duration of the Christmas holidays offered to the residents at this stage, but by the time another decade had passed, the Christmas festivities involved either time at Oak Forest or “a camping holiday at the seaside, to the wonder of many who had never seen the sea before.”¹⁰ The allure of sand and fishing proved popular, although beach holidays also had their hazards: on one occasion, several Mona Mona residents were hospitalised after being stung by box jellyfish.¹¹

Mid-winter camps might also have been a feature of mission life. The year 1936 saw 32 girls camped at Oak Forest, on the Barron River, under the watchful gaze of Arthur Hill and two chaperones, who also accompanied them to Kuranda and the picturesque Barron Falls. A week later, 44 boys camped at Kowrowra, where they swam, fished and walked to Kuranda.¹² Notably, on both occasions there was strict segregation of boys and girls.

Much later, in 1949, the Christmas break for the girls was an exciting 18-day break at Yorkey's Knob, a beach near Cairns that was about 35 kilometres from the mission. For Pat Blanch, who described the event, it was a rare privilege for residents who were hemmed in by high mountains and used to seeing a visitor once in six months. According to him, there

was a great stir at Mona Mona that morning and much incessant talk as 20 excited “Marys” boarded the mission lorry:

Now this was the day and they were actually off to the beachside for eighteen lovely, whole days and nights. . . . How the load piled higher and higher—suitcases, food boxes, bedding, bags full of bread, bags full of vegetables, bags full of this and that . . . more than ever could be heard chatter, chatter, chatter. My how the ladies can talk, and it is ever thus.¹³

To the delight of the girls, the holiday came complete with a visit to a Swedish ship docked in port to load sugar, which was a novel experience that proved intimidating for a number of the girls. A trip to Green Island also followed, courtesy of a donation of tickets to each girl. Excitingly for the girls, three Sabbaths were spent either on the beach, at the Cairns Seventh-day Adventist Church or in visitation. Only two girls had swimming costumes, which meant that the others were restricted to bathing in cotton dresses when no-one else was around.¹⁴

No report survives of similar holiday expeditions for the boys, but it may be presumed that such events occurred. Roderick Duffin recalled that his happiest memory was “when we got our six-week holiday time and we all got to go and camp at Oak Forest. That was a big holiday for everyone, nobody had to work then.”¹⁵ Mervin Riley also remembered having fun in activities that were sometimes unsupervised:

Going out to the bush and see a beehive on the tree and you cut the tree down and rob the bee. And fishing and going down the Barron river, camping and learning to tie the knots and bowline. At the end of the year we go down the Barron river and spend 2 or 3 weeks down there and the staff would come down every Sabbath to check out where we camp. We go horse riding when we get back and go over the hills and catch brumbies. Yeah, we had a good time, I'll never forget the time we had out there.¹⁶

The annual Christmas holiday was an established tradition by the 1950s. It usually consisted of at least a two- or three-week break on a campground at Oak Forest by the Barron River, a few kilometres away. The truck would make multiple trips to carry families, the dormitory residents and their luggage to the camping area, where residents sheltered in corrugated-iron huts. The time was unstructured and largely unsupervised, often filled with hunting and fishing. Residents recalled these breaks as some of their happiest times.¹⁷ “They love holidaying and sport and give everything they have to make this side of their lives happy,” wrote a missionary.

However, this time off the property itself was sometimes still seen as an attempt to “help the natives overcome their natural desires to go walkabout” and not simply as valuable recreation in its own right. It was also an opportunity for Mona Mona staff to work on projects or take leave while most of its residents were away. As such, it was not so much a holiday as a change for the staff.¹⁸ Nevertheless, on other occasions, mission staff worked hard to provide a memorable holiday experience. In 1954, Headmaster Dawson and approximately 60 mission boys and girls aged five to 14 were hosted by the Seaman’s Union on the ship *Kanimbla* where they “enjoyed to the maximum the huge balloons, squeakers,¹⁹ jazz caps and abundant party fare. Each boy received a gay shirt and each girl a purse, comb, handkerchief and mirror.”²⁰

Other planned leisure days were scattered throughout the year, especially for the schoolchildren. A teacher wrote of the picnic she organised for a fine winter’s day in the nearby bush, with a lunch of cakes, biscuits, jellies and tarts, and a lucky dip present box of lollies, ribbons and trinkets.²¹ School closing events involved “competitions, games, and musical items, and the giving out of prizes,” with parents and pre-school children also involved. Many of the “books, toys, cards, clothes, and what-nots” used as prizes were donated by church members in Australia. The year-end concerts were also popular with the residents, giving “real pleasure and entertainment,” and for weeks afterwards the memory of particular performances brought delight.²²

An unexpected festivity occurred in 1940 when a pupil won a national essay competition. Along with a silver cup and gold medal, Maurice Baker earned for the residents a public holiday, complete with “sports on the field with fire-works at night, preceded by a sumptuous spread of treacle-bread and soup served in billycans, etc.” The teacher, Elsie Wood, ensured that over a number of days, other students had a chance to share in his glory.²³

Sport was a favourite activity among the residents, and the various superintendents made provision for games, in line with the expectations of the government, which considered European sports as a marker of civilisation. In 1925, a government minister was photographed presenting a football to residents, as well as distributing lollies and toys.²⁴ Chief Protector Bleakly was a strong supporter of cricket and rugby. However, despite being one of his favourite sports, boxing was banned on the mission by the various superintendents, in keeping with conservative Adventist beliefs about the sport. This led to some residents sneaking out to fight in amateur events in later years.²⁵ Harry Grogan, who honed his fighting instincts against the rules, was among a group who fought in boxing

tournaments in the local district on weekends, using pseudonyms to avoid being found out by the authorities, who would have banned their weekend leave if they had known.²⁶

After World War II, a committee of residents was formed to organise seasonal sporting events and day picnics, with equipment provided by the mission. “Organised games” were a regular feature of Saturday nights, while school children took part in “[p]hysical culture and tumbling... and such games as rounders, volleyball.” Cricket and football were played on Wednesdays and Sundays during their respective seasons.²⁷

The residents were not constrained by European notions of how to play sport: one government report noted that “organised sport has the habit of becoming disorganised,”²⁸ but doubtless it was more fun this way. On one occasion during the war, visiting Australian soldiers played football against the residents, although the locals were playing Rugby League and the visitors, wearing big army boots, played Australian Rules football. The mechanics of a game combining two codes were probably very confusing, but Mervin Riley remembered it as “good fun that day.”²⁹ Another recalled games of rugby between Mona Mona teams composed of “half casts against darks.”³⁰ Rather than being seen as an example of racism, this might have been more to do with the lack of jerseys to identify team members. In any case, it was said, “They’ll have their own team and we’d have our own team and we used to compete.”³¹

Whether annual or scheduled more often, the school sports days featured the usual events as well as festive activities such as marching, wood-chopping contests, rodeo events, greasy-pole climbing, wheelbarrow races and egg-and-spoon races. Such fun days could have groups from other places attending and participating and were remembered fondly. “It was good fun, we enjoyed it there,” said Winnie Brim.³² Speaking about one show day, Mervin Riley recalled the delight of watching a competition where the big boys could jump on the back of a calf and see how long they could stay on:

Roddy Duffin stayed on for the full 8 seconds but then instead of jumping off he stayed on and then he was riding that calf like a horse and rode him right out of the show ground. That made us laugh so much, I reckon he must have been frightened to fall off and of getting hurt.³³

At times, the Mona Mona men and youth played rugby in the local area and hosted games. A Rugby League match against one visiting side was notable for bear-like tackles, fierce enough to ensure the visitors never returned for another match.³⁴ It is likely that Mona Mona was a leader among Adventist educational institutions of the time in having organised

competitive sport, especially contact sports such as Rugby League. While Adventist education at the time generally did not permit such sports, it was probably fostered at Mona Mona because the government expected it to be—in the same way that the mission supplied residents with meat and tobacco, contrary to Adventist principles. Being popular among Aboriginal people, sport was probably also seen as a means of inculcating them with Western values.

Far from creating a cloistered environment that strictly segregated residents from the outside world, some staff took some pride in organising visits to prominent events in Mareeba and Cairns. Mona Mona people were regularly taken to “district sports and rodeos where they take a very active part in the horse and bullock riding events” and other activities at these meets.³⁵ A recreation hall built at the mission in 1953 was a welcome addition and it hosted indoor sports. Saturday night youth socials became a feature, as did band practice and movie screenings, which increased from monthly in 1955 to weekly by 1959.³⁶ These more progressive policies coincided with increased government funding, changing cultural expectations among white Australians and more progressive administrators.

Other forms of leisure included being granted precious passes to leave for specified times. These could be given for various reasons, including going to town and visiting relatives. Some residents, particularly the adult males, felt that their unpaid work on the mission entitled them to time off for up to a month, and were “very persistent...and can put up very plausible reasons” in their demand for what they considered was earned leave.³⁷ In fact, any expedition away from Mona Mona could be viewed as fun. Some remembered enjoying the visits to Cairns, Kuranda and Mareeba as part of the Junior Missionary Volunteer (JMV)s, as well as singing on the streets.³⁸

The missionaries considered some leisure activities to be highly undesirable. When Mona Mona first opened, it had to manage the smoking and drinking of many residents, and there were even some who were “victims to the morphia habit.” These opium addicts were forced to go cold turkey once on the property. Changing the other two leisure activities took time, but the mission soon became noted for its absence of alcohol and the marked reduction in smoking, despite the government requirement that all residents who wanted it receive a regular supply of tobacco.³⁹

Spontaneous Fun

Despite the efforts of government and staff to replace Aboriginal behaviours with those of European society, the residents of Mona Mona made the most of opportunities to practise traditional recreations, crafts and habits.

These offered a kind of resistance to the efforts of the authorities in their attempt to eliminate Aboriginal culture. In the early days, camp-dwellers had the most freedom to maintain their traditional ways, as they were written off as irredeemable and subjected to minimal control. Corroborees were frequent events, sometimes witnessed by disdainful white visitors who could recognise them as a “a fantastic performance” designed around “an imitation of various sounds in nature and a means of arousing a warlike spirit in the warriors.” However, some visitors still labelled the whole event as lacking intelligence, “unmusical,” marked by “grunting in unison,” noxious body odour, and being in sum, “very weird.”⁴⁰ All-night performances were not unknown.⁴¹

While corroborees were more frequent in the early days of Mona Mona, they were still monthly events in later years, though by then they were performed around a fire in English rather than the Indigenous languages, which had been forbidden.⁴² Mission leaders did what they could short of an outright ban to discourage corroborees. Asked to stage one in 1951 for the Cairns Agricultural Show, the superintendent turned it down, instead providing a performance by the band and choir, which was considered more in keeping with the church’s values.⁴³ What European observers failed to understand was that these corroborees brought former warring tribes together peacefully and were likely used to retell stories of significance, involving ethics, hunting, family and what many Australians refer to as the Dreamtime,⁴⁴ as well as to help make sense of more recent and unpleasant experiences, such as being arrested by the police. These were often recounted with humour, offering an invaluable way of processing traumatic events.⁴⁵ In later years, some children had the opportunity to participate alongside their elders in limited traditional cultural practices, such as corroborees and speaking their own language.⁴⁶

The extensive area of bushland on the property offered other avenues for practising traditional activities. There were “many thousands of acres of land still in a state of nature, over which they can roam at will,” wrote a founder of Mona Mona,⁴⁷ although many residents would almost certainly have contested the notion that they could roam them at will. Those who lived in the camp could do so, as they experienced little supervision, but those in the settlement, and especially those in the dormitories, found their time largely taken up with work, study and other regulated activity. Nevertheless, the bush offered a range of recreational opportunities. Most frequent, and very popular, were bushwalks, especially on Sabbath afternoons and Sundays. These miniature “walkabouts” offered a sense of liberation from the ever-present regulations and reflected Aboriginal tradition, which made them a highlight in the week, especially for children

in the dormitories.⁴⁸ Missionaries noted that the residents often requested, “We fellow all want ter walk about.”⁴⁹

Collecting bush foods formed an incidental but important part of bushwalks. Doing so not only augmented the unvaried and sometimes meagre diet of the children but allowed them to practise what limited bush food foraging skills they had managed to learn from their elders.⁵⁰ Girls collected pig weed, boiled it and added fat or salt and spiced chilli leaves for flavour. Pumpkin tippings and wild yams also supplemented the diet in the early days when rations were meagre.⁵¹ Eddie Hastie recalled foraging for wild fruit, “like figs by the creek and guava past the bullock yard. We used to go over to Dora scrub and get nuts and also we got brown and white apples, then down near the duck yard and also at Pineapple Hill we got wild cherries.”⁵² Mervin Riley enjoyed “[g]oing out to the bush and see a beehive on the tree and you cut the tree down and rob the bee.” Along with locating and gathering bush honey, he enjoyed fishing, camping, horse-riding and catching brumbies. Berry-picking was also noted.⁵³

Hunting, shooting and fishing were popular recreational activities among the boys and men.⁵⁴ Clem Riley recalled hunting pigs, though not eating them, while Harry Grogan enjoyed hunting pig, kangaroo and wallaby, not just for the sport but also for the meat, especially as it was forbidden by the mission authorities as “unclean.” Esther Freeman-Snyder found the fishing important as a bonding activity as she was mentored by the older girls. For Elvina Hunter, a simple walk or horse-ride to the river, followed by cooking some freshly caught fish, was a highlight.⁵⁵ One girl remembered hunting pigeons and parrots with a shanghai, and cooking them over an open fire.⁵⁶ Several of the residents owned their own guns, which they used for hunting or protecting their gardens from pigs. In one incident, an accidental gun discharge led to the tragic death of Heather Simon’s father in Mareeba Hospital.⁵⁷

The bush offered resources from which to craft traditional products such as baskets and dilly-bags, and weapons such as spears, boomerangs, shields, nulla-nullas and woomeras. Many of these were made for cash sale to tourists visiting the mission, especially during and after World War II. A burst of creative activity erupted when Aboriginal culture was made a feature at the 1951 Cairns Agricultural Show.⁵⁸ Interestingly, this influx of tourists to the mission might have helped revive and preserve culture, something that would become important decades later with the emergence of the Tjapukai Cultural Centre and other enterprises in the Kuranda area. Beryl Dawson, wife of G J Dawson, headmaster in the early 1950s, fondly remembered collecting pandanus with the mission women and “going bush,” where she learned a lot.⁵⁹

Other popular recreation activities included swimming and horse-riding. The girls and boys had separate swimming holes in Flaggy Creek and took a swim—or “bogey” as they called it—as often as three times a day in hot weather. They particularly enjoyed swimming during floods, which could raise the water level in the creek by several metres. Amazed at their confidence in the water, a white observer compared them to corks and seals. Other swimming spots included the duck pond, Hartley Creek, the holiday camps at the Barron River and various Cairns beaches.⁶⁰ Using mud slides at Mona Mona or at the Barron River was also a source of much fun, while some illicit sliding down a hill on a Sabbath using offcuts from the sawmill led to “a huge splinter in backside” for one boy.⁶¹

Horse-riding was common, especially after-school rides, sometimes till very late, which led to punishment. Horses were often ridden down to the creek carrying up to six small children for fishing trips, and on camps at the Barron River, brumbies were chased and caught. Having gained experience managing the cattle on the property and on regional cattle farms, the boys and men became accomplished riders, jumping horses over logs, and many entered the local rodeos to test their skills.⁶² Not everyone, however, was a keen rider; some even expressed fear of the horses.⁶³

While staff organised some sporting activities, such as annual rodeos, much of the sport was informal. The mission’s leaders left some free time in which residents could pursue an “abundance of sport, of which they are so fond,” such as cricket and various football codes, rounders, hockey, basketball and volleyball.⁶⁴ Games of cricket and football after school or work were common, although in the early years, the residents stopped playing sport on Sabbaths, which pleased the mission authorities greatly.⁶⁵ Like children everywhere, the boys at Mona Mona found time to play in the confines of their lodgings. Football games in the dormitory compound often led to broken windows.⁶⁶ Other after-school activities included playing marbles, in which even the adults indulged, and simple games and socialising, especially when school-age girls were locked in until tea time.⁶⁷ As already noted, the residents often preferred to let team sports evolve into an informal game where rules mattered less than enjoyment.⁶⁸

When asked for their happiest memories, diverse features of mission life were identified by former residents who continued to identify as Seventh-day Adventist. Rita Hunter, Heather Simon and Mervin Riley described attending church, Friday night vespers and Tuesday night prayer meetings as special times. “I used to really look forward to going to church,” Winnie Brim recalled.⁶⁹ Others had precious memories of time with family, listening to a grandmother’s stories around a campfire, visiting relatives

with a father, or having a mother and aunts secret them peanuts from the bags they were packing for sale, or squirting milk from the cows at the boys as they passed.⁷⁰ Times where residents had some level of autonomy were likely to rate as favourite memories, even if taken against the rules.

Mona Mona Music

Prominent in so many accounts of Mona Mona is the delight that its residents took in music. From its earliest days, missionaries and visitors alike noted that the children and young people were “extremely fond of music both instrumental and vocal,”⁷¹ although they were not always positive about the level of skill demonstrated:

These little black boys and girls, like every white child, dearly love singing and other music. It is a usual sight to see a group of children, the youngest little more than three years, having a sacred concert among themselves, singing hymn after hymn, with much volume and correctness though often lacking sweetness. Their one difficulty is to remember the words, but they usually overcome this by singing the best-remembered verse over and over.⁷²

The lack of sweetness was quickly overcome, as many listeners repeatedly observed, by the richness and harmony of the singing of the residents, coming from voices that some hearers considered to be lower in register than Europeans.⁷³ Particularly notable was the enthusiasm with which they sang: “the little ones sometimes sing so loudly that they drown the music.” Other writers spoke of “lustily singing,” singing “with gusto,” and mentioned that “the church fairly rocks with the volume of the singing.”⁷⁴

The musical ability of the Aboriginal residents provoked contradictory responses from European listeners. On the one hand, they often considered the residents to have “natural ability” in music, particularly harmony, while on the other hand they seemed surprised that people with no other musical heritage than corroborees could be so musical.⁷⁵ In any case, mission staff and visitors were impressed with how quickly and proficiently they learned to sing, considering that, in this, “an excellence has been reached which would put many of our European congregations to shame,” and which listeners found inspirational, even moving them to tears.⁷⁶ Residents both young and old joined the singing in religious services, while hymn-singing was a common evening pastime, with hymns sung by heart and often identified not by title but by their number in the hymnal. It was common to hear rich harmonising, with part-swapping, pouring from the dormitories during the Sabbath hours from Friday evening to Sabbath evening, only breaking for meals and formal services. Mission leaders placed great faith

in the power of music, not merely as a tool of Europeanisation, but also to develop Christian faith.⁷⁷

Naturally, these leaders also sought to integrate musical participation into formal aspects of worship and education. By 1918, young people were featured singers in Sabbath afternoon meetings, presenting “solos, duets, and part songs.” A choir of about a dozen was also established, initially under the direction of Superintendent Borgas, singing a featured song every Sabbath by the 1920s. In 1927, the choir and two quartets assisted with an evangelistic campaign run in the nearby town of Mareeba, impressing the large white audience with their quality.⁷⁸ Some of the singers could read music, but even when they couldn’t and when musical scores were too scarce to have enough for all the singers, the quality of the performances was not reduced.⁷⁹ In later years, W Zanotti became the conductor and appeals were launched for people to donate particular song books to Mona Mona, especially as the choir had grown to 40 voices.⁸⁰

Alongside learning to sing, the mission’s residents also learned various instruments. At first, several girls were taught the piano and organ, soon becoming sufficiently accomplished to accompany worship services. By the 1940s, many girls were being taught the piano by Mrs Zanotti, with about half of the 15 recorded in 1949 as capable of accompanying services, while one studying Grade Four piano was even more accomplished, becoming the principal accompanist for various performances. As the mission lacked a piano, lessons and practices were conducted in the private homes of staff who owned their own piano or organ.⁸¹

Meanwhile the musical instruction of the boys was not neglected. The most distinctive contribution from the boys was the development of the gum-leaf band, which became a well-known feature of Mona Mona. Leaf quartets, later played on lemon leaves, which were softer and produced a better tone, became a highlight of music performances over the years, delighting many an astonished visitor, who sometimes described the tone as resembling violins.⁸² “I had never seen this done anywhere before, but it certainly made very fine music,” wrote one visitor. Mrs Borgas, wife of the superintendent, noted that the Europeans had tried “but cannot attain to the success of the natives.”⁸³

The arrival of the Zanottis, both of whom were accomplished musicians, led to a much more professional approach to music education. Wilton (Bill) Zanotti’s ambition was to start a brass band, but during the immediate post-war years, funds were limited. Only a trickle of donations came in response to appeals for the £300 required to buy the necessary instruments.⁸⁴ In 1949, Zanotti was able to buy 15 instruments from the local Mareeba Town Band at the bargain price of £480, albeit with payments in instalments,

to add to an assortment of donated pieces. Work was required to repair damage and the ravages of time on some of these instruments.⁸⁵

Under Zanotti's leadership, the Mona Mona band developed accomplished musicians and a burgeoning local reputation. Within a few months, the band was invited to conduct the Anzac Day services at Kuranda for the following year. They performed with distinction before a largely white audience and accorded great respect from the organising committee. Praised for delivering "the best [Anzac service] we have had yet," the band was immediately invited to conduct the service for the next year (1951) and was regaled with refreshments provided by the Country Women's Association. In the following weeks, the mission received a cheque for two guineas from the Returned Services League and an invitation to present a fund-raising concert for the band.⁸⁶

The appearance of the Mona Mona Brass Band at ANZAC services was remarkable in far-north Queensland. There can be few precedents for a band of mostly Indigenous Australians performing at an event that still in the 1950s so quintessentially defined white Australia. Incidentally, there is no record of Mona Mona residents serving in either world wars. In the following year, the band and choir were featured in the Cairns Jubilee Agricultural Show, where they made a favourable impression on the crowds and garnered £300 in donations.⁸⁷ Superintendent Peacock described huge crowds, a "marvellous" exhibit and a triumphant final-evening performance in which mission residents "entered the show ring at a point farthest from the grandstand, and marched to their place while the band played."⁸⁸

From this point on, the band was much in demand around the region, playing concerts across north Queensland for white and Aboriginal audiences, including on Palm and Fantome Islands, where other Aboriginal people were held on government-run stations, relatives of the band-members among them.⁸⁹ A performance in Cairns was filmed for use in the American "Voice of Prophecy" radio broadcasts. There was even talk of taking the band to the United States for more recordings.⁹⁰ The Native Affairs Report for 1955 listed a tour to local towns including Mareeba, Atherton, Millaa Millaa, Ravenshoe and Herberton:

In all of these towns large crowds of white people were delighted, and it was visibly evident that many were emotionally moved by the beautiful music rendered by the sons of Australia's original inhabitants.⁹¹

The band also played for 1000 delegates at the North Queensland Seventh-day Adventist Conference session, and the Indigenous band members, accompanied by about 50 others, were benefitted "not only by travel but from fellowship in church matters with European delegates."⁹²

In the report for 1956, other tours were noted, together with the regret of Townsville audiences when the band could not go there that year.⁹³ Participation in the band was a matter of pride for many members. One recalled leading the band for the march in Kuranda for Anzac Day, a particular honour "because in those days we were the only Aboriginal band in our area." He acknowledged the leadership of Zanotti until his departure in 1955 but said, "we all felt very important."⁹⁴ The band and choir vastly expanded the experiences of the residents. Their members travelled regularly and performed for appreciative audiences that were mostly white, offering opportunities for acceptance and appreciation otherwise unavailable at the time.

Zanotti also founded a fife band of 15 instruments and soon, "amid many strange whistlings and burlings," hearers could discern hymns and other tunes. "Quickly the boys learned the elements of time, notation, and fingering," and Zanotti hoped to be able to march the schoolchildren around the school grounds to the sound of the fifes.⁹⁵ Not to be outdone, the boys also created their own instruments, fashioning "crude wooden cornets, tenor horns, trombones, &c, and it is a source of amazement and delight to hear their version of 'Colonel Bogey'." They christened themselves the "School Band" and in doing so demonstrated their own musical initiative and innovation.⁹⁶

Music played a huge role in the lives of the residents of the Mona Mona. It provided an emotional outlet, developed artistic expression, bonded the residents, built links between residents and staff, and facilitated engagement with the outside community in ways that few other activities could. As a form of personal relaxation and entertainment, it remained popular with residents. While Zanotti's zeal for moral reform left its mark during his tenure as superintendent, perhaps the true legacy of Bill and May Zanotti is the lasting impact of fostering of their protégés' musical talents. The brass band continued after the mission's closure in 1962 and played a prominent role in the Kuranda church through the 1960s and into the 1970s.

Fond Memories in Challenging Times

There is no denying effects of the harsher aspects of Mona Mona on its residents, and it is important to acknowledge those who longed to be exempted from the Act because of the many rules, lack of freedom. There can be little doubt that some residents deeply regret the loss of language and culture, and younger generations, in particular, tend to remember stories of inequality and trauma. At the same time, many elderly residents think back on their mission years with some fondness. Heather Simon remembered the mission as "a very nice place" and part of her roots⁹⁷ Baptised by

Pastor George Quinlin in the Barron River in 2005, she regained a sense of community and belonging among the members of Kuranda Church, describing herself as “the prodigal daughter who had come home to her father’s love. On that day, I made the decision to stay with Jesus for the rest of my life.”⁹⁸

Energetic and optimistic into his old age, Mervin Riley recalled many fun times, but more importantly, wished the mission was still open, so that its influence could guide the values and lifestyle of later generations.⁹⁹ Deeply proud of her parents’ service in Papua, Alma May Franks recalled, “[M]y time on the mission was really good and I wouldn’t change it for anything.”¹⁰⁰ Perhaps Rita Hunter’s view resonates with others whose experiences were more mixed. For her, “My happiest time was when I was free to do the things I liked.”¹⁰¹ She might well have agreed with Beryl Dawson who, even though she was a headmaster’s wife and had her own struggles, said, “There was always something different, challenging. You could always help somebody. There were also bad things, but we shouldn’t dwell on those.”¹⁰²

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Indigenous Mission Beyond Mona Mona

Stephen Piez and
Brad Watson

The founding of Mona Mona Mission in far north Queensland in 1913 is possibly the best-known attempt by the Seventh-day Adventist Church to establish an Australian mission for First Australians. However, it was not the only one. In concluding this book, it is fitting to consider other significant efforts made by the Adventist Church to serve the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, before reflecting on the importance of reconciliation and the journey ahead.

The Western Australian Aboriginal Work

Inspired by the apparent successes at Mona Mona Mission, church leaders and members in Western Australia expressed the desire to do something tangible for the 24,000 Aboriginal people living across their vast state. To this end, a formal request to begin Aboriginal mission work was made to the Australian Union Conference in 1914 and again in 1916.¹

These requests did not meet with success at the time. In hindsight, this might have been fortuitous, because with the appointment of A O Neville as Chief Protector of Aborigines in 1915, attitudes to church involvement in Aboriginal affairs hardened.