



Crossing Cultures

An Anglo-Australian Working in Aboriginal Communities

Author - Barbara Jackson
www.crossingcultures.au

Outline of chapters

Part 1 One year in Papunya, 1982

Introduction

When Barbara visited her father in Ali Curung, an Aboriginal community in the Northern Territory, the trajectory of her life changed. She was 'hooked' by the vast, timeless, red earth, Australian outback and wanted to work and live amongst the original inhabitants of Australia. She found work in Papunya as a Health Service Administrator, left her suburban Melbourne life and moved to the Northern Territory to live and work in a remote Aboriginal community.

Chapter 1 Setting the wheels in motion

To Barbara's consternation, an urgent responsibility was to upgrade a small fleet of working vehicles. It was her 'can do' spirit that enabled her to sell off the 'dead' vehicles and buy two 4WD's fitted out for bush driving. Her newfound mastery of the Royal Flying Doctor Service radio schedules stood her in good stead.

Chapter 2 Working across cultures

The history of the settlement at Papunya provides the backdrop to a community suffering from illness, poverty and difficult living conditions. As a raw newcomer to life on Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory, Barbara shares her experiences settling into her role at the Aboriginal-Controlled Health Service at Papunya and Kintore. She overcomes her initial communication difficulties and introduces a training program for health workers to learn how to pay the wages. Purchasing supplies takes her to Alice Springs where a romantic interests starts to bloom.

Chapter 3 Papunya Tula

Papunya Tula art began 10 years prior to Barbara's arrival in Papunya. Although she did not know it at the time, many of the Pintupi artists of Papunya Tula were involved also in the Kintore Homelands movement. Kintore was strongly supportive of their health service being Aboriginal-controlled.

Chapter 4 A new doctor and cats

The recruitment of a new doctor to the Lyappa Health Service becomes entwined with Barbara's semi-feral cat Tjapa when it was neutered in the refurbished surgery. With instructions from Johnno the mechanic, Barbara learned a successful method of controlling cockroaches. The health service driver taught Barbara how to push start Toyota 4WDs.

Chapter 5 Heartbreaking challenges

Petrol sniffing on Papunya and the hard reality of racism in Alice Springs were confronting for Barbara. Her romance collapsed and she found herself, once again, being a single woman.

Chapter 6 The demise of Lyappa Health Service

An underlying tension between the Lyappa Health Service and the Papunya Aboriginal Council culminated in the disbandment of the health service. The staff were sacked and the white staff ordered to leave the community. Barbara's Papunya life had closed down. She returned to Melbourne, however the thought of once again working in an Aboriginal community stayed with her.



Part 2 Two years in Coonamble, 1989

Chapter 7 Coonamble and the CDEP

A new Community Development Employment Program for the Aboriginal community of Coonamble NSW employed Barbara as their Coordinator. Barbara and her Aboriginal counterpart enthusiastically worked together with the Aboriginal community to start up a successful 'work for the dole' CDEP. The start up included conducting an informal census of the Coonamble Aboriginal community. At that time there was very little public knowledge about the Aboriginal people and that the Wailwan people were the traditional custodians of the region.

Chapter 8 CDEP turns unemployment on its head

With the support of the Shire Council and St Vincent de Paul, CDEP participants began actively working for their 'dole' money. Drinking, gambling on the pokies and playing bingo were a large feature of the town's entertainment. An Aboriginal-designed Advance Pay Scheme allowed CDEP participants to pay off their rent and electricity arrears. An 'hours bank' enabled men to take leave of absence for short term work contracts outside the town. Participants visited Lightning Ridge and Tamworth to gain new ideas for their CDEP.

Chapter 9 Racism and goodwill

Similar to many rural towns in NSW, there was both racism and good will. As an outsider to the town, Barbara learned she was a 'Johnny-come-lately' and a 'Gubba'. She also learned who 'Old Mate' was. Barbara suffered a shock when she discovered a form of apartheid in the justice system. This was counterbalanced by the success of the Court House Café managed jointly by CDEP participants and women from the Uniting Church.

Chapter 10 Woodwork, the Warrumbungles and art

Barbara's outsider loneliness was dispelled when her father Bill and her friend Heather visited her in Coonamble. When CDEP participants discovered Bill's woodworking expertise, he was encouraged to start a training program. Barbara and Heather joined Aboriginal people in a camping excursion to the Warrumbungles.

Chapter 11 Dark and light sides of Coonamble

A shocking racist incident occurred which forced the CDEP to forgo renting a work shed in town. The CDEP put the incident behind them when an art and craft program started up. The highly successful program culminated with art and craft exhibition and the launch of the CDEP with the new name of Ellimatta. When a participant shared his heart moving story of turning his life around with Barbara, it confirmed to her that the CDEP was the workplace heart of the community.

Chapter 12 Leaving Coonamble

Barbara found it a wrench leaving the CDEP. Despite being an outsider, she had become embedded in the town. She was immensely satisfied that her Aboriginal counterpart replaced her as the CDEP coordinator. Returning one year later, Barbara was overjoyed to reconnect with her Aboriginal friends and learn of the continuing success of the CDEP. In 2021 she returned again to find that the CDEP had been forced to close down due to a government decision to remove Coonamble's classification as a remote town.

Part 3 Two years in Yarralin, 1995

Chapter 13 4,000 Kilometres to Yarralin

To start her new life in Yarralin Community in the Northern Territory, Barbara drove 4,000 kilometres from Melbourne to Yarralin in the Victoria River region of the NT. It was a trip that many Australians dream about. Although Yarralin's Community Government Council had similar legal status to Municipal and Shire Councils, there was a huge disparity in funding. Yarralin had a decrepit council office and its workers were CDEP participants working for the dole rather than normal council wages. Barbara's first task was to revitalise the CDEP.

Chapter 14 An old man is dead

Dealing with the tragic killing of an old man was a situation completely out of Barbara's previous experience. She was fortunate that the community mechanic came to the rescue.



As well as the main community of Yarralin, Barbara's responsibilities included three outstations. On her first visit to Pigeon Hole outstation, Barbara and Yarralin councillors had to bring the distressing news that increased costs prevented two new Pigeon Hole houses from being insulated.

Chapter 15 A fraught history

The relationship between Victoria River Downs cattle station and the people of Yarralin and its outstations has a fraught history of massacre, murder, exploitation and dispossession of Aboriginal land. The guns and violent tactics of the invading white men smashed the Aboriginal resistance. Eventually the Yarralin people had no choice but to work for the cattle station. They became skilled stockmen and domestic servants and the cattle station depended on their unpaid labour. Although Yarralin's first Land Rights claim was heard in 1975, it was not until 2016 that they received title deeds for their lands.

Chapter 16 Mistakes, achievements and failure

As Barbara's role expanded in many directions, her day to day interactions brought her into contact with Aboriginal culture and required much cross cultural learning. Her bright idea for Lingara outstation to raise chickens became a complicated issue for the Council to resolve. Her support for Jackie Anzac was helping him turn his goal of an Aboriginal stockmen team from a great idea into reality. Her hopes for the Council and Primary School to work together with a community development approach were dashed. The first Yarralin office worker was employed.

Chapter 17 Upskilling Yarralin's young workers

Yarralin's young people were keen to learn new skills. The trainee droving team joined a six week training program for stock and station skills. Young CDEP participants already working as offsiders to the local handyman and mechanic, joined Batchelor College Foundations Skills classes at a small Yarralin campus. Barbara learned the complexity of teaching dates of birth.

Chapter 18 A council clerk is never bored

Endless meetings about 'whitefella' business was interspersed with overcoming a cockroach infestation, contamination of the water supply and seeping sewerage. On a high note, the stockmen started their first droving contract. A purchasing trip to Katherine ends with a night drive back to Yarralin that Barbara never would forget.

Chapter 19 The Health Infrastructure Priority Project commences

Yarralin was accepted for a Health Infrastructure Priority Project (HIPP). Through the HIPP planning process, Yarralin was redesigned with active Aboriginal town planning. Instead of making do, the community was able to plan what they really wanted for their town. When government grants were being offered for Women's Refuges, Barbara carefully and respectfully consulted the wishes of the women of Yarralin and the Councillors. A Yarralin grant application was given the go ahead.

Chapter 20 Reflections

Due to personal reasons, Barbara resigned from the Council Clerk position. Her reflections cover the highs and lows of her jobs and much in between. With searing honesty she acknowledged her ignorance of the past history. Her intensive research led her to document the violent colonisation of Australia through the Colonial Frontiers Massacre interactive map. For Barbara it was an extraordinary privilege to live in an Aboriginal community and work in a culture with a deeply imbedded sense of family and place that stretches back 60,000 years.

Appendix 1 Massacres in the Victoria River Region 1884-1925

Appendix 2 Victoria River Downs Station