

Cooladdi to Cambooya

Garry 'Sonny' Martin

*For my granddaughters,
Lailah and Ruby*

With tears in everyone's eyes (including Dad's I suspect), we waved goodbye to our friends who were as much saddened by our departure as we were. It was mid-1967 and the day we would leave our beloved Cooladdi behind forever and start on the long journey to a place that was to be our new home: Cambooya.

We loved Cooladdi, a railway siding about eighty-five kilometres west of Charleville. Back in the late '50s it could take us four hours to drive from Charleville to Cooladdi depending on flat tyres and how many station property gates we had to open along the way. We moved to Cooladdi from the Yumba in Charleville when I was eight and there we would live for several years to follow. I believe we were moved off the Yumba because the government would have been under intense scrutiny from international media who would be in Australia to report on the referendum: the government didn't want attention on their violation of human rights against the Indigenous population.

Cooladdi was a place where we'd have fun as kids and learn about life's many challenges. Those memories we will cherish forever. Friday's sports day was packed full of fun and games. Mothers and fathers would join in and have a great time. Broom throwing for the ladies, foot races, egg and spoon races, team relays and, of course, there was plenty of food to eat: watermelons, lollipops and freshly made sandwiches and cordial.

Saturday night was much welcomed by the older folk as it gave them an opportunity to dress up, kick up their heels and let their hair down. Gypsy tap, fox trot and Pride of Erin were just a few of the slow waltzes the adults enjoyed, and every now and then the old band would jazz it up and play something fast — that's when everyone would break into the twist or a jive. There were no Ginger Rogers or Fred Astaire's among us, but gee we had some fun. Never mind the ritzy bars of celebrity glamour and fashion around London, Paris and New York — we had it all right there in the dance hall of Cooladdi. Elegantly dressed in high-heeled stilettos, bright red

lipstick and some of the most beautiful and attractive looking women you could imagine and none more so than Bobby and Violet — my two sisters. Men in swallow-tail suits with their pointy-toe shoes and red socks, equally handsome as their female companions.

The Quilberry Creek was not far from where we lived and it had the best yabbie hole. My siblings and I would often go down and catch a few yabbies to eat or use as fishing bait. The bigger yabbies we’d take home and cook in a big pot on the stove and the smaller ones would be kept for fishing. However, if we were extra hungry, we wouldn’t wait to take them home — we’d light a fire and cook them in the coals. They were delicious with a nice smoky flavour — we just loved munching out on them. Ponchas Pilot, a Punthamarra man from Quilpie, taught us how to catch yabbies. ‘Get some string and tie it to a bit of meat,’ were his instructions and off we’d go. We didn’t have a net to catch them so we had to use our hands which was a bit scary.

One day I stole a galah from its nest down by the creek. I didn’t give him a proper name, I just called him Cocky. When I brought him home he couldn’t fly and I left him to wander around, but at night I sat him at the end of my bed where he would sleep until the sun rose and I’d give him his breakfast. Granny showed me how to feed Cocky rolled oats — she would place the oats between her lips and he would feast on it until his little craw was full and then he closed his eyes and fell back asleep.

On the day we said farewell to Cooladdi, the old falcon wagon was packed full — Mum and Dad in the front with one kid sitting between them on the bench seat, one on the floor under Mum’s feet and the other six of us crammed in the back with our beautiful faithful sheep dog, Biddy, and of course, Cocky. We knew the road to Charleville was going to be rough and dusty, but beyond that was unknown — the thought of maybe having a bitumen road to drive on would be a pleasant change from pot holes and bull dust. The roads were particularly hazardous at that time as there were lots of heavy vehicles with oil-drilling rigs doing exploration work and with all this activity going on it left the roads in a very bad state of repair.

Charleville was our first stop just before lunch and it was a good opportunity to have a quick dip in the Warrego River and boil the billy. Some of our friends from Cooladdi had packed sandwiches and cooked cakes for us to eat on the way and once we cooled off and washed ourselves down of bull dust we sat down and enjoyed a picnic lunch under a shady coolibah.

Morven would be the next stop-over on our epic journey and much to our disappointment there was still no bitumen — the dust kept pouring in and the pot holes were endless. Dad lived

in Morven as a young fella, working as a station-hand on properties around the district and playing football with his mates on the weekends, so I guess it was a good opportunity to call into the local pub and say his goodbyes and reminisce about the old days.

He seemed to take forever as we all sat impatiently waiting in the back of the old falcon and while we were waiting Mum told us a funny story about Dad’s football prowess. She said that Dad had a cousin called Sarah Bell who played match-maker between Mum and Dad in their early dating days. Sarah wasn’t obvious about this in the beginning but over the course of a few weeks it became very clear to Mum that is exactly what she was up to. On Sarah’s suggestion, a few weeks after Mum and Dad first met, they all went on the train from Charleville to Morven to watch Dad play football. Mum said she was really excited and looking forward to watching Dad play as he was telling her about how he and Sonny Curry, a local football legend from Mitchell, would pass the football back and forth to each other and completely annihilate the opposition with their skills. ‘Well, you’ve never seen anything so embarrassing in all your life,’ she said. ‘When Jack got the ball he took off running in the *wrong* direction! I couldn’t wait to get out of the place, all I wanted to do was to get back on the train and hide my face in shame.’

Us kids just roared with laughter as we had all believed Dad was a great sportsman, by his own account, naturally, and to learn differently from Mum was too much for us. It really cracked us up! He was looking rather happy when he eventually made it back to the car for the next stage of the trip and that would be to Mitchell and of course he would have to call in and say goodbye to his cousin Angus Mitchell. Thank goodness he didn’t stay too long chatting with Angus as it had been a long and challenging day being crushed between five other kids in the back of the car and the sun was now setting behind us as we set off towards Roma.

We arrived in Roma at about eight o’clock that evening — I remember that night very clearly because there was a total eclipse of the moon — and we spent the night with Aunt Marie and family before setting off the next morning. All fed and freshened up for the last and final leg, we said our hoorays and Dad sped off down the bitumen highway towards Cambooya... Bitumen at last! It was such a relief not breathing in bull dust and now Dad could actually wind the windows down and let some fresh air in.

It was a relatively smooth day compared to the previous with no stops to say goodbye to friends, only the odd toilet break. We knew that we were getting close to our destination as we passed through Dalby and onward towards Oakey because there, standing in the distance, was

the big hill that Dad had told us about: Gowrie Mountain. We kids just marvelled in awe at the site of such an enormous site as it was the biggest one we'd ever seen.

Prior to seeing Gowrie Mountain the biggest hill I ever saw was in Charleville where the water tower stands. As a young boy driving past this magnificent site I allowed my thoughts to drift into an exciting adventure. I wondered what it would be like climbing to the very top. Would there be any caves I could hide from the rest of the world? And wouldn't it be great if I found a hidden treasure and we could turn around and go back to Cooladdi and build a beautiful big house on the banks of the Quilberry?

There was no more kicking and fighting going on between us kids when Dad finally stopped the car outside our new home. I think we were all too overwhelmed with the realisation of facing the unknown and the mood became unexpectedly eerie: a future filled with uncertainties lay ahead. I wondered if there would be any other Aboriginal families around that would befriend us, and what the school would be like, and whether the kids would be friendly.

Mr Aisthorpe, the ganger, was there to greet us with his gold tooth noticeably shining through a warm smile. He handed Dad the keys to our railway cottage. Dad thanked him for his kindness, and for his welcome to Cambooya, and with that, everything was official. Regardless of any emotional pain we were experiencing at that moment we simply had to accept the situation.

The next few days were extremely difficult for everyone as we tried to adjust to our new home. I said to Mum on several occasions, 'Can we please go back home to Cooladdi? I don't want to live here — I hate it.' And I believe that as much as she was also finding it hard she also knew it was the best thing for her kids to remain.

As the weeks went slowly by we became more accustomed to life in Cambooya. The most difficult time for me was going to school. I was good at maths and enjoyed reading but having to face the staring eyes of kids hanging over the school fence to see the 'Aborigines' was confronting; it made us feel like aliens. 'Here they come! Look at their skin!' I could hear them calling out over the fence. This morning ritual went on for weeks and it was beginning to take its toll. My brothers and I became more frustrated until one day we grabbed a few of the bigger fellas and took them over by the tennis courts and got stuck into them. Mum always told us to stick up for our rights and not let anyone bully us and that's exactly what we did. Needless to

say, that was the end of hearing ‘Here they come!’ each morning. It became, ‘Hello, how are you?’

My mother is a Kamilaroi woman and she spent her younger years growing up on the Moree mission. Back in those early days of mission life it was normal for religious groups to teach the Bible to whoever wanted to attend their gatherings and my mother was one such person. She always saw the value of a good religious upbringing and tried desperately to have her children gain some knowledge of the Bible. In Cambooya our friends, the Aisthorpes, a very strong Catholic family, would attend church every Sunday or whenever there was a service, so naturally Mum thought it was a good idea for us to go along to church with them. Every Sunday morning for about six weeks us older kids, under much protesting, would go to church. But, on one particular day, my youngest brother Ray and I decided we’d had enough kneeling down on hard wooden boards and we made our escape down to the creek. While I’m not a religious person, I think it would be a crazy mixed-up world without it!

I believe Dad was under enormous pressure to stay in Cambooya and not retreat back to the safe and familiar surrounds of Charleville. It would have been easy to give up and return, but to his credit he managed and dealt with the situation as best he could. Dad had no peers or anyone who he could communicate his feelings with. He was a trailblazer and a man with a vision who desperately wanted to educate his kids. He drank more often than he should have as the pub was within walking distance of our place, but I guess the pub offered some kind of sanctuary for him, and how could anyone blame him for the sacrifices he made?

But the hardest part about our first few months in Cambooya was finding Cocky dead. As I was walking passed the service station near home the attendant called out to me and gave me the news that a car had ran over Cocky. She knew Cocky belonged to me as did nearly everyone in Cambooya because he would follow me everywhere I went. To find out that he was run over broke my heart and I burst into tears. I threw my school bag over the fence on my way passed our house and ran down to the creek. I loved the creek for its beauty — its clear, clean, running water was in complete contrast to the murky, still waters of the Quilberry of Cooladdi. When I visit the creek now I’m disappointed that there is no water. How can this be? Once a vibrant healthy environment, reduced to a dry creek bed — it’s a disgrace. What would the traditional owners, the Jarowair people, think if they saw the Hodgson in this state? All the food they would collect along the creek to feed their families: muscles, yabbies, shrimps and the water itself, so

plentiful and natural, I'm sure they would be appalled to see it now... It would be easy to blame the farmers for their continuous irrigation of crops, but in my humble opinion I believe the government is to blame as they make the decision on water allocation and, in doing so, have allowed an environmental catastrophe to occur. But anyway, I found a good spot under the big willow tree near the traffic bridge and sat down. It was a good place for me to hide as I didn't want anyone to see me crying over a silly galah — I was supposed to be a tough guy. Maybe if I hadn't cut his wing feathers off to stop him flying away he would have been able to get out of the way of the car. If the driver had looked around before driving off he would have seen Cocky and waited for him to pass by as he made his way to meet me after school. I was searching for answers as to why my beautiful Cocky was taken from me and I couldn't find one except that it must be a very cruel world to allow this to happen to me and Cocky.

But there were happy times too. I found more time to play. I didn't have to fill kerosene lanterns every evening or carry drinking water from the railway tanks: we could flick a switch and light would instantly appear, and a walk down the stairs to the rainwater tank made life for me all that much easier.

Once winter was over and the weather started warming up most of our free time was spent swimming and playing down the creek. We built a fleet of tin canoes from scrap tin we found in the local rubbish tip and with other bits and pieces we made 'The Queen Mary'. It was a majestic-looking vessel, at least we thought so, assembled by strategically placing a heap of old, four-gallon petrol drums under a double-sized bedframe to keep it afloat. (The only problem we encountered sailing the Queen Mary was when it was carrying too many passengers as it would slightly submerge just beneath the surface of the water and that's when the blood-sucking leeches would attack.)

I also found myself some work with Mrs Free, a single mum with three kids who lived on a farm outside Cambooya. Ray and I worked there three days a week after school collecting and cleaning the eggs from her chickens in preparation for sale. We enjoyed our time collecting eggs and mucking around with her three kids as it was a good chance to make some pocket money and get away from our own annoying siblings. The two dollars a fortnight we earned went towards cigarettes (without Mum and Dad knowing), locally made sarsaparilla and BBQ potato chips.

They say that the world is a small place and how true it is I thought when one of my old teachers from Cooladdi walked through the door and into my classroom at Harristown High.

'You're one of the Martins from Cooladdi, aren't you?' he asked and with a big smile on my face I answered, 'Yes!' It made me feel good sitting in class surrounded by all these kids and knowing that I was the only one who knew the teacher personally.

We would live in Cambooya for two years before Dad became too sick to work on the railway and that's when we moved to Toowoomba. The move from Cambooya to Toowoomba wasn't as much of an ordeal as our move from Cooladdi to Cambooya and there were no tears this time, just a wave goodbye to the Aisthorpes, and we were gone. The old falcon wagon was jammed packed: Mum, Dad, the kids and Bidy. There was no Cocky this time, just my memories of the dear little fella and as we drove over the traffic bridge towards Toowoomba I took one last look down at the spot under the willow tree where I cried the day he got run over.

Mum and Dad did the best they could under extreme circumstances and having access to good schools and the chance of a decent education for their kids was one of the main reasons they decided to give up the security of living in Cooladdi and move to Cambooya. As I look back on those days, and especially now that I have three kids of my own, I realise the importance of a good education and I am filled with such admiration and respect for my parents for having the vision, and the courage, to undertake such a huge task of moving from Cooladdi to Cambooya.

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