

Mungalla

Past and Present



Mungalla Station is located in north Queensland, between the cities of Townsville and Cairns, 12 kilometres east of the town of Ingham. This area is the traditional country of the Nywaigi Aboriginal people, who have occupied these lands for thousands of years. Nywaigi ancestral land is approximately the coastal region from the Herbert River in the north to Rollingstone in the south, and to Stone River in the west.

For 120 years however, Mungalla was the property of European settlers. From the 1860s Aboriginal people had been dispersed from the coastal areas of north Queensland as the sugar cane and cattle industries encroached on their traditional lands. The Mungalla cattle property was founded in 1882 by James Cassady, a pioneer of the north Queensland pastoral industry, but he allowed the Nywaigi people to continue living on the property and was a strong advocate for Aboriginal people. However, again in the twentieth century, Nywaigi and other Aboriginal people were forcibly removed from their ancestral lands under government-sponsored programmes. Many were relocated to Palm Island, off the nearby coast, which is not part of Nywaigi country. In 1999, when Mungalla was purchased by the Indigenous Land Corporation, the ownership returned to the Nywaigi people, who now own the 880 hectares that makes up the property today.

The property was purchased to benefit the Aboriginal community financially, socially and spiritually. The Mission Statement of the traditional owners is as follows:

Mungalla Station is a resource owned by the Nywaigi Traditional Owners for the purpose of fostering Aboriginal cultural values by building economic and cultural opportunities through the careful use of our country as a legacy for our children.

Indigenous Australians are the original inhabitants of the continent and surrounding islands. It is thought that they arrived here over 45,000 years ago. Aboriginal is a name used for the inhabitants of the mainland of Australia and Tasmania, while the people from the islands off the northern tip of Australian are called Torres Strait Islanders. There was great diversity among the different Indigenous communities and societies in Australia, each having its own unique mixture of cultures, customs and languages. It is thought there were over 250 different spoken languages with 600 dialects at the start of European settlement.

During the occupation by the Cassady family, Mungalla was also home to people from the Pacific Islands, *Kanakas*, as they were called then, or South Sea Islanders. They were originally brought to Queensland to work on sugar cane plantations.

The Dreaming

In Aboriginal mythology, the Rainbow Serpent story tells of creation. In the Dreamtime the great spirits moulded the barren and featureless earth. The Rainbow Serpent came from beneath the ground and created huge ridges, mountains, and gorges as it pushed upward. The Rainbow Serpent inhabits deep permanent waterholes and is in control of life's most precious resource, the water. In some cultures, the Rainbow Serpent is considered to be the ultimate creator of everything in the universe.

Walter Palm Island was told this story by his father: "Coming from the upper Herbert River, the Carpet Snake came down to Hinchinbrook, shaping and moulding the channel there, and shaping and moulding all the islands. As he came through he made a pathway on the main island of Great

Palm. Then he rested his head on Magnetic Island.” The Nywaigi people say that the snake then came back and rested in Palm Creek, where he remains to this day in the deepest waterholes.

Aboriginals and Europeans

Before the European settlement, Aboriginal people speaking Nywaigi, Warragamay and Girramay languages inhabited the Herbert region. There were thought to be about 500 members of each linguistic group, along with 200 Manbarra people on Palm Island. By the 1880s however, these groups were dispersed and much reduced in number, as a result of the occupation of the land for sugar growing and cattle grazing. The Nywaigi people were pushed from the coast to the foothills surrounding the Herbert Valley, the Warragamay fled into the upper Herbert River gorges, the Girramay retreated to the mountains, and the Manbarra were recruited or abducted to work on the northern pearling and beche de mer boats. The Biyagirri people who had lived on Hinchinbrook Island were removed or killed by the Native Police Force as retribution, as it was thought that they were responsible for the deaths of survivors of the wrecked ship *Maria* in 1872.

James Cassady was one of the few white people of the time to protest at the treatment of the Indigenous inhabitants. He wrote letters to parliament and newspapers defending the Aboriginal people and protesting at their treatment. By 1880 he estimated that there were only 200 Nywaigi people left, mainly women and children. This was attributed to “the brutality of the Native Police and some of the settlers, who, in the beginning, relentlessly hunted down and shot as many of the males of the tribe as possible”. The survivors found refuge on Mungalla and some other properties whose owners were sympathetic to their plight. They had camps and burial grounds on Mungalla. During the time of the Cassadys (1882-1936) there were six Indigenous camps on the property.

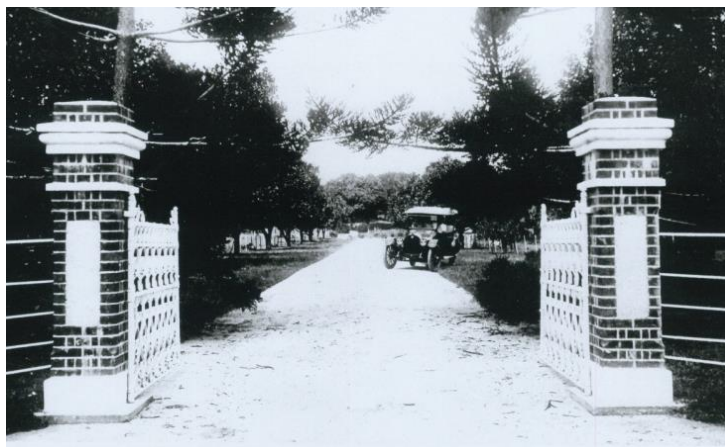
The Cattle Property

James Cassady was born in Ireland in 1837. His family came to Australia in 1848 and in the following years he was one of the pioneers of north Queensland. In 1872 James took up land in the Herbert Valley; firstly Fairview, which he sold to CSR for their sugar plantation and mill, and then Mungalla in 1882, where he stayed for the rest of his life. It's said that he first camped under a paperbark tree and then lived in a slab hut for some time, but in 1901 he built the first homestead on a high sand ridge overlooking the property. It's believed that *Mungalla* means *sandy hill* in the Nywaigi language.

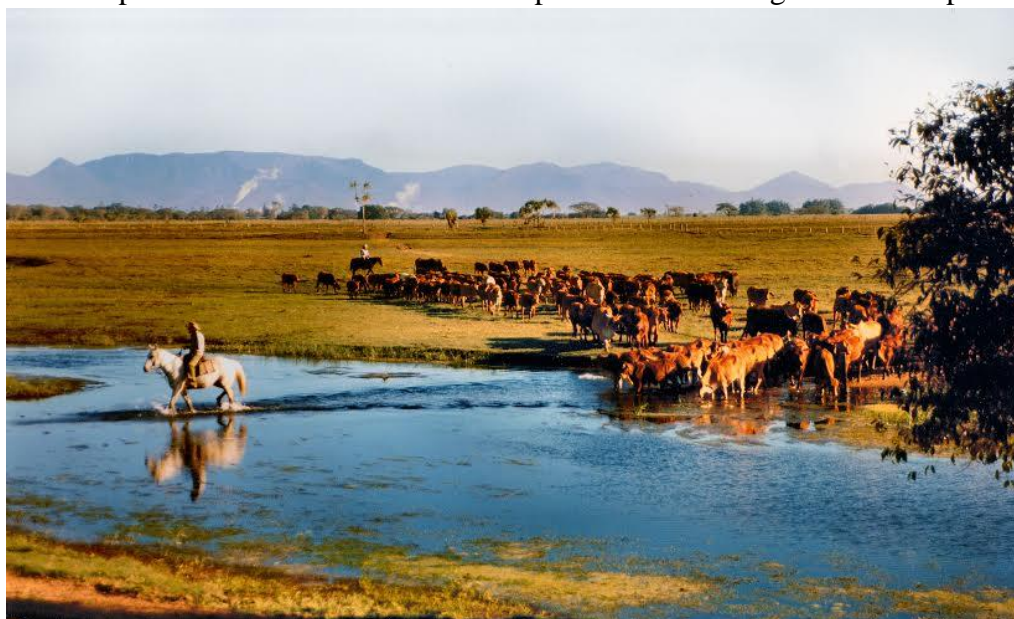
In time the property became one of the most famous in north Queensland, with prime cattle and thoroughbred horses. The thoroughbred sire Stromboli, a winner of the Sydney Cup, was kept at the stud. There were formal gardens and tennis courts, with rows of coconut palms, pine trees and mango trees. The grand entrance had iron gates on brick columns with a tree lined avenue of white gravel leading to the house.



James Cassady and his son Frank were prominent members of the Ingham community, Frank being Shire Chairman (Mayor) for 24 years. James died in 1902 and was buried on a small hill 200 metres from the homestead. His son Frank was also buried in the same plot and their gravestone can still be seen today. In 1936, after Frank died, the property was leased, the gardens and the homestead fell into ruin and the grounds became overgrown.



Mungalla was sold to RL (Mont) Atkinson in 1944. The Atkinson family also owned the famous Valley of Lagoons station on the headwaters of the Burdekin River, inland from Ingham. It was decided to relocate the old homestead to a site overlooking Palm Creek about 3km away, with fewer mosquitoes and plenty of fresh water. So in late 1944 the old house was dismantled and transported across the dry lagoon on trucks to the new location where the house was reassembled onto a new brick bottom level. The original stained glass windows and pressed metal ceilings were not damaged in the move. Two of the upstairs verandas were built in to protect the building from the tropical weather. The house had seven bedrooms and wide verandas with views across the property to Hinchinbrook and the Palm group of islands. The old wing of the house was removed and placed nearby to be used as a staff cottage.



The Atkinson family continued the Cassady tradition of breeding racehorses, and Mungalla Stud produced many winners of prestigious races. They also established the now famous Droughtmaster breed of cattle, a cross of British breeds and Brahman cattle which proved much more suited to the hot climate and tick problems of northern Australia. Alan Atkinson took over the property from his father, and it was managed by Ken and Eleanor Wallace until 1999.



Captive Lives

In 1882, the American circus of PT Barnum began to put together a show “of all the uncivilised races in existence”. A group of nine Aboriginals, from Palm and Hinchinbrook Islands, was recruited by RA Cunningham and shipped to America to be displayed as “cannibal boomerang throwers”. They were later taken to Europe and exhibited. Most of the group died during their travels and were buried in unmarked graves.

In 1892 another group of eight were taken to America, and the majority of these were Nywaigi people from Mungalla. They were taken without the knowledge of James Cassady, who tried in vain to have them returned. All but two adults died on tour in America or Europe.



In 1993, the mummified body of Tambo, a member of the first group, was discovered in the basement of a former funeral home in Ohio, USA. His body had been previously displayed in a “Dime Museum”. Tambo was originally from Palm Island, so with the assistance of Manbarra elders, his body was returned and finally laid to rest in his traditional land.

In 1996 the National Library of Australia in Canberra launched the exhibition *Captive Lives: Looking for Tambo and his companions*, curated by anthropologist Roslyn Poignant, who had originally researched the story. The exhibition toured Australia and was seen by over 30,000 people. It is now permanently housed upstairs at the Mungalla homestead.

South Sea Islanders

Between 1863 and 1904 about 60,000 Pacific Islanders, *Kanakas*, as they were called then, were brought to Queensland to work in the sugar plantations. They were Melanesian people, from Vanuatu, the Solomon Islands and New Caledonia. Some came here willingly, but others were kidnapped from the islands where they lived, a practice called *blackbirding*. They were paid very low wages.

After the introduction of the White Australia Policy most of these people were deported back to their homes. Some were exempted from deportation however, but were not allowed to work in the sugar industry. They found work on properties like Mungalla, tending the gardens and doing domestic work. The Islanders and the Nywaigi Aboriginal people lived in camps on the property; one camp was at the mango trees where the entrance to the property is today. Today there are some 20,000 descendants of South Sea Islanders living in North Queensland.



Birds and Crocodiles

Mungalla has long been famous for its bird life, both permanent residents and migratory visitors. During the occupation by the Cassady family shooting was never allowed on the property. At 2018, 230 different species had been recorded. (*Eremaea Birdlines*). A number of uncommon sightings have been made.



There are always birds to see, but the best time is in the dry season, September to December, when the wetland species become more concentrated. Large numbers of Spoonbills, Egrets, Ibises, Magpie Geese, various ducks and other smaller waders can be seen as the wetlands dry and contract. Brolgas can be seen on the grasslands, Jabirus nest on the property and many species of raptors can be seen hunting over the paddocks and wetlands.

Saltwater Crocodiles actually occur in both salt and fresh water habitats, and they can be found in many rivers and wetlands in north Queensland. A number of crocodiles inhabit Palm Creek and the Mungalla wetlands. Crocodiles as big as five metres have been seen here.



Boomerangs and Didgeridoos

There are two types of boomerangs, returning and non-returning. The returning boomerangs were invented by the Australian Aborigines thousands of years ago and are unique to Australia. The non-returning boomerang could be thrown further and hit with greater force so it was used in both hunting and warfare.



The way that boomerangs return is very complex. Part of the explanation is that boomerangs are flatter on the lower side and more curved on top in a shape called an aerofoil. When a boomerang is

in flight, the shape of the boomerang wing deflects air downward and creates an upward force. When a curved boomerang spins in flight, the two wings experience different amounts of lift. One wing always enters undisturbed air, while the other wing is faced with air that has been churned up by the first wing, causing less lift. Also, as the boomerang spins, one wing moves in the direction of the boomerang's flight and has more lift than the other wing which is spinning back. The boomerang tends to flip over but the spinning motion changes this flipping over action into the curved path of the returning boomerang.

The aerofoil shape for a right-handed boomerang will be different to that of a left-handed boomerang.

The didgeridoo was not used by the Aboriginal people of Mungalla, but it has become a unique symbol of Australian Aboriginal culture. Traditionally it is a wooden tube from a branch of a tree hollowed out by termites, often with a ring of beeswax around the mouthpiece to improve the seal. It is a very unusual instrument: although it usually plays only one note, it is capable of a great range of different sounds. Circular breathing is necessary to play the didgeridoo correctly, which gives a constant sound. In recent times didgeridoo players have performed with symphony orchestras in concert halls of the world.



Mungalla Today

Prime cattle still graze on Mungalla. The agistment of cattle by local graziers means that visitors can still see bulls, cows and calves grazing peacefully on the lush tropical pastures, often accompanied by large numbers of Cattle Egrets.

Tourism at Mungalla is an initiative of the Nywaigi owners, and today visitors can learn about Australian Aboriginal culture, the history of Mungalla and see the site of the old homestead and the Cassady graves. They can view the regenerated wetlands and get a hands-on experience of plants used by Aboriginal people for food, medicine and tools. At the new homestead visitors can experience the *Captive Lives* exhibition. Mungalla has won the Queensland Tourism Award Indigenous Tourism category for three years running and has been inducted into the Hall of Fame for Queensland Tourism.

School and university student groups visit the property and students learn about Indigenous culture, pioneering history and environmental care during their excursion. Students can also actively participate in the revegetation projects, planting seedlings and mulching and watering young trees.

Training plays an important role in the life of Mungalla. Many projects have been run where young Aboriginal people have been trained in aspects of Agriculture, Horticulture, Construc-



tion, Hospitality, Tourism, and Conservation Land Management. The Green Army provided practical training and experience in environmental projects for young people at Mungalla. The Conservation Volunteers organisation brings young people from overseas countries to work on environmental projects on the property.

Wetlands Restoration

Hymenachne is a semi-aquatic grass that was introduced into Australia in the 1980s to be used as pasture for the cattle industry. It has now become an invasive weed that is choking the wetlands and waterways of the tropical north with devastating impacts on natural ecosystems. Other aquatic weeds such as Water Hyacinth and Salvinia are also a problem. Mungalla Station has worked with the CSIRO and now Greening Australia to manage the weeds and restore the health of the Mungalla wetlands. They have implemented a wetland management strategy which includes control of weeds using a combination of fire, physical removal and herbicides. Increasing the salinity of lagoons by opening dam walls has proven especially successful in eradicating Hymenachne.

The restoration of the wetlands has resulted in improvements to areas of Mungalla that are of cultural significance to Nywaigi people. In 2014 we received a Queensland Reconciliation Award for our collaboration with CSIRO on the Mungalla Wetlands Biodiversity Project. In 2016 we were awarded the Qld Premier's Sustainability Award for the successful rehabilitation of a culturally sensitive wetland. Also in 2016 we were finalists in the nationwide Banksia Foundation Sustainability Awards. In 2017, Mungalla became a focus area of Reef Aid, Greening Australia's program to improve water quality on the Great Barrier Reef by restoring coastal wetlands and rebuilding eroding gullies. Virgin Airlines Australia, a partner of Reef Aid, named one of its new aircraft "Mungalla" after the property. In 2018 Mungalla received the prestigious Caring for Country Award at the national NAIDOC awards.

Acknowledgements

Richard Wallace - information and photos

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Poignant R. 2004. *Professional Savages - Captive Lives and Western Spectacle*. Sydney: University of NSW Press.

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