

**SUBMISSION TO THE
INQUIRY INTO STOLEN WAGES**

POINT PEARCE MISSION STATION

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On behalf of the Graham family from the Yorke Peninsula in South Australia

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1. Introduction

Generations of Aboriginal people did not receive fair remuneration for work on missions, stations and reserves, despite this work making a significant contribution to the economy and wealth of Australia.

The Point Pearce Mission Station that was established in South Australia in the late 1800s did not simply house Aboriginal people, but effectively operated as a commercialised work hub for building, shearing, scrub-cutting, reaping, fencing, harvesting, road-making, carpentry and general farm work.

This work took place on hundreds of acres of government owned land, producing profits which directly benefited the South Australian government. The workers received a meager wage, which could be arbitrarily suspended, reduced or replaced with rations at the discretion of the superintendent/manager of the mission.

While this submission examines the control of labour and financial management on Point Pearce Mission Station only, the practices were widespread and occurred on other missions throughout the State.

“In truth our people have made a significant contribution to the economy of ‘South Australia’ especially at periods and in places where Goonya [non-Aboriginal] workers were scarce. From the earliest days of the young colony our ancestors were seen by Goonyas as a convenient source of cheap labour.”¹

The submission will draw upon the experiences of many Point Pearce elders including the stories of my great grandparents Doris and Cecil Graham in their book *As We’ve Known It: 1911 to the Present*.² Both Doris and Cecil Graham were born on Point Pearce Mission Station in 1911 and 1912 respectively, where they lived and worked for forty-five years.

2. Summary of Submission

The submission will covers the following areas:

- Aboriginal missions in South Australia;
- Establishment and development of Point Pearce Mission Station;
- Employment on Point Pearce Mission Station;
- Regulation of lives on Point Pearce Mission Station;
- Wages on Point Pearce Mission Station; and
- Conclusion and Recommendation.

3. Aboriginal Missions in South Australia

Aboriginal missions, stations and reserves were established across Australia in the 1800s for various reasons. Some early colonists acquired large areas of land for farming and obtained Aboriginal labour, which was cheap or free. Some religious organisations sought to control and civilise the lives of Aboriginal people. Life on most missions, reserves and stations was highly regimented and controlled. On government run missions, this control was vested through the various protection and welfare boards established in each State and Territory.

There have been a number of major mission settlements in South Australia since 1850.³ These include:

- Point Pearce
- Poonindie
- Point McLeay (Raukkan)
- Killalpaninna
- Oodnadatta
- Colebrook
- Swan Reach
- Nepabunna
- Ooldea
- Umeewarra
- Ernabella
- Finnis Springs
- Gerard
- Yalata

4. Establishment and Development of Point Pearce Mission Station

The idea for a mission in Point Pearce originated in the 1860's with local Moonta residents who formed the Yorke Peninsula Aboriginal Mission Committee. This committee established a school in a wool shed in Moonta Bay to better the conditions of the "wandering heathen natives in their neighbourhood".⁴

In 1868 a formal Mission was established at Point Pearce over 600 acres of land to house the Narrungga people of the Yorke Peninsula. Over the next twenty-five years Aboriginal people from the Murray, Adelaide Plains and Eyre Peninsula were moved to Point Pearce Mission Station and by 1900 Point Pearce had established itself as a commercial farming settlement built predominantly on Aboriginal labour.

The Moonta community, led by Reverend Wilhelm Julius Kuhn, received grants of funding from government, subscriptions and donations during this time to oversee the construction of buildings, cottages, fences and the cultivation of the land.

In 1913 the South Australian government appointed a Royal Commission to investigate the conditions and treatment of Aboriginal people living and working

on missions. It was the recommendation of the Royal Commission that all the Aboriginal Missions in South Australia be placed under government control.

On 1 March 1914 ownership and control of Point Pearce mission was formally transferred from the Moonta community to the South Australian government. *The Aborigines Act* 1911 effectively placed all Aboriginal families under the direct control of government officers and established the Aboriginals Department, which was charged with the duty of “controlling and promoting the welfare of Aboriginals”.⁵

In 1915 the number of Aboriginal people living on the mission was described as “about 180, of which a large portion are half-castes and quadroons”.⁶

5. Employment on Point Pearce Mission Station

In Mr Archibald’s 1915 publication *Yorke’s Peninsula Aboriginal Mission Incorporated: A brief record of its history and operations* he writes: “The benefits accruing from the establishment of the Mission had been great, and were amply demonstrated by the increasing aptitude on the part of the natives to the usages of civilized life, by their growing habits of industry, and in the young, especially by their general improvement under careful training of the Missionary”.⁷

He further writes “The men have learnt to do shearing, wool-classing, road-making, fencing, building, carpentering and blacksmith’s work, painting, and everything pertaining to farm work of all it’s departments”.⁸

In *Point Pearce Social History Project, Yorke Peninsula, South Australia*, the mission is described as having a large number and variety of farm related buildings: “Among these were: a milking shed and dairy; a slaughterhouse; meat shop; wheat shed (grainery); blacksmiths; wool shed and piggery”.⁹ Furthermore “The men would gather at the large ‘implement shed’ for their work roster in the mornings.”¹⁰

Young girls and women were employed as domestics or midwives: “Aboriginal midwives, such as Nina Hughes, Ivy Karpany, Gladys Elphik and Beryl Rankin, delivered babies on the mission station, both in the hospital as well as in the women’s homes.”¹¹ Doris Graham writes in her book: “Well, I left school after grade six, and then I went and worked as a maid in the hospital. The hospital used to be the missionary’s residence. I worked there for Sister Ford for a long time for about thirty shillings a week.”¹² Another Point Pearce elder recounts: “I think they took advantage of a lot of us... of us young girls and I mean, rather than sort of stay here and be supported into going and having an education, see we were pushed out to go to work as housemaids.”¹³

6. Regulation of lives on Point Pearce Mission Station

Life was highly regimented and controlled on Point Pearce Mission Station with a daily bell which rang at key times throughout the day to dictate working start and end times and to ensure complete control over the residents on the mission.

The bell used to ring in the morning at, it was quarter to eight because the men used to be at the 'pick up' at eight o'clock, see what they call the 'pick-up' to get their different jobs. It used to ring at twelve for lunch time and again at one o'clock to start work. Then it used to ring for knock-off at five o'clock...All our lives were regulated by that bell.¹⁴

The Protection Board managed that place. They were the heads. The Chief Protector of Aborigines would manage any money that was made by the Mission. It was bad time for the Aborigines with the Protection Board. The Protection Boards was silly. I don't think any Aboriginal people wanted or needed protection like that. It was like we were protected birds or something. We couldn't do anything without the white man being there to tell us what to do and what was right. The black man, he was always wrong.¹⁵

We were ruled over by our white 'superiors' in the form of superintendents, then we had farm overseers, mechanical overseers and there was no privacy whatsoever. They had full control of all the Aboriginal lives in those particular institutions. It was incredible, it was an incredible feeling, to be living in a place where your lives weren't your own because these white people really did have power over you.¹⁶

The extent of the regulation of employment and lives is further demonstrated in the *Rules for the Management and Government of the Mission Station* below.¹⁷ The document demonstrates the myriad of rules and regulations that operated to control Aboriginal people's lives, particularly with respect to terms and conditions of employment and wages, which is specifically addressed in Sections 5 – 11 and in the final paragraph.

Rules for the Management and Government of the Mission Station

1. The Mission shall be under the charge of a Superintendent, who shall have the following responsibilities, powers and duties:

He shall be responsible for –

- The maintenance in good order, repair, and condition of all buildings, stock, implements, stores, and other effects on the station.
- The proper cultivation and management of farm and livestock,
- The maintenance of good order and discipline on the station, and the strict observance of the rules.

He may remove from the Station any person committing any breach of the rules.

- He shall report to the Trustees during the first week in every month on:
- The social and religious state of the Mission.
- The work done during the previous month and the number of hands employed.
- The work required to be done during the then current month.
- Any offences or breaches of these rules committed, with the names of the offenders and how dealt with.
- The number of sheep, horses, cattle, and pigs on the Station, and the condition thereof, and the value of the stores on hand.

- The state and prospects of the farming and other operations.

He shall keep proper books of account of all receipts and expenditure, and forward a monthly account thereof to the Trustees. He shall also keep accounts of all stores and other benefits supplied to each inmate.

He may, with approval in writing of the Trustees, delegate any of the above powers, duties and responsibilities to the Overseer.

2. All inmates of the Mission shall maintain themselves and their families by their own labour, with the exceptions mentioned in the next following rule.
3. The sick, confirmed invalids, aged inmates who are past work, and orphans under 14 will be supplied with the necessaries of life and such medicine and medical attendance as the Superintendent may deem necessary at the cost of the Mission.
4. All children will be educated free of cost, and will be required to attend school regularly. Parents will be responsible for the strict observance of this rule.
5. Work will be provided on the Station for as many of the inmates as practicable preference being given to married men. All able-bodied men, and youths and girls over 14 not required for work on the station, will be required to seek work elsewhere.
6. The wages to be paid shall be at a rate to be fixed from time to time by the Trustees, and shall be paid monthly.
7. All rations, stores, provisions, rent, firewood, medical attendance, medicines, paddocking, and all other supplies and benefits, shall be paid for, or deducted from wages, at the end of each month, and shall be charged for at the following rates:
 - All groceries, clothing, and other goods kept in store, meat, chaff, and other produce, at current retail prices.
 - Firewood at 10s per load.
 - Milk (new) at 2d. per pint; Milk (skim) at 1d. per pint.
 - Medical attendance at 5s. per visit to doctor; medicine at actual costs.
 - Paddocking for each horse, foal, or cow, 1s. per week, paddocking for each calf. 6d. per week.
 - Rent – old cottages, 1s. per room per week; other cottages, 1s. 3d. per room per week; with a maximum of 5s. per cottage.
8. No credit will be allowed to any inmate employed by the Mission beyond the amount accruing due on each month's wages. In cases where any such inmate is already indebted to the Mission, a deduction of 1 s. per day will be made from his wages and applied in liquidation of such debt until same is discharged.
9. No inmate who obtains employment outside the Station will be allowed any credit unless and until he shall sign an order on his employer for payment to the Mission out of his wages of the amount named in such an order, and such employer shall have agreed in writing to accept such an order. The amount for which such an order is given shall in each case be fixed by the Superintendent. If such an inmate is already indebted to the Mission, the amount named in such an order, shall be sufficient to provide for payment of 1s. per day, in liquidation of such debt in addition to the amount of future credit required.
10. All inmates shall rise not later than 6.45 a.m. from September 30 to March 31, and not later than 7.15 a.m. from March 31 to September 30.

11. Work shall commence at 8 a.m. and continue until 6 p.m. from September 30 to March 31, and till 6 p.m. from March 31 to September 30, an interval of 1 hour being allowed for dinner. Saturday from 1 p.m. will be a half holiday.
12. All inmates, and also all Officers employed on the station, shall attend Divine Service on Sundays at 11 a.m. and 7 p.m.. All children shall attend Sunday-school at 2.30 p.m.
13. Sanitary habits shall be strictly observed. All inmates shall be clean in their dress and person. Occupants shall keep their cottages clean and in good order to the Superintendent's satisfaction. All rags, ashes, and other refuse shall be removed each day and deposited at such a site as the Superintendent may direct.
14. No person shall bring any intoxicating liquor on the Station.
15. All breakages or injuries to the Mission property or effects shall be paid for by the offender, and the amount deducted from his wages.
16. No inmate shall keep any horse, cow, or dog on the Station without the written permission of the Superintendent. In no case will more than one horse or one doge be allowed to each family.
17. Any inmate guilty of-
 - Drunkenness, whether on or off the Station;
 - Having in his possession any intoxicating liquor;
 - Immorality;
 - Swearing or obscene language;
 - Insubordination; or
 - Refusal or neglect to observe any of these rules, shall be dismissed from the Station, and may be removed therefrom by the Superintendent: Provided that, for a first offence, the Superintendent may, with the approval of the Trustees, instead of dismissal, impose a fine on the offender.

Wages

The following shall be the rate of wages for daywork until otherwise ordered:

- For married men, from 7s. to 9s. per day, according to a classification to be made by the Superintendent and approved by the Trustees.
- For single men and youths, such daily wage as, according to their capabilities, shall, in each instance, be fixed by the Superintendent, not exceeding the following rates:
 Under 18 years, 2s. 6d. per day;
 Under 21 years, 3s. 6d. per day;
 Over 21 years, 5s. 6d. per day.

Provided that, instead of daily wages, contracts may be let for piecework, where considered desirable by the Superintendent and approved by the Trustees. Provided further that shearing shall be paid for at such a rate per 100 as shall be fixed at the commencement of shearing time.

N.B. In order to meet the present difficult situation and the effects of the drought it has been necessary to temporarily reduce the wages paid.

7. Wages on Point Pearce Mission Station

While workers initially received part wage, part rations for work performed, this was eventually phased out to wages only by the time of Mr Archibald's report in 1915. While it is evident that Aboriginal workers on Point Pearce Mission

Station were receiving a wage for their work, wages were fixed by the Superintendent of the Mission, were minimal and could be arbitrarily reduced or suspended. “Although our people’s labour has contributed much to Goonyia enterprises, Nungas have not always received fair remuneration for their work. Payment has often been made in kind, ‘bicketty, blankets and bacca’, which has made it easy for unscrupulous Goonyas to exploit us”.¹⁸

a) Poor wages

There is considerable evidence which demonstrates that Aboriginal workers received low wages, certainly less than the award rate, for work performed on missions, stations and reserves.

In 1913 a Royal Commission was established to ‘inquire into and report upon the control, organisation and management of institutions...set aside for the benefit of Aborigines’. Transcripts from the public hearing provide valuable insights into the system of wages and general discontent on the station.¹⁹

Is there anything you would like to add?

There is discontent about the ‘tucker’. I think that is one of the main things.

What is the system?

We have two days wages stopped every week for cost of food for that week.

Do you think it wrong to work two days in each week for your food?

What do you think would be the right way?

A standard wage and find our own ‘tucker’, or all ‘tucker’ found.

What is your objection to the present system?

Sometimes it happens that we work two days for our ‘tucker’ and if the rest of the week should be wet and we could not work we would not have any money.

I believe that if you have a bad week the superintendent gives you rations all the same?

Yes; but if we have four days’ pay to be deducted the following week it is worse than ever.

Is there anything to prevent you going away and securing employment elsewhere?

We always understood this was our land, and looked upon it as our home.

Do you look upon this reserve as your own, and that I must provide for you for all time?

I have always understood that.

Your impression is quite wrong?

It may be.

This is a place to which the aborigines can come, but it is not a place to

support you people entirely. You must help to support yourselves as much as you can?

We are anxious to support ourselves. We have grown beyond the mission life, and if we remained here another 50 years we would not be any farther advanced.

What would you suggest as a means of bettering the conditions of the rising generation?

If you allowed us to have land our children would be bound to benefit. There is nothing for them to look forward to now.

In addition there are many oral and written accounts of employment conditions and work life on Point Pearce Mission Station. In 1924 one of the residents on Point Pearce Mission Station wrote a letter of complaint regarding low wages and inferior rations on both Point Pearce and Point McLeay:

As I am a descendant of that race [Aboriginal] though perhaps lighter in colour, I have lived at both these Mission Station Stations, for a few years, until I could live there no longer owing to the high cost of living, and the very poor wages paid to native workers in these places ranging from 5s. to 7s. for married men with families, whereas the average white working men with families find that they can with the greatest economy make 14s. per day meet their liabilities, yet the poor Aboriginal is expected to feed and clothe himself, wife and children. From my own experience, I can hardly make both ends meet on the better wage namely 14s. per day, but by going out shearing or doing other piece work or contract work I seem to manage. Rations and blankets to the aged and needy are of inferior quality, one blanket for two married adults, rations unrefined sugar, second rate flour and last grade tea. These are only supplied to the aged full-blooded Aboriginals, and those in dire circumstances, otherwise nil.²⁰

In May 1956 a school teacher with the Education Department in South Australia wrote the following statement about the conditions on the Mission:

I invited the four Native people into the School house for a cup of tea before a good fire. I was pleased as it gave Mrs Neilson and myself a chance to know these people, whom we came to work and live with. They spoke of the conditions they had to live with such as leaky roofs and broken windows, poor food supplies, high cost of living and low wages. The men doing ordinary work on the Mission were receiving only 4.50 Pounds per week. Admitting they got free milk and rent, medical attention and hospitalisation, the amount of money coming into the house each week was very meager indeed and it was.²¹

An elder from Point Pearce recalls:

The boss treated us badly and we didn't get much money.²²

In his paper *Strikes, Petitions and Deputations: Protest by Aboriginal Workers at Point Pearce Station, 1941 – 1952*, Dr Cameron Raynes details what he

describes as a “long, proud history of protest and dissent”²³ at Point Pearce Mission Station over the lack of award rates of pay for Aboriginal workers and the “miserly rationing regime”.²⁴ He describes a number of strikes and petitions, which occurred throughout the duration of the mission surrounding the payment of appropriate wages, gross violations of the rights of Aboriginal workers and living conditions.

b) Work off the station

While Aboriginal workers could elect to obtain work outside of the station, it is not evident what the availability of outside work was and the practical reality of obtaining employment on the open labour market. Dr Raynes notes that “Aboriginal people were generally made to feel uncomfortable in rural South Australia. For Instance, in 1932, moves were made to confine the residents of Point Pearce Station *to the station*, and in particular to make Port Victoria a prohibited area for Aboriginal people.”²⁵ He further goes on to say that this acted as a strong disincentive for Aboriginal people to leave Point Pearce and take up work elsewhere.

However, in circumstances where workers were fortunate to obtain off the mission, the disparity in the level of income was quite marked.

*We got very poor wages. Outside the Mission, the wages were all right though. They had to pay us, because that was what the union said. We had to join the union. It was the A.W.U (Australian Workers Union) when we went shearing. Then we got the same wages as what a white man would get. They treated us well when we worked off the Mission, but on the Mission, we got small wages, just so much weekly.*²⁶

*The pay was 100% better when I worked off the mission.*²⁷

c) No promotional opportunities

There were little or no opportunities for promotion. Heritage consultants Wood and Westell write in *Point Pearce Social History Project, Yorke Peninsual, South Australia*: “While the mission population had become highly competent farmers, their skills, experience and work ethic were never given credence, and a paternalistic approach saw a succession of Europeans placed in the role of farm manager and overseer.”²⁸ This view is also echoed in numerous historical accounts and by living elders today:

Once point I'd like to stress is: the white share farmers who came and worked with land on Point Pearce made a lot of money out of it. This is something that should be mentioned. Some of them came with only wheelbarrows and when they left that place they went away with big flash motor cars. And some of the white managers they had on that place... Well, there was one bloke who was the manager of all the sheep and all that on Point Pearce, and before that he used to sell fruit at Port Victoria. He was a greengrocer, yet they made him stock manager. Any yet the old Aboriginal people had done it for years and years. This is my point. It was always

thought that it was necessary for there to be a white man at the tiller, even though the Aboriginal people could do it as well.²⁹

Well, since I've been looking back on the days on Point Pearce, I've thought about it a lot, wondering why's it got to be the white man at the head. The black man's got to do the work...We did it just as well as the white person could, you know, but it was always a white person there, or someone. But we had to do all the work.³⁰

Furthermore, the work that was performed directly benefited the mission and the government. The profits did not go to the workers.

Well, the people used to be fed off the land. There was wheat, sheep, cattle and pigs, but the profits, we don't know...It went back to the government that was ruling at the time. The Aboriginal people only did the work. Where the profits went, we don't know.³¹

d) Aged Pensions

Pensions were not available to men and women if they remained on the mission after the age of 65. However it was exceptionally difficult for elderly residents to leave the mission because for many it was the place of their birth and there was a strong connection to the land.

There were some terrible laws on that Mission, like the ones for the old people. When they got up to the age of sixty-five and if they wanted their pension, they had to go off the reserve to get it. They were just pushed out and let go. If they died outside, it was their own fault. Those old men pioneered that place. They did everything for that Mission. They made it what it was. Like my father said: He did the fencing, he did the haystacks and he did the ploughing of the fields and was a hard-working man. And yet when it came time for him to get a pension, he couldn't get it and stay on the Mission. And they couldn't stay there without any money. It was a terrible law. So they had to get off that Mission....I thought it was terrible that pensions weren't paid to those men on Point Pearce who pioneered that place.³²

8. Conclusion and Recommendation

The Point Pearce Mission Station was under direct government control and management from 1914 to 1966 when the Point Pearce Aboriginal Reserve Lands became vested in the Aboriginal Lands Trust.³³ There has been no investigation in South Australia to date with respect to Indigenous workers whose paid labour was controlled by government. It is the recommendation of this submission that the South Australian Government conduct a thorough and comprehensive investigation into the exploitation of Aboriginal labour on mission stations in South Australia and compensate Aboriginal people for the exploitation of this labour.

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- ³ *Aboriginal Missions in South Australia*, Nunkawarrin Yunti of South Australia Inc, Adelaide, 2003
- ⁴ TS Archibald, Yorke's Peninsula Aboriginal Mission Incorporated: A brief record of its history and operations, Hussey and Gillingham, Adelaide, 1915, p. 9
- ⁵ *The Aborigines Act 1911 (SA)* s 5
- ⁶ Archibald, op. cit., p. 25
- ⁷ Ibid., p. 19
- ⁸ Ibid., p. 30
- ⁹ Vivienne Wood and Craig Westell, *Point Pearce Social History Project*, Yorke Peninsula, South Australia, Parkside SA [s.n.] 1999, p. 16
- ¹⁰ Ibid., p. 16
- ¹¹ Ibid., p. 25.
- ¹² Graham and Graham, op. cit., p. 47.
- ¹³ Wood and Westell, op.cit., p. 13.
- ¹⁴ *Point Pearce: past and present*, comp. Eileen Wanganeen, Aboriginal Studies and Teacher Education Centre, Underdale, 1987, p. 32.
- ¹⁵ Graham and Graham, op. cit. p. 61.
- ¹⁶ *Point Pearce: past and present*, op. cit., p. 38.
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- ²¹ Graham and Graham, op. cit., p. 68.
- ²² Aboriginal Elder 1, pers. comm., August 2006.
- ²³ Cameron Raynes, *Strikes, petitions and deputations: protest by Aboriginal workers at Point Pearce Station, 1941-1952*, History Trust of South Australia, Adelaide, 2005, viewed 26 July 2006, <http://www.history.sa.gov.au>, p. 1.
- ²⁴ Ibid, p. 10.
- ²⁵ Raynes, op. cit., p. 10.
- ²⁶ Graham and Graham, op. cit., p. 51.
- ²⁷ Aboriginal Elder 2, pers. comm., August 2006.
- ²⁸ Wood and Westell, op. cit., p. 9.
- ²⁹ Graham and Graham, op. cit., p. 61.
- ³⁰ Ibid., p. 63.
- ³¹ Ibid., p. 61.
- ³² Ibid., p. 62.
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