Early Merrimac History

The first chapter...

It’s a place haunted by happy moggaris, spirits from a history that time almost forgot. But, with the help of the local Gombemberri tribe we have reached back into time to recall a past that should never be separated from our future. It’s a past that begins in the Dreamtime. The first residents and tourists of the Gold Coast were Aborigines and archaeological evidence shows that Aboriginal Peoples have populated this area for at least 23 000 years. The Gold Coast was a part of the territory occupied and travelled by the Gombemberri clan group. Their homeland reached from the Tweed River to the south to the Coomera River in the north. From the coastal seaboard it spread west to the foothills of Tamborine Mountain. Aboriginal people from one clan group would not venture into the territory of their neighbours without observing the proper protocol, such as lighting a signal fire on the other's border. The penalties for unauthorised trespass were harsh. But if correct protocol was followed, then different clan groups could, and did, inter-visit, sometimes travelling hundreds of kilometres for seasonal food gathering and feasting and "Karabari" (Corroborees).

The Gombemberri clan group, who regarded themselves as a 'family', were the coastal and estuarine People of this nation of families. Clan groups included were NGARANG-WAL from Nerang/Mudgeeraba: MIGUNBERRI from Canungra; the WANGERRIBURRA from the Tamborine Mountain area; BIRRINBURRA from Lamington and Springbrook Plateau, MUNUNJALI from further west around Beaudesert; east to BULLONGIN FAMILY at Coomera.

Each clan group had its own dialect with all understanding the 'Master' dialect of the "Yugambeh". The Gombemberris, though, really had no need to stray outside their own territory. They lived in a land that provided them with all their daily needs. They favoured the hinterland during the summer and the beaches during the winter - avoiding the mosquitoes of the coastal swamps. The historical Kombumerri people were hunters, gatherers and fishers, and are reported to have trained dingoes and even dolphins to aid them in the hunting and fishing processes. They had fresh water and a huge variety of fresh foods. Their calcium and protein needs were obtained from bones, mussels, prawns, and dark green, leafy vegetables. There was honey in abundance in the hives of stingless native bees. The sea and waterways teemed with fish. Crayfish (yabbies) and crabs cluttered the creeks and estuaries, which were also rich in oyster beds. The beaches were alive with the succulent eugaree or pippie clams. Flocks of wild ducks and other waterbirds covered the swamps and lagoons; plump birds such as parrots, pigeons and scrub turkeys, haunted the woodlands. The inland forests seethed with animal life, and were a source of edible roots, yams, and all manner of fruit, berries and nuts (27 different kinds including the Macadamia).
The Gombemberris could afford to be generous, opening their territory to neighbours for great feasts and corroborees. There were two major seasonal events, the Sea mullet Season and the Oyster Season. People walked from as far away as Boonah and Warwick just to participate in the feasting. The seasonal gatherings were the signals for rituals and ceremony such as the Bora held as numbers dictated. Shell middens scattered along selected sites are evidence of these feasts.

**Settlement**

During 1840 the first major official survey of the coastal area from the mouth of the Nerang to the Richmond River at Byron Bay was undertaken. The surveyors were Robert Dixon, James Warner and Granville C. Stapylton. Dixon sent Stapylton to survey inland while he and Warner surveyed the coast. In 1872, when the aptly named 3600ha Great Swamp dominated most surveyors’ maps of the Gold Coast, Julius Holland was creating a 480ha sugar cane plantation in the wilds of Bundall. By 1883 The Gombumberri’s faced total eviction from their favourite living sites. In 1889, on January 24 a railway line opened linking Brisbane to Southport. The State Government had to negotiate with the local Aboriginal people because part of the line passed through a clan group’s ground.

1891 Hinterland family at Nerang River

*The history of Merrimac reflects the development of the district. It is during the early years that the settlers welded into a community. This period was fraught with difficulties and frustrations. These setbacks acted as a strong unifying force for cooperation. The neighbourliness of self-reliant people laid the foundation for happy and contented residents.*

Written for Merrimac State School’s Golden Jubilee (1967) by Secretary of the P&C, Clive Nielsen
Early Days

In 1851, William Ducat White acquired the whole of the area south of the Albert River as a cattle run with headquarters in Nindooimbah. He established huts for mustering cattle at Nerang, Worongary and Mudgeeraba. In 1863, the Manchester Cotton Company received a grant of 1280 acres fronting the Nerang River. This land extended from Cooper’s and Birmingham’s properties to Boobegan Creek. The early settlers and their wives arrived in Brisbane under the manager, Mr E.B. Price. A boat was chartered to transport the settlers and their machinery and supplies to the new settlement. However, the boat, which was crowded with men, women and children ran aground on one of the islands and they were forced to remain there for a fortnight. Food was short and the mosquitoes plagued the immigrants. It finally took three weeks to reach their destination.

1870 Robert, Grace and John Veivers Boobegan (Boowagon) Creek

In 1865 two Scottish brothers, Robert and John Veivers, were among the most successful timber-getters in the Gold Coast region. Robert was granted 320 acres of farming land in the Nerang area.

These early settlers cultivated cotton on the high land with chipping and cutting being done by the local Aboriginal peoples. Later, the land west of the Nerang River was cut into small agricultural blocks. The first settlers produced crops of potatoes, maize and fodder, but floods caused great havoc. Sugar was introduced by Mr Price and the fertile land of Carrara produced good crops. However, heavy frosting affected the crops. At one time, there were six sugar mills operating in the area but the price slumped badly and sugar growing was finally abandoned. Coopers introduced the first aerator which revolutionised cream supply.
Two English families, Messrs. Parr and Tucker, took up land but the floods ruined their crops. They appealed to the government for help and received 10 pounds worth of seed potatoes. This crop was very successful and helped them over their first difficulties. Later, Mr Parr bought up many small uneconomic farms and eventually started dairying in a big way. Two German families, Messrs Eichsteadt and Kamholtz, established successful farms on the banks of the Nerang River.

Other farms were established by V. White, J. Gooding, J. Veivers and J. Hoy. Bill, Jack and Lacey Gaven were early settlers on properties between Boobegan Creek and Broadbeach. In 1901 when the Victorian Syndicate bought large areas of land, many Victorians settled into the area. Mr G. Wilson was one of the first settlers to take up the land in 1905. Other settlers followed. Among them was Mr J. Lyndon, who purchased land at Worongary in 1909, where he later developed a very successful Illawarra Cattle Stud. He was often invited to judge at country shows.

A Dairy Community

In 1910, Mr P. Nielsen bought ‘Hillview’ and T. Gooding, John and Jacob Platell, R Crocker and C. Bruhn bought land along Clear Island Road (now Gooding Drive), where they commenced dairying. Periodic floods and caterpillars caused great destruction. Mr J. Davidson, who came to Merrimac in 1916, farmed the land. They held the contract for carrying bulk milk from Merrimac Milk Factory to the Railway station at Worongary. Eventually ‘Talgai’ was purchased by Mr J. Veivers in 1919.
Mr G. Wilson commenced cheese making and taught Mr Mac Namara the art. The cheese was sold locally and 80lb cheeses were manufactured for export. Later, cream was taken to Worongary station and then by rail to Kingston Butter Factory. The Standard Dairy Company built a milk factory at Nerang which operated successfully for a year before it was bought by Nestle’s. However, after a short time it was closed.
The Merrimac Milk Factory started to supply pasteurised milk to Brisbane as early as 1918. The milk was placed in glass-lined containers and conveyed to Worongary siding by a horse-drawn wagon. From 1918 till October 1936, the Modern Milk Supply took over the factory and transported milk to Brisbane by motor truck. Three years later, this company merged with Paul’s Ice-cream Milk LTD. In 1957, the Merrimac Milk Factory was burnt down and all the milk from the area was sent to The South Coast Cooperative Dairy Association in Southport, where surplus milk was manufactured into ice-cream and powdered milk. In the early days each individual farmer carried the milk to the depot in his own cart. Today’s milk is pumped from stainless steel refrigerated vats into a stainless steel insulated road tanker.

**Transport**

The railway from Brisbane to Southport was opened in 1889 and by 1902, it was extended as far as Coolangatta. Rail proved economically important to the area and provided quicker transit of goods and passengers. Nerang and Worongary were busy rail centres.

Road transport in the Merrimac area consisted mostly of horse drawn vehicles. The rough dirt and forest roads made journeys hazardous and slow. The horses provided the power on the farms and they were also used for road haulage. There were several outstanding teams in the district, which moved heavy loads, fully justifying their proud owners. The Carrara ferry was used to transport vehicles and people across the Nerang River.
Some roads were sealed in the 1930’s and transport flowed more freely. The motor vehicle began to gradually take over the horse drawn vehicles with the advent of bitumen road and in the late 1940’s motor transport grew apace. In the early days transport from Brisbane could take several days.

1928 Mr Greaves of Merrimac Estate Model T Ford with Joan and Dorothy Lane

**Drainage**

Mudgeeraba and Bonogin Creeks rise in the Nimmel Range and flow into the broad low lying Merrimac Plain, to eventually join with the Nerang River. Originally, the overflow from both creeks emptied into a chain of lagoons named on early maps as the ‘Great Swamp’. Flat, very wet and bottomless in parts, the swamp extended from the original Merrimac Estate to today’s Burleigh Waters. Carl Lentz, a Hinterland pioneer, wrote that the Yugambeh people and the first settlers believed that the swamp was the home of the mythical creature of the Australian bush and wetlands, the Bunyip.

Late in the 1860’s, Thomas Stephens took up 10 000 acres of swamp land. This land extended from Nerang River west to a line connecting Nerang and Mudgeeraba. Stephens was a prominent Brisbane businessman, newspaper publisher, one time Mayor of Brisbane and later a member of Queensland Parliament. His grandson wrote, ‘There was of course no railway line and Thomas Stephens often rode down on horseback to the property from his home in South Brisbane’. He established a dairy farm at ‘Hillview’ in early 1870, and soon after at ‘Merrimac’.
William Stephens 1920

William, Thomas Stephen’s son, was left with the problem of draining the vast swampy lands. Great difficulty was experienced as the swamps consisted mainly of a soft peat. In the early construction of drains through the swamp, the peat was cut with hay knives and lifted by hand. At a later stage, horse-drawn scoops were used, two draught horses to a scoop, and twenty scoops working on one drain. His son wrote, ‘The draining was difficult. The land was very flat, very wet and almost bottomless. A twenty foot box sapling could be worked down by hand out of sight almost anywhere in the swamp. Mudgeeraba Creek with its huge catchment area had no mouth but emptied its waters into the swamp. Many miles of open drains were constructed and kept clear of weeds. These drains ran the water off the swamp and the surface gradually hardened. Number Two dairy was built on a slight rise nearer to the coast’. This dairy was called Merrimac.

1910 Digging a canal in the swamp
1917 Preparing Merrimac Swamp

Naming ‘Merrimac’

One explanation documented that Mrs Stephens named the dairy after an American Indian word meaning, ‘merrily running waters’. A descendent of William Stephens wrote, ‘To a man who spent many years making and maintaining drains to run water across the swamp, the meaning of ‘Merrimac’ seemed most appropriate’.

When the Victorian Syndicate bought the land owned by Stephens, they continued this drainage system. The last drain to be completed was Dunlop’s Drain which drains into Little Tallebudgera Creek. The drains are still in use today with flood gates and levies used to control the flow. As the local swamps are low, barely above sea level, they are still prone to flooding as seen at Emerald Lakes.

Early Schooling

The Carrara area was originally part owned by the Manchester Cotton Company’s cotton plantation established in 1860. It was situated on the east bank of the Nerang River. Carrara is an Aboriginal word meaning ‘long flat’. The first Carrara school was established near Kamholtz’s farm, Mrs Cooper being the first teacher. Later Mr Lee donated a piece of land near Carrara ferry, now owned by Mr J. Hamilton where Mrs Cooper continued teaching. She was succeeded by Miss A. Healy who taught there for many years. The school at Carrara continued to serve the community for many years (1901-1929) and in 1916 had an enrolment of 28. The nearest other State School was at Mudgeeraba and also had an enrolment of 28 pupils.
Advocacy for Merrimac School

The local people, mostly dairy farmers, wanted a school built closer to their lands, so on 21 May 1915, a public meeting was called. Two sites were proposed, one 2 1/2 miles and the other 3 1/2 miles (each two acres) from the existing Carrara School. At this meeting, a committee was formed consisting of Messrs Wilson, Platell, Caskin, MacNamara, Gooding and Eichsteadt. They were elected as a building committee for ‘promoting the establishment of a state School at Worongary to be known as Merrimac State School. Mr W. A. Smith, postal address, Worongary South Coast Line, was appointed Secretary of the Committee.

The deliberations of this meeting along with a lithograph plan of the locality, showing the positions of the two proposed sites as well as the existing schools, a list of ages, addresses and distances from each of the proposed sites of the children who intended to enrol at the school were forwarded to the Secretary of the Department of Public Institutions in Brisbane on 30 September, 1915. The correspondence reached the department on 15 October 1915. Pupils on the list included some that were attending school at Carrara and Mudgeeraba but who also intended to enrol at the new school if one was established. Other children on the list were listed as not attending school.

On May 12 November 1915, an enquiry was held by the department to select the site for the new school. Mr Gripp, District Inspector of Schools, conducted the enquiry and the majority of parents approved the site now occupied by the Merrimac State School. In his advice to the Under Secretary of the Department of Education, Gripp wrote, ‘Of the 31 children on the list, 11 now attend the Mudgeeraba School where there is an enrolment of 37, 6 attend the Carrara School where there is an enrolment of 33 and 14 attend no school owing to distance. On the whole, I consider that the applicants have made out a good case, and I therefore beg to recommend that a State School be established at Merrimac’ (15 Nov 1915).

Negotiations then proceeded to purchase the land from Mr John Davidson to the department for £28 for the establishment of the school. The local residents subscribed £14 for the purchase of the land under the condition that the owners of Merrimac Estate, subscribe another £14. The company agreed to the proposal and the residents forwarded their contribution to the company’s local manager. A letter outlining the proposal went to the department on 25 December 2015.

John and Elizabeth Davidson
1915 Receipt of £14 for school land

The negotiations for the new school stagnated so a private school was conducted under Plattell’s house, where the children were taught by Miss C. Platell. After the approval of the site on 12 November 1915, a number of parents had second thoughts and submitted a protest to the government. These parents wanted the school to be erected on the previously rejected site. This led to a further enquiry, which when conducted, supported the original decision and these deliberations were received by the department 12 March 1917.

‘The Brisbane Courier’ 9 Feb 1917

Day Labour Works

The Executive Council has approved expenditure by the department on carrying out the following works,

Wooloowin State Infants Home, new ward and additions to nurses’ quarters, £2 300
Merrimac, State School, £400
Highland Plains State School, £380

‘Darling Downs Gazette (QLD) Monday 30 July 1917
Transfer of state school teachers in Queensland have been arranged as follows:–
Earnest John Andrews, from a.t. Chinchilla to h.t. Merrimac

The Land

The chosen site for Merrimac State School was previously owned by John and Elizabeth Davidson who immigrated to Australia from Longtown in England in 1909. They came out on a ship called the ‘Otranto’. In England, the family operated a small dairy farm, milk run and horse drawn vehicle hire business. The family of 9 moved to ‘Braeside’ in Merrimac in 1914.

Davidson family with picture of ship, ‘Otranto’