

Blackfella Business

by Sam Bienstock

During the autumn of 1970, I was 19 and I received my military draft call up notice for the U.S. armed forces who were prosecuting the war in Indochina. Being absolutely opposed to that war, my decision to flee the country was easily made.

My intended host country was Australia. Shortages in the workforce induced the government of the day to assist immigrants with cheap passage and with permanent residency visas. Immediately upon my arrival, however, I was told that as a permanent resident I would be liable for call up in the Australian draft.

In time, I was called up to be interviewed by the draft board and given a medical exam to determine my fitness for induction into the military. During the interview I told the committee of my opposition to the war and that I would simply leave the country to go to Canada if they intended to follow through and draft me. Based on that interview the committee decided not to induct me and once again I was a "free" man so to speak.

Through a series of connections; friends of friends of friends etc. of my parents; I was introduced to Faith Bandler the head of FCAATSI (Federal Council for the Advancement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders) and two of its organisers: Chicka Dickson and Joe McGuiness. During this time I learned that although Black people were in fact citizens of Australia it was not until 1962 that Aboriginal people were granted the right to vote in Federal elections and not until 1965 in Queensland state elections.

I was also told that while it was compulsory for all other sectors of the Australian citizenry to vote, it was not so for indigenous people and that there were some states that were proactive in hindering their registration. If and only if they were enrolled, it was compulsory to vote. However, enrollment itself was not compulsory and it was illegal under Commonwealth legislation to encourage indigenous people to enrol to vote. Thus FCAATSI decided to send Joe around north Queensland and the top end of the country, to remote missions, stations and reserves to register black people for the vote. And I was employed to drive him.

At about the same time Brian White, newscaster and head of news at radio 2GB, had suggested that I should take along a tape recorder to record my impressions as a young American travelling through rural outback Australia, with particular emphasis on conditions of indigenous peoples on reserves.

Joe and I headed off in a small Land Rover four wheel drive, north from Sydney. We spent more than two months driving around the Territory and Queensland visiting such places as Yuendumu, Palm Island, the cane regions on the

Atherton Tablelands and outstations and reserves between the Alice and Darwin. At the time I was struck by the remarkably racist and intolerant laws governing life of indigenous people who lived in Queensland.

The Queensland Acts gave draconian power to white "managers" over black people. Managers had total control over indigenous lives. They could determine where people would live, how they would travel, and the jobs they could have. The managers had a say in wage negotiations as well. In fact wages were "held" in trust for the indigenous people by the managers with no prudential oversight. The managers also had the right to expel indigenous people from their homes and communities (much like a lesser form of Ethnic Cleansing today).

The communities were fenced in, with warning signs posted on trees and posts declaring that all visitors needed the permission from the managers to enter upon those lands. To me it seemed that they were all but held in prisons, without the rights afforded to the common non-black people in Australia. For all intents and purposes it was generally acknowledged that wages were stolen from the people to whom it rightfully belonged and that these unfortunate people had no freedom of movement whatsoever and that harsh penalties were met out for the smallest of infractions of "rules". These "rules" included drastic dictates for socialising, ceremonies and conduct; far stricter and more authoritarian in most ways beyond what the law of the land held for white Australia.

Talking about my shock of witnessing this and comparing it rather substantially to the abhorrent treatment black people were given in racist communities in the south of the U.S., in my weekly tapes sent back to radio 2GB, I was told that I created a furore on the airwaves in Sydney. I was glad that I was out of town, so to speak, during a seriously fiery debate, live, on the phone lines to 2GB, about the appropriateness of a *"yank telling us about our state of affairs"*. This was especially so when I compared my observations of the Queensland Acts with the rule of Apartheid in South Africa!

On the less extreme side of that political experience I was given the opportunity to witness the Aboriginal Olympics that was held on the Yuendumu reserve. Interestingly but not surprisingly, I had to be acceptable first to the council of elders before I was allowed into the reserve to watch the proceedings and that many dances and ceremonies were forbidden to me based sometimes on my gender and sometimes on my race.

At the end of our trip I was given the chance to work on a cane farm on the Atherton Tablelands near Kuranda, which was one of the first and only indigenous co-op owned farms in Australia. I had spent time photographing our travels and today some of my favourite work comes from this period of my eye opening trip around rural black Australia.