

Daisy Bates Papers

MSS 572.994 B32t

Series 5: 'Notes not for legends or included in Aborigines: Odd notes only'

V, 6. MS paper 4 p. The Murray River Natives, transcribed J. Walkley

The Murray River today from end to end of its great long winding trail from S.E. Victoria where it begins as the little Indi pursuing its placid course through states, claiming tribute from the fourth when the floodwaters of the Warrego and Parroo run into it – has lost forever its most interesting form of wild life – the Murray River Native. So completely has he disappeared, so thoroughly is every trace of his occupancy wiped out from the river that there is not a vestige of his one-time group ownership of the areas all along its great length. Farmlands and orchards have replaced his old campsites, his native foods, edible seeds, roots and fruits have been ploughed up to make way for the vineyards and orchards, wheat and oats and barley of the white man, his meat food – emu, kangaroo and other large game have trekked in diminishing numbers to outback places. Fences became restrictions on his freedom of movement and before he realized what was happening to him, he himself was fenced out of his camping ground forever.

River, Hill, Seacoast and Plains groups were always at variance with each other and every Murray group was a faction in itself and was at odds with its neighbouring group. Fierce battles were fought at times as many an old battleground on the lower banks today testifies in broken skulls and shattered bones, every portion of its old layers full of organic remains. The high Murray banks - part of the ancient seabed - were poor in native implements and materials such as flints, spears, axes and other native objects. The [..?] or ground axe was a dear purchase as it originally came from the far north of Australia. The flints discovered here and there on the Pyap banks were chipped and re-chipped before other bartering contingents arrived. Good rounded upper and lower millstones also came from a far off district, either NSW or Victoria, a perfect specimen found in the bed of the Murray at Pyap. Pipeclay and ochre were valuable commodities brought from long distances inland. Every group had its defined fishing and totemic area and bartered its fish and other local products for the much-needed flint and axe and other needed supplies – river foods, codfish, yabbies, mussels, ducks, pelicans, swans etc. were objects of barter with the inland visitors.

To one familiar with native group life in all its aspects, it is saddening to visit what is now only the grave yard of this once virile Murray River people. Every gravel pit along the high banks was a burying place and in these, skulls and bones are often dug up with the fine sea worn gravels that make such good roads and tennis courts today.

What did that young native die of – whose skull is so young and fine and strong? Two teeth were removed, evidently by the insertion of a piece of wood or bone as the empty sockets bear no marks of flint or [?] other implement. Except the skulls and bones, a few poor and inferior flints, the bartered upper and nether millstones, an old limestone mortar, man's first known pounding vessel – which still bears traces of the white pipeclay that had been pounded within it, a poorly made and much blunted ground axe – they could not re-grind it – a bartered article and a very inferior limestone upper millstone of limestone, showing the parts where thumb and fingers pressed, found with a flint here and there on the hill bank opposite Kattarakto (Katarapko?)Creek.

A sudden wish to meet and talk with a Murray River Native, a belief that such a great river of drinking water must have a little group in a way back area, sent me down to a little way back district with tent and notebook, blank vocabulary and a small map of S.A.s portion of the Murray River to help in locating the various groups getting [?] of each group, the foods, game, customs, ceremonies that could be remembered.