

Seventy-Five Years on the Richmond.

1847-1922.

James Ainsworth's Reminiscences

(No. 5.)

(From Ballina "Beacon.")

THE OLD SKIPPERS.

At memory's bidding the mind readily recalls quite an army of veteran skippers who braved the coast in all weathers and who hazarded the Richmond bar under every condition in the grim old days. And as the silent procession passes in dim review a lingering thought emphasises what a splendid era of glorious service passed with them. They were almost without exception Captains Courageous every one of them. They were not alone heroic Empire-builders as became the outpost adventurers of the mid-Victorian age, but they were also pioneers of the truest type. They had mastered their sea calling in the roughest of schools—in which, as a rule, in those days only the fittest survived—and their varied and exhaustive training was so thorough that they were in

was so thorough that they were invariably able to meet every subsequent vicissitude with an experience already learned and with a resource as prompt as it was usually effective. Bluff, hearty, kindly, with a dare-devil recklessness and a courage born of the sea, they were exactly the type of men required for the needs of their time. Hundreds of such sailor men it was then who kept open the lonely coastal connection with Sydney and waited upon the timber-cutters and settlers in the remote Richmond fastnesses 30, 40, 50, 60, 70, and 80 years ago. Their hardships we can now only surmise, we cannot ever measure or fully appreciate them ; and in the case of scores of the number who were tragically engulfed in a moment or who were cast away and lost oblivion happily provides a veil. Captain Steele, of the Sally, in '42, was the first of the gallant band, and Capt. Ben Alley, of the Brundah, the last. A complete roll-call of the names of the skippers is at this juncture impossible, but a few well remembered ones come readily to mind at the moment. In the late forties and fifties there were for example Captains John Skennar, Tom Ainsworth, Jimmy Griffen, Frank Freeburn (afterwards first pilot on the Clarence), G. R. Easton (first pilot on the Richmond), Jimmy Somerville, Deborough, Benard

Jimmy Somerville, Desborough, Benaud, Barnard, Harry Capps, Jack Jones, and Cambridge. In the sixties and seventies there were likewise Captains **Ben Alley, Harry Jackson, Bill Pratt, Cope-land, Haynes, White, Billy Rice, Jimmy Holden (second Mayor of Ballina), Tom Fenwick, Walker, Harold, Jimmy Hamilton, Dan Callaghan, J. Loutit, Tulloch, Wright, Humphries, Locky McKinnon, H. Reed, Gallienne, Haag, Brown, Watson, Currie, Turner (who lost the s.s. Waimea on the North Beach), Sullivan (of the s.s. Susannah Cuthbert), John Magee (s.s. Platypus, with whom, by the way, was associated Chief Mate Farrell—later Commodore of the North Coast Co.—and Jimmy Pender, now assistant steward on the s.s. Burringbar), Tommy Tyrell, Dave Howell, and so on.** The majority of these men, it may be stated, lost vessels on the bar, and in fact many of them lost not only one, but two, and even three. Nowadays, perhaps, the best remembered of this big shadowy legion are the genial, forceful and lingering personalities of Captains Jackson and Alley, who changed over from sail to steam in the early seventies and continued on the Richmond trade until each of them, full of years and honor, crossed the final bar some years ago. Capt. Jackson in the sixties skippered the schooner *Margaret* and *Mary*

the schooners Margaret and Mary, Policeman, Julia and Storm King. He left the latter to succeed Billy Rice on the bridge of the s.s. Platypus, and continued master in the red-funnel line down to the Tomki, 20 years back. Both Jackson and Alley sailed from Sydney to the Brunswick as well as the Richmond in the early sixties. The latter's last command under canvas was when he skippered the salvaged schooner Summer Rose from Ballina to Sydney after she had been wrecked on the North Beach opposite Pilot Point. Capt. Alley then in the seventies joined the firm of G. and B. Nichol as master of the fine new steamer Bonnie Dundee, which was afterwards sunk in a collision with the s.s. Barabool off the Manning. Other Nichol steamers running to the Richmond under Captain

Alley's command were notably the two Richmonds and the Lismore, the last named being lost on the North Beach below the inner North Head in 1885. The popular old veteran then transferred for lengthy periods to the Oakland and St. George of the Yeager line, and lastly he skippered the Brundah for the North Coast Co. from the time

for the North Coast Co. from the time of her arrival in Sydney from the old country until his death.

THE ABORIGINES.

In 1847 there were between 400 and 500 native blacks in the tribes belonging to East and West Ballina. At that time they had not yet become contaminated by the white approach. They lived in rigid accordance with their own primitive customs and were strangers alike to grog and to many of the other vices and diseases of the white civilisation. The men were destitute of clothing and the women wore loin cloths, mostly made from the wool of the opossum. Their principal food was fish and oysters and the varied products of the chase. They were a simple, good-hearted and friendly people who would generously give away anything they possessed to the "white pfeller." It is regrettable to have to record that in return they were often very badly treated by the settlers.

They were exceedingly expert hunters and fishermen, and in these pursuits brought to their aid many ingenious weapons and contrivances. In catching fish they used what they called a "tow-row"—that is, a finely meshed net attached to a stick of bamboo bent in the shape of a bow about eight feet across between the two ends. This

across between the two ends. This gave a bag effect to the net, and with a tow-row in each hand the blacks would surround the fish schools in narrow and shallow waters and catch them by hundreds. The cordage of these nets, which were verw strong and beautifully woven, was made from the inside fibre of the stinging tree and from the bark of the currajong. They used a similar net in hunting. This was made of the same fibre in long sections four feet in width. These sections when joined together for the purposes of the chase would extend sometimes to a half-mile in length. Where game was plentiful in the forest or scrub the blacks would run the net after the manner of a fence in the shape of a semi-circle. Then the whole tribe with the dogs would beat up the neighborhood for a mile or two and drive all game—everything—towards the open end of the enveloping net. Here the scared paddy-melons, wallabies, bandicoots, iguanas, etc., would be suddenly arrested and, becoming hopelessly entangled, fall speedy victims to dogs and men. It was surprising the immense quantity of food they sometimes secured by these means.

Flying foxes were a prolific source of food supply, and as these huge bats clustered together in their camps in thousands they were easily brought

thousands they were easily brought down with the boomerang and paddy-melon stick. Yams were also a favorite delicacy, and some that were obtainable in the scrubs grew to two feet in length by an inch or two in diameter. A very appetising bread was made from a nut flour. These nuts grew on the coastal headlands, and in season, when ripe, were ground up between heavy stones. The pulp was then placed in the running water for six weeks or so and the resultant paste when cooked made a really splendid bread. It resembled arrowroot in smell, and was eagerly sought after by the whites when rations ran short.

In that early period, too, the blacks, in the month of September each year, flocked to the beaches for salmon fishing. This was a very fine eating fish, resembling a small "jewy" in shape, and while the brief season of a month lasted Binghi's larder was full to overflowing. They came in huge shoals inside the surf, where the blacks could spear them in any number; then they would disappear from the coast as suddenly as they came. A singular circumstance in connection with these migratory salmon was that in the '57 season countless hundreds of them were washed ashore dead, so that the beaches north of the Richmond were literally covered with their decomposing bodies.

strewn with their decomposing bodies. They were apparently ravaged by some disease. Certain it is—and this is the peculiar feature—they have never, to my knowledge, been seen on this coast since.

Tribal warfare was not infrequent. The Brunswick blacks, hostile to those of Ballina, would meet on the Seven Mile Beach as a battleground and there they would savagely fight out their differences. Generally the trouble had its origin among the women folk. A young buck from a neighboring tribe would carry off a young lubra, or the latter would elect to steal away to another camp, and this was sufficient for a declaration of war. The original white settlers witnessed many of these tribal collisions. A battle would sometimes last for two days, and would take place generally on the open beaches.

The weapons were mostly spears, boomerangs and nullahs, and each warrior carried a shield, or bukkha, to protect the body from the flying missiles. The balance spear was a favorite weapon, and these the expert fighting men could hurl up to a couple of hundred yards with deadly precision.

The tribes subscribed to the primitive principles of right and wrong, and believed in the existence of an evil spirit. As a consequence they were

spirit. As a consequence they were possessed of many disconcerting fears. Without any apparent recognition of a good spirit, they stood in mortal terror of an evil one, but generally they were fair in their dealings with one another in obedience to the rigid tribal codes.

They had many gruesome customs. On the death of a member of the tribe the women relatives would with sharp tomahawks while standing up hack their scalps clean of hair, after which they would collapse in heaps, presenting a sickening sight. The hairless, blood-smearred heads would then be treated with poultices of congevoi and in a few weeks the bruised and bare scalps would again be wonderfully healed. Another cruel custom was the initiation of a young buck to manhood. This, among other wierd ritès, involved the laceration and burning of the flesh on chest and shoulders, and the application of clay to heal the wounds. Huge weals remained, and these were

the warrior's pride and the sign of his tried manhood.

The hunting ground of the Ballina tribes extended north to Broken Head and back from the beaches to the Rio

and back from the beaches to the Big Scrub. The seasons were known to them by foliage and flowers, and the great book of nature undoubtedly revealed to them many of its secrets. They could tell by natural signs of flowers and fruits when the salmon and the mullet were due on the beaches and in the rivers, and also when certain game was bound to be in evidence in particular localities.

The tribe usually camped in divisions at different places excepting during oyster season, when they assembled unitedly at Chiekiaba, on North Creek, where the large oyster banks on the foreshores to this day mark the old feeding grounds.

Naturally conversant with the ways of the bush and the scrub, they were of incalculable assistance to the cedar getters. They also became fine axemen and expert at squaring the logs, rafting, and bullock driving. It was never known that the whites had ever suffered injury at their hands, but on the contrary their help was in constant requisition in many ways.

AN EAST BALLINA MASSACRE.

SHOT DOWN LIKE DOGS.

In 1853 or '54, when Queensland was still under the jurisdiction of N.S.W., it was the custom (occasionally) to

patrol distant territories with black-trackers in charge of white troopers. These were trained horsemen and musket shots, but were possessed very often with only a cramped conception of their duty.

It had been alleged in Brisbane that the blacks to the north of the Tweed had murdered some white men and that the murderers had fled south towards the Richmond.

In due course one afternoon one of these patrols—a small one—rode into East Ballina and put up at Ainsworth's public house, "The Sailor's Home." That is to say, the white troopers stayed at the hotel while the black trackers camped outside.

The object of the mission to Ballina was not disclosed to the settlement and no inquiries were made by the patrol, but at 3 o'clock the next morning they turned out and ascended the hill in the direction of the present reservoir. The blacks had a camping ground on the clear slope of the hill facing the valley reaching over towards Black Head. At the time between 200 and 300 of them lay asleep in the camp.

The troopers and trackers stealthily surrounded the slumbering blacks, and when sufficiently close at a given signal opened fire. Men, women and children were slaughtered without mercy, and

were slaughtered without mercy, and their screams and cries during the onslaught were heart-rending. Between 30 and 40 of the poor wretches were killed outright, and many who got away were badly wounded. Their graves may still be found on the fatal ridges.

The patrol, after its bloody work, returned north, and the white settlers at East Ballina reported the unprovoked massacre to the N.S.W. Government. The authorities, however, gave no satisfaction, and when pressed to take action against the troopers the settlers were peremptorily told to mind their own business and were warned that persistence in the matter might lead to trouble for them.

In their flight from the camp the blacks took refuge in the scrub and did not return for quite a period. They sought no reprisals and took no revenge ; and to the credit of the whites, in the meantime, be it added, they were shown every sympathy and every assistance.
