

Culture & History

Kincheega National Park



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ABORIGINAL HISTORY

The Paakantji Aboriginal people travelled the length of the Darling River from Bourke through Menindee towards Wentworth. They have strong ties to the river, which are manifested in their name with "Paaka" meaning the Darling River and "ntji" meaning belonging to. The Paakantji people hunted small mammals, birds and fished in the river and lakes for golden perch, yabbies and fresh water mussels. Evidence of this can be found in the numerous middens and stone relics scattered across the park, with the highest concentration being revealed by the erosion of the dune system.



Other evidence showing Aboriginal occupation of this land can be seen in the numerous scarred trees scattered along the bank of the Darling River as it meanders through the Park. These trees provide evidence of canoe building, fishing, food gathering and shelter construction. Archaeologists say that some sites such as middens could be 35,000 to 27,000 years old. Numbers and settlement types of the Aboriginal people are thought to have changed and fluctuated as the level of water ebbed and flowed through the river and the Menindee lake system. Changing climate patterns about 15,000 years ago caused the

Willandra Lakes (of which Mungo is apart) to dry up and settlement intensified around the Menindee Lake system.

Water is an ever a precious resource in our arid landscape and as the land continued to dry up, the diet of the Aboriginal people shifted to incorporate native seeds and grasses. Kincheega is naturally stoneless country, so any stone found on park was brought here by someone. Grinding stones were carried into the Menindee area from at least 40km across the plains so that millet seeds, succulents and ferns that were harvested could be ground down and mixed into dough. The Paakantji people stored large quantities of grains in skin bags to be used in times of drought.

As European settlers moved into the region the Paakantji people fought hard to stay on the land that they had such a strong connection to. Many succumbed to diseases such as small pox that they had no immunity to, while some died during conflicts with pastoralists. The Paakantji people refused to give up and during some of the great droughts the rainmakers refused to perform their ceremonies in the hope it would discourage the pastoralists from settling along the Darling. As settlement of the land by pastoralists intensified the local Paakantji people were moved off the Darling River into camps such as the Menindee Mission or were put to work fencing off properties and shepherding sheep.

Many sheep stations employed an Aboriginal work force during the good times and the Paakantji people were able to set up camps by the river. When Australia slipped into depression employment rates dropped and the Paakantji people were forced back onto reserves, such as the Menindee Mission.

This mission was poorly located upon shifting sands and on the remains of an old burial ground. The accommodation provided has been described as tin shacks and hovels, with dirt floors and no partitions. Because of these poor conditions many people died due to Tuberculosis. The mission was shut down in 1948 and the Aborigines Welfare Board attempted to move the people to a new settlement of Murrin Bridge near Lake Cargelligo. Many of the Paakantji people refused to leave the Darling region and as the economy improved many were able to escape the mission and return to work along the Darling. Work in Menindee was never a constant thing and it rose and fell with the water level in the Darling River. As work shifted away from the large sheep stations other opportunities opened up with new ventures into fruit farming, work on the railway and the new Menindee Storage Scheme. After the war employment became sporadic and forced many people off the land and into the cities where unemployment was just as high.



PASTORAL HISTORY

During the late 1840's people began looking to the West Darling area as potential sheep country and by 1850 there was a small settlement on the Darling River that was later to become Menindee. In April 1855 the Darling lands were surveyed and opened for tender. These small frontage blocks were the forerunners of the great Darling stations of later years. One such block was Menindee later to become known as Kinchega. This station passed through many hands until it came under steady ownership of Herbert B Hughes in 1870.

Kinchega station holds a special place in explorer history. It was the place where the ill fated Burke and Wills expedition picked up the infamous William Wright in 1860. Burke was in charge of the party, Landells the camel man was second in command and Wills, a surveyor and meteorologist was third in command. They were in a race to be the first white man to travel Australia from south to north. Landells resigned from the expedition at Kinchega after an argument with Burke. Wright was the newly appointed Manager of Kinchega when he joined the party as the new third in command. His failure to meet the party on his return to Coopers Creek was blamed almost entirely for the demise of the Burke and Wills expedition.

Under the ownership of the Hughes family Kinchega station grew as they introduced their hardy merinos that were able to survive in the harsh conditions that often plagued this land. Hughes brought in tank and well sinkers to provide a permanent water source for his flock. By doing this he was able to increase the amount of sheep the station could support from 35,000 when he brought the station to 72,000 within 5 years.

Paddle steamers opened up trade along the Darling River. They provided a cheaper and quicker transportation service than the previous over land transportation and increased the profitability of wool in the Darling region. Paddle steamers needed high water to travel the Darling, and the Menindee lake system emptied slowly after floods, keeping the river open for steamer traffic.

As Hughes was always prepared to embrace change, he had his own steamers the "Jandra" and the "Nile" built and shipped in from England. His station was one of the first to experiment with bores and in 1879 found excellent water at 250 feet. He also had a telephone line installed to link up all the outposts on the property before Menindee received a telephone exchange. Remnants of the telephone line still exist in parts of the park.

In 1875 the woolshed was built. Thomas Taylor the station manager at the time was quoted as saying this shed "will last a life time" and so it has, as it still stands to this day. All methods of shearing a sheep were employed at the station, from blade shearing; then the early model steam driven mechanical shearing, followed by the combustion engine driven mechanical shearing and finally, electrically driven shearing which was used until the last sheep was shorn in 1967. The woolshed shows signs of all these methods of shearing and is an important link to the past.

In 1967, Herbert's son Harold Hughes held a huge ceremony to celebrate the 6 millionth sheep being shorn in Kinchega woolshed. The shed and surrounding lands were acquired as a memorial to the past by the NSW government and Kinchega National Park was born.



LIFE AS A NATIONAL PARK

Kinchega was dedicated as a National Park in 1967, the same year as National Parks and Wildlife Service was created. It was the first national park to be declared in western NSW.

NPWS has invested in the past to protect it for the future, and as such, a lot of time and funding has been put into restoring the woolshed. The corrugated iron sheeting over the pens has been removed and re-rolled; the internal sheep pens and gates have been repaired. The southern wall of the blade shearing board has been repaired and reconstructed and there has also been sub-flooring and flooring repairs. All of this has been done in such a way as to keep the character of the shed alive and accessible to the public.

The staff of Kinchega National Park and Broken Hill Area, work closely with the traditional owners to insure that their heritage is preserved and respected.

A memorandum of understanding exists between National Parks and Menindee Aboriginal Elders Council. It allows Elders with ties to the park to have real and meaningful involvement in its management.

Images:

Main: Hughes family, Kinchega Homestead. Courtesy of Hughes family
Front left: Shell midden, Menindee Lake (J.Doyle/OEH)
Front right: Scar tree, Morton Boulka (J, Doyle/OEH)
Back left: Counting pens, Kinchega Woolshed (B.Hlavica/OEH)
Back right: Steam Engine, Kinchega Woolshed (B.Hlavica/OEH)

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