<u>WIPING AWAY THE FEARS AND TEARS AT WILCANNIA</u>

Uncovering the truth about this often reviled town in the Australian outback

By Stephanie Jackson

A sense of frustration bubbles below the surface of my usually calm exterior whenever I visit Wilcannia, for I find it hard to ignore the reactions of some other travellers when they first set eyes on this NSW outback town, or, more specifically, on its dark skinned aboriginal people.

A negative response is perhaps understandable, for the initial view of Wilcannia is one of buildings with barred and boarded up windows, of derelict and burnt out shops, and of dusty aboriginal people sitting on the footpath beside the pub that has its windows boarded up too, even though it's still open for business.

Travellers driving into town fill up with fuel at the service station, and hurriedly make their exit. This is not a place to dally, the myth goes, nor a place to spend a moment more than necessary. But an initial glimpse of Wilcannia can be misleading, and while hurrying through the town without stopping might be the easiest and less confronting option, it's not the best way to discover the real Australian outback, or to meet the unquestionably friendly people who have made the town their home.

On arrival, I was greeted with the familiar sight of aboriginal men sitting beside the pub's doorway, but not all had been drawn to this spot by a desperate urge for grog. Some were there, they insisted, simply because the wall, illuminated by the early morning sunshine, was the best place to warm themselves on a bitterly cold winter's morning. Others, still under the weather after a drinking binge the previous night, had nothing to say, and stared at me with glazed eyes that concealed vacant minds that held no thoughts of aggression, merely of despair.

To a white woman slaving over a hot stove in the town's café, having a yarn to a stranger seemed to be of greater importance than serving up another burger and chips, and she rattled off a list of local aboriginal people who she was proud to call her mates. "Sure there are a few troublemakers," she unhesitatingly admitted. "But most of the local aboriginal people are a friendly, easy going lot." And visitors, she added, have nothing to fear from the town's indigenous residents.

Aborigines in the supermarket, in the takeaway shop, and wandering along Wilcannia's streets all volunteered a cheerful 'G'day mate' and their faces gleamed with smiles of welcome as their dark eyes met mine.

In the residential area, where houses in a derelict state tumbled down beside others with neat gardens and freshly painted picket fences, I was accosted, in the friendliest of ways, by a group of aboriginal people who begged me to take their photo. I was happy to oblige, and when they wandered on their way in a dark skinned huddle of laughter, I continued my exploration of the town. It was the Darling River that slithers past the town that had attracted the indigenous Barkandji people to the area more than 40,000 years. But it wasn't until 1835, when explorer Thomas Mitchell passed through the area, that the European chapter of Wilcannia's story began.

Pastoralists, with their flocks of sheep, arrived in the 1850s, and in 1859, the first steam boat to journey up the Darling River to Mount Murchison Station, near the present site of Wilcannia, triggered the beginning of a new and prosperous era.

The township of Wilcannia was founded in 1866, and elegant buildings, constructed from local sandstone, were erected as the settlement flourished. By 1880, the town that had a population of 3,000 who could quenched an outback thirst at more than 13 hotels, became Australia's third largest inland port. In the busiest of years, more than 200 steamers arrived with vital supplies for the town and outlying settlements, and returned to southern ports weighed down with wool and other valuable rural products. In 1896, when a bridge was constructed across the Darling River, Wilcannia's future prosperity seemed assured. But in the 1920s, a new sound of progress that reverberated through the outback heralded the end of a golden era. Motor vehicles arrived on the scene, and the town began its slide towards obscurity.

Today, Wilcannia's once grand buildings, some decaying, and others with bars and plywood barricading their windows, hint of the poverty that has engulfed the town. The elegant architecture of 19th century buildings such as the post office, the church, and the bank that has been transformed into the offices of the local council, is still evident. But many others, like the tumbledown 1894 Catholic convent, have succumbed to the neglect of generations.

Almost 70 percent of Wilcannia's 600 residents are aboriginal people, and the majority, according to a non-aboriginal social worker I met as I approached the town's riverbank park, are "genuinely good people." "The worst thing they'll do to you is ask for a cigarette or a couple of dollars for a drink," he said. And as if on cue, a middle-aged aboriginal woman wandered towards me, and asked "Have ya got a smoke?" Being a non-smoker, I couldn't oblige. "That's OK luv," she said, as a beaming smile crossed her weathered face. "Why don't ya come over and look at our lovely river and see what they've done to it." And I was more than happy to accept her invitation

The boisterous and outgoing Colleen introduced me to her mates, and to her family – to her 'baby boy' Eric who, I estimated, was in his 30s, to her quiet and reserved husband, and to her brother William who had plenty to say in the most informative of ways. And as the group shared a cigarette scrounged from the social

worker, and passed around a plastic bottle filled with cheap white wine, I listened intently to their fascinating stories.

William, who was employed at the outback Mutawintji National Park, once the homeland of his ancestors, had a passion for traditional bush tucker. He revealed the secret of how to cook witchetty grubs on hot coals until they popped and developed a delicious flavour similar to that of peanut butter. And he recalled the times when he had dined on shingleback lizards and emus. “Emu meat is very oily, and too much of it makes you run faster than the emu ever did,” he chuckled, and the group erupted with laughter at the memories of a dash to the dunny as a consequence of their overindulgence of this traditional bush food.

“There’s plenty of bush tucker around if you know what to look for and where to find it,” William said with pride in this aspect of his culture. But the abundance of food that the river had provided and that had sustained the Barkandji for millennia is today a fading memory, for the river has become little more than a series of green and stagnant pools. “It’s so sick,” William said with sorrow in his voice, “that it’s close to death.” With the murky water now populated only by European carp, an introduced species that has triggered a dramatic decline in native fish stocks, fishing, which not only provided indigenous people with food, but also tied them to their past and helped to reinforce their spiritual connection to the river, has become a pointless activity.

“In the past”, William said, “we’d spend every day on the bank catching yabbies, fishing, and cooking Billy cake while the kids were swimming, but we can't do that now. There’s not even a yabby to be caught.”

The drought has unquestionably played a significant role in the river’s demise, but it is cotton growers and other agricultural irrigators who, each of the group were adamant, are primarily to blame.

The river's decline, William said with his soft voice tinged with sorrow, has had a dramatic impact on the lives of indigenous people, and has intensified social problems. But the social problems burdening Wilcannia’s aboriginal people began long before the river’s demise, Colleen said. They began in the early 1900s when tribal people were forcibly removed from their land and sent to reserves. Then along came alcohol and its twin evil of unemployment, and it’s that lack of work, particularly for young people, that is the greatest cause of social unrest, she said. When the river’s health is restored, either by nature or by man’s intervention, the lives of the indigenous community will be restored to a natural and harmonious balance too, William insisted. With hope that that day would soon arrive, I said goodbye to the dark skinned and hospitable people who had ensured that my brief visit to their town would be a memorable one.

Travellers who have driven through Wilcannia and seen nothing other than decay and despair may claim that my view of this corner of the world is one seen through rose coloured glasses, and I have to concede that there may be a fragment of truth in that supposition. But for those who are searching for a rewarding travel experience that will provide an opportunity to understand the lives, the history, and the aspirations of true blue Australians, Wilcannia is a must see destination where there is nothing to fear other than fear itself.

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