



M A R E E B A .

THE TOWN FOUNDED BY JOHN ATHERTON .

(By Glenville Pike, F.R.G.S.A.)

Issued by the Mareeba Shire Council on the occasion of the
unveiling of the Memorial to the late John Atherton, at
MAREEBA on ..17.AUG.1957..

In 1860, the family began their slow northward pilgrimage. With drays and stock they journeyed north to Rockhampton, then only a few years old. The Colony of Queensland had only just been formed and was attracting a stream of pioneers. At Mt. Hedlow Station which the family established, the father passed away.

John Atherton was anxious to push further north, out into the unknown lands on the tracks of the gold prospectors, and explorers like Edmund Kennedy, the Jardine Brothers, and William Hann.

In 1873, when the gold rush to the Palmer broke out, he started off with a mob of cattle to sell to the diggers, and to explore some of the country for himself. His interests were in land and stock, and goldmining had no appeal to him.

His brothers settled in the Bowen district, but John took a fancy to the Upper Burdekin-Herbert River headwaters. He had married and now had a family.

In January 1875, he again rode north with fifteen hundred head of cattle and two bullock drays. Mrs. Atherton and the children joined him in Townsville.

The pioneers were a month crossing the jungle-covered range behind Cardwell, and floods delayed them on the Herbert. John Atherton then took up Basalt Downs (Cashmere) on the old telegraph line from Cardwell to the Gulf.

But the lure of strange - and perhaps better - country still further north was awakened in Atherton when J.V. Mulligan made known his discoveries of mid - 1875 - the Hodgkinson River, the Barron, the great un-named Tableland at its head, the Wild River, and all the fine unoccupied country through which these rivers flowed.

X X X X

When the Hodgkinson gold rush broke out in March 1876, Atherton could contain his restlessness no longer. A young pioneer named John Fraser had already brought a thousand head of cattle over the coastal ranges and ridden north to the Mitchell River headwaters and taken up a vast area of cattle land deep in the wilderness.

On an exploring journey, Atherton took up all the country between Fraser's run south to the jungle-covered Tablelands, east to the coastal jungle, and west beyond the Barron River.

He then sold Basalt Downs to McDowall of Kangaroo Hills, loaded the family possessions on two bullock waggons and a buggy, and with a small mob of cattle, set out on the northern track.

Following up the Wild River, they turned westerly over rough ranges near where Watsonville was later situated, and came on to a western water, the Walsh River. They missed the rough country around where Herberton now is. Also there was no scrub to contend with which was a complete barrier to wheeled vehicles until a road was made.

In rough basalt country covered in long sweet grass they came to the swiftly flowing Barron River.

When Mulligan had first seen it, he thought it was the Mitchell. William Smith, John Doyle, and the Mounted Police, trying to find a route to the coast from the Hodgkinson, soon found it to be a new river altogether. It was named after a police official in Brisbane.

X X X X

Where Emerald Creek - a beautiful running creek of clear water - received the Barron, John Atherton built his slab homestead. He named his station Emerald End - of the EE2 brand, well known to old timers.

Cairns and Port Douglas had only just been founded. The country surrounding the Atherton homestead was a little-known domain, and the aborigines were hostile.

Scores of Atherton's cattle were speared, and seeking them far and wide over the Barron and Clohesy valleys, he carried his life in his hands.

A tomahawk thrown from ambush one almost put finis to Atherton's career; he carried the scar until the day of his death. A hill northwest of Tolga, called Bones Knob, is a grim reminder of the revenge the early pioneers took on the dusky inhabitants - for those were grim and dangerous days.

The old homestead - still standing and occupied - withstood a terrific cyclone in 1878 which devastated Cairns and Smithfield.

That year a telegraph line was erected along the Smithfield Track, and at the crossing of the Barron (Biboohra) was situated the Athertons' first neighbours - the Waldrons, Rovins and McCords. A few miles to the northwest, on the extreme headwaters of the Mitchell, was Baan Bero, the Native Mounted Police Camp. It was then in charge of Sub-Inspector Douglas. From this fortified post, the black troopers frequently sallied forth to "disperse" the hostile tribes.

62

John Atherton, the expert bushman, noted landmarks with an explorer's eye, and his namings have endured - Shanty Creek, Granite Creek, Mt. Twiddler, Kate Sugarloaf, Tichum Creek, Cobra (Cobbera) Creek, Tinaroo etc.

Tinaroo is reputed to have got its name when Atherton excitedly called out to his mate, Jim Robson, "Tin - hurroo" when he found the metal in his prospecting dish.

A minor rush set in, and the ways began to change. To this tinfield in the scrub came John Newell and William Jack, carrying their swags - as miners always did in those days - from the Hodgkinson.

When they found the Great Northern tin lode in April 1880, on the Wild River, a great rush began, and the town of Herberton sprang up.

X X X X

Overnight, civilisation came to Emerald End. It would be lonely no longer. Turning off the Port Douglas - Hodgkinson road which veered away to the west around the Granite Range some miles north of the Atherton homestead, excited travellers flocked to Herberton, crossing Granite Creek almost within sight of the Atherton homestead.

They followed in the wake of Christy Palmerston, Mullins, and McLean, who blazed the way to Herberton.

From Emerald End, John Atherton saw the dust of their passing.

By the eddying pools and lush flats of Granite Creek, the carriers and packers who followed the rush lingered awhile, the din of their horse and bullock bells and the flickering gleam of a score of campfires cleaving the solitude of the bush.

This spot, half way between Port Douglas and Herberton, was a convenient camping place.

Quickly, in the manner of the times, came passenger laden mail coaches - first run by Murphy and Macdonald, then by Cobb & Co.

Although only a rough bush track, the Herberton road soon became as busy as a highway.

For the convenience of the coach travellers and the hundreds who streamed along the dusty boulder-strewn track twisting between the bloodwood trees, in the early months of the year 1880, John Atherton built a little steep-gabled wide-verandahed shanty and rest house on the high south bank of Granite Creek, right at the crossing.

Eccles and Lloyd conducted this business, and so these families became the first citizens of the town of Marceba. But so far it was only known as the Granite Creek Coach Change.

All around was a waste of grey-green bush and heaps of basalt boulders among the tall speargrass.

X X X X

Part of the history of the North enfolds the old Granite Creek Coach Change of the "roaring 'eighties".

A traveller riding in from Thornborough or one of the other bustling mining towns on the Hodgkinson would see the rooftops of the roadside shanty, and perhaps of John Atherton's homestead, among the treetops, from one of the ridges. Away in the distance towards the north in the shimmering heat haze of the dry season, there would be a moving cloud of dust - a coach coming in from Port Douglas.

From the verandah of Eccles and Lloyd's hotel, one looked along a rough bush track to the south - it is Byrnes Street today. Teams would be turned out along the creek, saddle horses would be standing along the hitching rails.

Cobb & Co's coach would be coming in from Herberton; perhaps Bill McDonald or Jack Warner would be driving. The coach would come in with a cloud of red dust, lathered horses, jingle of harness, and creak of bodywork on leather thoroughbraces.

The clothes of the bearded driver and his passengers would be covered in dust; with a swish of skirts lady passengers would cross the rough verandah with its flooring of pit-sawn boards in quest of tea and cordials, while the men crowded into the bar.

They would talk of many things - new names, new places, of mines and teams, and newly-blazed tracks. The miners, teamsters, bushworkers, cattlemen and travellers - roughly dressed and bearded, the air reeking with Derby tobacco - would talk about the new and exciting discoveries in this raw new land in the making.

The Granite Creek Coach Change has vanished into history, but memories of those days have been handed down - the days of Cobb & Co, the packers, and the teamsters. Granite Creek was a meeting place for the people of that era, and an important stage on the long rough track that ran from Port Douglas to Herberton and right on over the ranges to Croydon in the far Gulf Country - a road that once echoed to the rattle of coach wheels and rumble of laden teams.

In 1886, and for the next seven years, a railway was climbing the coastal range from Cairns towards Granite Creek. In anticipation of its coming, surveyor Alfred Starcke laid out a few township blocks on the north bank of Granite Creek, in 1887.

With the arrival of the railway from Cairns in August 1893, it became the town of Mareeba.

John Atherton watched it grow rapidly. He played a prominent part in the early life of the township, as well as contributing to its development.

His son, William, when he formed Chillagoe Station in the 'nineties, had noted the existence of copper there, and so was partly responsible for the founding of that town also. The building of the Chillagoe Railway placed Mareeba on a sound footing, and it has never looked back.

In the early days of Mareeba, old John Atherton, red-shirted and bearded, was a familiar figure. Among other things, he was president of the Turf Club in 1908.

During his lifetime he saw the town of Atherton carved from virgin jungle, the railway constructed to it, and extended to Herberton in 1910.

The old pioneer died in 1913, after some 37 years' residence at Emerald End. He was buried there beside his wife, who had died in 1902.

John Atherton, the founder of Mareeba, played a valuable part in the development of North Queensland. He is worthy of this fine monument in the town he helped to establish so long ago.

For years his son E.A. ("Paddy") Atherton represented the Tablelands in the Queensland Parliament, and he was Minister for Mines at one time. He did his share of pioneering also. He passed away about three years ago and was laid to rest in the family graveyard at Emerald End. Only one son, and one daughter of John Atherton are still living.

MAREEBA, THE TOWN THAT STARTED AS A COACH CHANGE.

People who had followed the railway from camp to camp through the construction years, and those who came from Port Douglas as the coach roads shortened as the Iron Horse advanced, all came to Mareeba; they constituted some of the town's first citizens.

On the high bank of the creek near the coach change, its pioneers were laid to rest in the coaching days. On the edge of the present street, under a gnarled frangipanni tree, are the graves of Mrs. Eccles, and one dated March 1886 is that of a Henry McCrohan.

It was Surveyor Rankin who surveyed the nucleus of the present town - three long streets and seven cross streets. Some of them perpetuate the names of early pioneers - Eccles, Lloyd, Middlemiss, Atherton, Hort and Walsh. Rankin Street was named after the surveyor himself.

Some confusion exists after whom the main street, Byrnes Street, is named. One school of thought suggests that it should be "Byrnes" Street and that it was named after Thomas Joseph Byrnes, Premier of Queensland in the 'nineties, while another asserts it was named after Peter Byrne, a local publican and later of Chillagoe. That it was named after the premier seems the most likely conclusion.

Other pioneers were honored in street names as the town expanded, and this practise is still continuing.

X X X X

In imagination we will wander down that part of the old Herberton Road that became Byrnes Street in the 'nineties before the days of the Chillagoe Railway - a street one mile in length, hot, bare and dusty in the dry season, muddy and undrained in the wet.

On the railway side of the street was Gates' saddler's shop, Peter Berglund, bootmaker, Albert May, cabinetmaker, and Jacobson's watchmaker's shop. At the top end of the railway reserve was Fenwick's blacksmith's shop. All the other buildings faced west towards the railway station. Mr. Courtney was the first station-master.

The post office was situated at the railway station until 1897 when it was erected on its present site. The present brick building dates only from 1951. Mr. McLeod was Mareeba's first postmaster.

Starting from the northern or Granite Creek end of the street, there was first the Royal Mail Hotel of Eccles and Lloyd, where Michael Walsh lived in the 'nineties. There was the Terminus Hotel, the second hotel built in Mareeba, first kept by Paskin, later by Fitzgerald. It was an overnight stop for Rod McCrae's coaches before the railway came.

Then there was John Walsh's store and bakery, See Chin's store, and W. Dickson's bakery. Then there was Norris' blacksmith shop and W. Middlemiss' butchery (later bought by Munro & Gordon, and a butchery is still conducted there).

Next was Mick Carroll's Carrier's Arms Hotel of one storey on the corner. The old time building was destroyed by fire in 1952, and a very modern hotel now occupies the site. On the opposite corner was Tom Dillon's two-storied Mining Exchange Hotel (now the Great Northern)

The buildings were now closer packed for then, as now, this was the main business section of Mareeba.

Pares was an auctioneer and commission agent. Next door was the Bank of North Queensland (M. Gabriel, manager); the School of Arts (later shifted to Walsh Street); a Chinese store; Meyer & Co's general store, and Hunter's produce store. Some of these original buildings still stand, but are rapidly being replaced by modern structures of brick and concrete.

In this section was the office of Mareeba's first newspaper "The Express", printed and published by Octave Lannoy from Port Douglas. Mr. G.H.O'Donnell later bought the printery and issued the "Mareeba Herald". This was followed by the "Walsh and Tinaroo Miner" in the first decade of this century, produced in co-operation with Ned Martin.

Next door was Jimmie Richard's barber's shop, a Chinese store, Smith's drapery shop (later kept by H. Castor), Danks' chemist shop, Byrne and Callaghan's butchery, Peter Byrne's store and his Imperial Hotel - later burnt down. Dunlop's Hotel is its modern counterpart. Andy Dunlop came from Mungana.

Where Wilson's big drapery store now stands there was a Chinese shop in the 'nineties, and on the site of the National Bank, on the corner, was an unfinished building known as "Hart's Folly".

On the opposite corner, a building which was a landmark in Mareeba for sixty-three years - Jack & Newell's big general store - has recently been demolished and a fine brick building has been erected. The original building was put up by W. Hastie in 1893, (he also built the railway station which still stands). Mr. Love was Jack & Newell's first manager.

The first concrete building in the town was Mr. Arther Costin's chemist shop. In the 'nineties, Walsh & Co's general store was on this site, it was burnt down later.

Next door was Schorning's saddler's shop, Dan Collins, tentmaker, then Walton's Federal Hotel (shifted to Cairns during World War 1.) This hotel was the headquarters of Cobb & Co. from 1893 to 1903. The Railway Hotel (now the Hotel Mareeba) was kept by Mrs. Strattmann in the early days.

Opposite was vacant ground - the camping ground of the carriers. Big horse sales were held here by Arthur Garbutt and Fred Drew in the 'nineties. On the Rankin Street corner was the old Court House and police station; the latter was later moved to Walsh Street, and the old Court House, since demolished, served as an ordnance store for the United States Army in 1942. Mareeba's first policeman was Sergeant Orr.

Situated on the present site of Mr. Lawson's home was the Royal Hotel, later demolished. Some of the material was used to build the present Royal Hotel in the centre of the town. Beyond this hotel, sixty years ago, stretched the primeval bush and the rutted coach road to Herberton and beyond.

There were a few scattered homes in Walsh and Constance Streets where lived the Pares, Vaughans, McLaughlins, Jennings, Troughtons, Petersens, Whites, Mays, Hardakers, Cummings, Hamps, Wilkinsons, Herts, Dowds, and others. The State School was opened on August 9, 1893. Dennis Horan was the first head teacher.

Gold was discovered on Tinaroo Creek (the Mareeba Goldfield) by Duncan Finlayson in 1893. The discovery coincided with the arrival of the railway at Mareeba, and despite the financial depression raging at that time, the town continued to prosper.

In 1897, meatworks were established at Biboohra. Bill Smallwood was the first manager. Graziers then received an average of 7/6 per 100 lbs. for prime beef. Near the railway station, E.C. Earl built trucking yards.

The Chillagoe Mining Co. began construction of the Chillagoe Railway in 1899, and it was completed in 1901. It helped the growth of Mareeba. Some of the old time railway men were Harry Fuelling, Bill Garthwaite, Mick Woods (later M.L.A. for Woothakata) Morrow Bros. Sam Cameron, Jim Riordan, Ralph Hastie, Bill Gee and Darby Riordan (later M.L.A.) Paddy McDermott and Arthur Hastie were traffic managers.

X X X X

in 1903, the town became a busy railway junction, for in that year the construction of the Herberton railway was resumed, and upon its completion, the picturesque mail coaches vanished forever. The coaching days were over.