

New wave - by Paul Myers - [The Australian](#) - February 01, 2010



Barry Grey, head stockman of Roebuck Plains station near Broome, with his trainees. "It's making a difference," Grey says of the program. "It's presenting opportunities that wouldn't have existed." Photo: Leon Mead *Source: The Australian*

GINA Sebastian and Frederick Cox have never heard of Wave Hill or Vincent Lingiari, the Gurindji elder who led the epic 1966 Aboriginal walk-off from English aristocrat Lord Vestey's Northern Territory cattle station. That momentous event, which changed the human landscape of the northern pastoral industry, occurred in another place and time, far removed from contemporary life and its limited opportunities in remote areas of the far north.

But Sebastian, 26, and Cox, 18, are two striking examples of young indigenous people building a new future for themselves on country where the legendary skills of Aboriginal stockmen were forged from the mid-1800s. Beyond the good intentions of many, and the failure of governments to deliver meaningful careers for young Aborigines, indigenous people are taking it upon themselves to turn back the clock, if only nominally, to a time when station jobs were there for the taking and good stockmanship was second nature to any lithe youngster willing to get in the saddle.

Once again young Aborigines are finding a future in their own country. Not that the halcyon days – if that's what they were – can return. The Wave Hill walk-off, which started as a dispute over pay and conditions and evolved into a campaign for land rights, led to stations being depopulated of their workforce, although to some extent that would have occurred anyway. Soon after, helicopters and motorbikes arrived to muster cattle, new beef roads were built to transport stock, and improved communications and equipment made station management more efficient. Then, from 1970, the Brucellosis and Tuberculosis Eradication Campaign slashed cattle numbers and drove family operators and indigenous workers from their stations.

My personal connection to this story goes back to the cusp of this great change. In 1967, fresh out of agricultural college, I spent part of a mustering season on Epenarra Station, a "small" 259,000ha pastoral lease southeast of Tennant Creek that was taken up in the '50s by returned RAAF airman Bob Clough and his young family. There, 20 or 30 Aboriginal families lived happily, albeit in squalid conditions: side-by-side makeshift humpies with loose corrugated iron roofs, dirt floors, swags or blankets on the ground, dogs everywhere, naked and semi-naked toddlers playing in the dirt, women sitting in the shade.

The able-bodied men, who were mostly uneducated and spoke in their own dialects, worked in the stock camp, mustering the largely unfenced country, expertly holding large groups of cattle in open claypans while others “cut out” young and wild mickey bulls for castration before droving the mob to the highway for transport to Alice Springs and beyond.

Their horsemanship and stockman’s skills were amazing. Even though I could ride, I was enthralled by their ability to control semi-wild animals in the open, without yards and with only human restraint; especially how two stockmen could put a half-tonne bull on its back in a flash, removing its testicles with two quick slashes of a knife before seamlessly remounting their horses. If some of the herd broke away at night – as often happened – the ringers would be on their horses in an instant, returning after daylight, invariably with all the breakaways.

Most of the time there was no grog, although occasionally Clough would take his ute into the small hamlet of Wauchope to stock up with basic supplies and a few slabs of beer that, on return, was shared with the stockmen – usually a couple of cans or stubbies each. When the beer was gone, it was gone. No one asked for, or expected, more.

At the end of each mustering season, the stockmen left the station with a few hundred dollars in their pockets – a full season’s pay. It equated to \$5 or \$10 a week, well under the \$25 a week demanded the previous year by the disgruntled Wave Hill stockmen and rejected by Lord Vestey’s managers. To my knowledge, the Epenarra stockmen were unaware of the Wave Hill rumblings. A disparate bunch, I doubt they would have been as militant.

They clearly valued their lifestyle, weren’t seeking land rights and, despite what southern activists might have thought, the boss cared about their welfare. At any rate, neither he nor other station owners could afford to pay any more.

Invariably, the ringers’ first stop before departing every October or November was the station store on neighbouring Murray Downs, where they bought a new hat, boots, a bright shirt and maybe an equally colourful cotton scarf. “You should see them,” Clough declared one day, “as proud as punch in their new gear. They love to dress up and look good.” By March, the stockmen began returning. “They get sick of picking up papers and hanging around on the mission,” Clough said. I never forgot his words, especially in later years when I often observed intoxicated men sitting around in remote indigenous communities with nothing to do.

I also never forgot my departure from Epenarra. As the mail plane taking me back to Alice Springs circled over the small homestead on the Frew River, a large group of stockmen stood by the windmill, waving frantically. Bob Clough later wrote in a letter that they were upset I “had to go back to school”. Wouldn’t their lives have been better, I later wondered, if things hadn’t changed so quickly and dramatically – if these people had stayed on Epenarra, and other cattle stations, doing what they loved?

Long-lost skills

Those days, of course, are gone forever. Aborigines who now live in communities on or adjacent to cattle stations are rarely considered for employment. “They don’t stick at it, and go missing” is the explanation typically provided. In some cases, indigenous communities look after a station’s horses or perform other functions. But not many black stockmen can be found in stock camps, which usually comprise young, southern-reared males and females, often with farm backgrounds, who have ventured north for a season or two of hard yakka and excitement.

This reality, and the time that has elapsed since Aborigines held meaningful station roles, has made the first tentative steps by the Indigenous Land Corporation to foster jobs for young Aborigines all the more challenging - and vital. Its station training scheme not only provides willing participants with long-lost career skills and a work ethic but also, equally importantly, a pathway that steers clear of the alcohol, drugs, unemployment and hopelessness plaguing indigenous communities.

This new era is, however, a far cry from the good (or bad) old days, when an ability to ride a horse and do what you were told was all that counted. In its wisdom, the ILC has included tourism and hospitality in the training program, two industries that hold the key to northern Australia's future as much as pastoralism.

The ILC, which owns 222 landholdings around Australia covering 5.7 million hectares, has built training facilities on nine of its 15 large agricultural holdings – mostly in the northern cattle belt – where students learn skills in tourism, hospitality and rural operations while working in one of the indigenous-owned businesses. After completing a one, two or three-year course, they receive a TAFE certificate.

The next step is to secure a permanent job on an ILC property or in the broader workforce. The corporation's goal is to train more than 500 young indigenous people by the end of next year and to employ almost a third of them. It's early days, but the signs are positive. A total of 116 trainees entered the training program in 2009, 71 of whom were concurrently employed; 72 other young Aborigines who weren't in training found jobs on stations where the ILC operates businesses on indigenous-leased land.

Dressed in her neat Home Valley Station uniform, Gina Sebastian admits she would probably have drifted into alcohol back in her home community of Beagle Bay, on the Dampier Peninsula north of Broome, if she hadn't spent last year training on the 250,000ha station, 500km away on the other side of the Kimberley. She'd moved to Kununurra to be with her partner; there, a self-confessed "nobody" in town, she enrolled as a tourism and hospitality trainee and changed her life forever. Sitting in a boat on Home Valley's idyllic billabong, with a cluster of tourist lodges perched along the shoreline, Sebastian reflects that her life now couldn't be more removed from her upbringing. She says of the 300-population town where she was raised: "It's too easy to fall into a trap. I needed to get away and do something positive. This course changed everything for me."

Originally taken on as one of the 14 trainees each year who from March to November learn and work on Home Valley, she's now employed in the front office of the station, which attracts tourists travelling between Kununurra and Derby on the Gibb River Road. Home Valley, which borders two other ILC East Kimberley stations - Karunjie and Durack River - lies near the Pentecost River, close to where much of Baz Luhrmann's movie *Australia* was filmed. It has had \$17 million of facilities and infrastructure invested in the past four years and offers a high-quality pastoral tourism experience.

"I want to stay in tourism and maybe go back to Beagle Bay where my aunties have a place on the middle lagoon," the quietly-spoken Sebastian says. "I've developed some ideas from my time here, as well as some skills, that I think could work."

Her partner, Clive Morton, a friendly, burly man with arms and legs like tree trunks, was also a Home Valley trainee, but five months into the course accepted a maintenance job on the station. Before entering the program he says he was "plain lazy, spending too much time doing nothing". He adds: "Now I'm really happy with what I'm doing." His motivation is plain to see. He is clearly dedicated and determined to succeed.

I get the same feeling when, early one morning on the way back to Kununurra, we meet up with the bus bringing trainees from town to Home Valley. They spill out of the doors, enthusiastically chatting to each other. "Most of them really look forward to their day," says the station's marketing manager, Chris Fenech. "They're so enthusiastic and it shows."

Part of the reason is that several Home Valley graduates have secured good jobs and a new level of self-respect. Wyndham-raised James Cigobia, 26, is one. After completing a Certificate 3 commercial cookery course, he became a chef in Melbourne with indigenous TV chef Mark Olive in his specialty catering business. Cigobia has since returned to work as a sous chef at Home Valley, where he is mentoring trainee Desmond Green, who entered the program in 2008. "I want to work with young indigenous people and be a role model both locally and Australia-wide," Cigobia says. "I want to encourage local kids. There are opportunities out here just waiting for them." Last year, Home Valley graduated its first horticulture Certificate 2 trainees, Kununurra locals Raelene Johnson and Colleen Carter, who have done much of the

landscaping and plant propagation on the station and now have full-time roles that include taking guests on bush tucker tours.

John Gummery, general manager of Kimberley Group Training, the region's main training placement organisation that puts indigenous people into accredited courses each year and works closely with the ILC, says the program has been "hugely successful", offering Aborigines – most in their teens or early 20s – opportunities he says would otherwise "never be available".

With a retention rate of about 42 per cent – and rising – Gummery acknowledges that there is room for improvement. "But it's far from gloom and doom," he adds. "There's no problem finding employers willing to take on indigenous trainees. There are plenty of jobs, especially in the East Kimberley. Our main challenge is poor housing and lack of education. We have to make sure that people who haven't been used to getting up each morning and going to work develop a work ethic and then stay in the program."

Good hard yakka

On the western side of the Kimberley, just 40km from Broome and its many distractions, Frederick Cox last year completed his Certificate 2 training in beef production on Roebuck Plains, the ILC's showpiece 282,000ha cattle property. "Froggy", as he's known, was recently offered a full-time job on the station - a big step towards becoming a head stockman or perhaps, in the future, a station manager. "If I wasn't doing this I'd probably be on the grog or otherwise getting up to mischief," he says with a characteristic grin while waiting for training to resume after lunch in the mess room.

Cox, who seems to have formed a special bond with Roebuck Plains manager Doug Miller, explains that he was keen to follow his uncles, who once worked on Kimberley cattle stations, but didn't know where or how to get a job. He left school after Year 10 and in 2008 jumped at the opportunity to enter the training course when it was offered to him. "I tell my mates that work is much better than hanging around getting drunk," he says.

Cox is held in high esteem by his peers. He was the natural leader of last year's group of Roebuck Plains trainees and his work ethic is evident when the trainees pick up tools at the export yards, a few kilometres away on the main road to Broome. They are like all teenagers - laughing, joking and teasing each other while they work - but no one shies away from anything and supervision is minimal.

Of Roebuck Plains' nine trainees last year, seven graduated with a Certificate 2 qualification; this year Doug Miller is expecting a full initial intake of 15 trainees, which will be whittled down to 10. While admitting that organising and overseeing work for the trainees as well as 16 full-time employees has its challenges, he regards the program as highly positive, and for the second year running has offered full-time positions to three trainees, with another going to the ILC's Myroodah Station near Derby.

Miller, who came to the Kimberley from NSW, says "the word is out" about the training opportunity and, while it's still difficult to identify youngsters who will stick out the course, the quality of inductees is improving. Initially he thought graduating trainees would be able to get jobs as lower-level hands, but now he feels that most are good enough to become level three or level four station hands (the highest is level five, several years after which a head stockman position could be in the offing).

"At the very least, we're getting them 'work ready'," he says during lunch. "But some are proving to be better than that. The ideal situation would be for them to go on and do a Certificate 3 course, but that might not always be possible. Either way, they're learning skills they wouldn't have had and experiencing discipline that most also have never had. We treat them like anyone else, while taking into account cultural and other issues which arise from time to time."

Roebuck Plains' training facility is a large, neat classroom with individual desks where trainees do their formal studies. There, Barry Grey, a tough, work-hardened indigenous trainer employed by the ILC, quietly encourages each student to tell me his story. The youngsters are shy and reserved, show none of the bravado or confidence of city teenagers, and have to be encouraged to answer questions. On one occasion Grey grabs

a pencil from a distracted youngster who is doodling and barks, “Go on, answer the question.” It’s obvious Grey practises tough love, mentoring his charges while carefully disciplining them. “It’s making a difference,” he says of the program. “It’s presenting opportunities that wouldn’t have existed. Most of them didn’t like school and just dropped out, without anything to do. This at least gives them a start.”

Spencer Thorne, a 17-year-old from Broome who has been offered a job at Roebuck Plains after completing the course, says he could have been doing cementing work for his father, but wanted a station job instead. “I like being out of town,” he says. Another former student from Broome, William Miller, 21 (pictured on the cover), was an outstanding trainee at Roebuck Plains in 2008. He has since moved to Perth to gain further qualifications and plans to return to his home town.

Geoff Smith, a TAFE assessor who signs off on each trainee during and after they finish the course, says the program is “part of the solution” in drawing indigenous people back to cattle stations. “It has got to be the way to go,” he says.

There will be teething problems, Smith acknowledges. “Some of the private operators want everything done yesterday and this might not achieve that outcome. But we aim to filter out the properties where the program might not work. In time, I’m confident it will break the mould.

“What it’s doing is making them employable, when they weren’t before. It’s giving them a chance. I wouldn’t be putting my time into it if I didn’t think it was worthwhile.”

Home Valley Station

PR Contact - Chris Fenech *Managing Director* - *id Services Australia* – Travel & Lifestyle

Sydney Office: *id Services Australia*, Suite 2, 1 Eurobin Avenue, Manly NSW 2095

t +61-2 9977 6395 **f** +61-2 8966 9009 **m** +61-(0) 419 977 542 **e** chris@idservices.com.au **w** www.idservices.com.au

Official Year of the Outback Ambassador & Founder of the Happy Days Foundation’s **Holidays With Heart** initiative **w** www.happydays.org.au