



The Early History of Yorkeys Knob

From *The Knob, A History of Yorkeys Knob* by Mary T Williams, published in October 1988.

Behind the naming of any village, township, city, state or country lies a story. Some names are bland, negating any curiosity to pursue the derivation. Conversely, names can be provocative instantly stirring the imagination.

Yorkeys Knob on the eastern coast of Australia in the northern part of the State of Queensland is such a name. Westing from the Coral Sea - approaching land from the east, Yorkeys Knob sits very prettily on the hem of the great Barrier Reef. To further enhance a natural beauty it edges into rich coastal flatland running from the foot of a marvellous range straight into the illimitable sea.

The Knob itself is the first headland north of the Harbour of Cairns, a cheeky headland layered in rock with a fuzz of timber. Its boulders tumble into the sea in arrow fashion forming a calm bay on its northern side and giving the surf full play to the south. The bay is called Half Moon Bay because of its crescent-shaped white beach and cradles a tidal river running up to and fed by the massive range. On earth level at any angle or off-shore, the lumpy and picturesque Knob invites an explanation why a man nicknamed Yorkey gave to this Knob a meaning.

It might be assumed that amongst the cosmopolitan insurgence of gold-diggers into Northern Australia during the mid-1800's was a Yorkshireman called George Lawson. There is no factual information to support this assumption. It was only in the 1880's that an adventurous hard-living beche-de-mer fisherman nicknamed `Yorkie' was, by a series of incidents emerging as an identity in the northern waters off the harbour of Cairns.

On 10th May 1883 issued the first copy of a newspaper "The Cairns Post". Thereafter this newspaper was published weekly until 1888 then bi-weekly until 1893. Despite disruptions, changes and upheavals to this date, the newspaper flourishes on a daily circulation. But it is to its romantic and uncertain first decade that we owe a faithful recording of time, date and incident relevant to the man George Lawson nicknamed Yorkie.

In early records Yorkey is referred to as `Yorkie' or 'Yorkey' and in one instance as being a Norwegian fisherman who lived on the 'hill' called the Knob. However, in all traceable registers the man Yorkey and the headland Yorkeys Knob rise unmistakably and territorially rock-like from misty legends of an extensive region strongly linked to the sea.

The same registers disclose the man Yorkey's great respect for life in a time of lust and survival, more impressive when human life weighed little in value.

From the "The Cairns Post" of date 10th June 1886 (Thursday) the following item of news appeared:

'George Lawson (Yorkey) a beche-de-mer fisherman at Green Island reported to Mr. R. T. Hartley yesterday the loss of a man and his wife from the island. They started last Thursday in a boat with the intention of visiting the wreck of the Upolu and have not returned since, although it was understood they would return the same day. The weather during the time was fine and he (George Lawson) had made search for them but is unable to account for their absence. The pilot cutter will be despatched to search for the missing couple.'

To emphasise the dangerous nature of sailing the Great Barrier Reef at a time when even the sea-lanes were barely chartered are two further extracts:

"The Cairns Post" 17th June 1886 (Thursday):

'Boat missing. Supposed loss of the Idalia and eight lives..... a cutter which left Cairns on Saturday last 12th instant with a party of eight persons who intended to visit Green Island which is distant about 15 miles from Cairns and seawards towards the Barrier Reef, and had not yet returned up to the time of our going to press.

....the weather during the previous few days had been fine but on Saturday there were evident signs of a change. Besides the Idalia there was a party left on Saturday night in the cutter Sea Breeze bound for the same place and they returned to Cairns on Monday last.

....although the weather was boisterous two search parties searched as far as Double Island with no trace of the Idalia'.

And the second extract from "The Cairns Post" 24th June 1886 (Thursday) regarding the 'Loss of the Idalia:

Since our last issue the worst fears have been confirmed respecting the loss of the party of eight persons who left Cairns in the Idalia on the 12th inst. Telegrams have come to hand from Port Douglas and Cooktown which places it beyond all doubt that the boat must have foundered at sea and all on board have perished.

Telegram reads: June 21. Port Douglas.

The Government steam launch Dingo has just returned after having searched as far as Cape Tribulation and Weary Bay but could find no traces of the Idalia or the boat which contained the missing man and woman from Green Island'.

To introduce the strong link between Yorkeys Knob and Green Island the following extract is taken from J.W. Collinson's book "More About Cairns" - a sequel to his first book "Early Days of Cairns":

'Green Island was one of several coral islands utilised as stations by beche-de-mer fishermen. As these islands were sparsely wooded, these men were forced to sail to the mainland for mangrove firewood for curing of the sea-slugs (beche-de-mer). In following years Green Island was often visited and utilised as a base for men working the Barrier Reef for fish!'

And in Dorothy Jones' "Trinity Phoenix" (A History of Cairns) lies the thread tying Yorkey's first claim to Yorkeys Knob:

"Yorkey took up a homestead adjoining the Mount Buchan estate in the vicinity of what is now Yorkeys Knob and there during the off-fishing season he and his boys farmed not very successfully, raising pumpkins and sweet potatoes and paddy melons which the bandicots and pigs ate which the crocodiles devoured. He was known to be liberal to the aboriginals, obliging to other fishers and given to treating young children.'

Hence it was natural for Yorkey to seek in the fishing season, the mangrove shores close to his homestead block to obtain the firewood and water for his beche-de-mer station on Green Island, some 15 or 16 miles seaward. Farming and fishing were two stable pursuits in Yorkey's otherwise perilous and daring life.

In Yorkey's day, fishing for beche-de-mer was by no means a new venture. Mulgrave Shire Historical Society's Bulletin No. 54 of February 1983 records the following:

'By 1804 James Aicken initiated the beche-de-mer industry along the Great Barrier Reef. By mid-century the reefs between Townsville and Cooktown (although these towns were yet to be established) were being exploited commercially. Records show that stations, to smoke the sea slugs had been set up on Frankland Isles, Fitzroy and Green Island and Oyster Cay from where the beche-de-mer fishermen visited the mainland estuaries to collect red mangrove firewood and fresh water supplies.

One such fisherman Captain L.S.V. Mein set up a beche-de-mer station on Green Island in 1857.

Some thirty years later, Yorkey's station for curing of the sea-slugs was established on Green Island evidenced by his name once again appearing in "The Cairns Post" as a news item. This fact was recorded barely three months after the first event but was to give Yorkey an astonishing and bizarre identity.