

Stories from the Barron River

NEWS

Report in *The Capricornian*, 23 March 1878

Courtesy Cairns Historical Society

“Smithfield has been a very severe sufferer and the losses there are something terrible. A correspondent furnishes ... a long catalogue of injuries sustained from the storm at Smithfield on the 8th instant.... At 11 o'clock it then blew a perfect hurricane from the northwest. It rolled down over portions of the main range into the dense scrub below and destroyed the timber like a wheat field.

“Spargo’s house was blown into the river; Mendelsohn’s roof and verandah carried away as also those of the North Star Hotel, next the baker’s shop completely blown away, oven and all; the side of the post office blown out, Koch’s store and verandah carried away, his large show window being blown in, the wind and rain sweeping through the store damaging nearly the whole of his stock....

“The Chinese Gardens have suffered fearfully, many trees and even pineapples having been blown out of the ground.”

NEWS

“Fast live and a flood killed shanty town - gold and grog took their toll” Taken from *The Sun Magazine*, Brisbane 1983

Courtesy Cairns Historical Society

Fast life and a flood killed shanty town – gold and grog took their toll.

The rough, tough citizens of the shanty town of Smithfield on the Barron River, just north of Cairns, certainly had fun while it lasted. Trouble was the centre existed such a short time, falling victim to lawlessness, grog and finally a flood. During Smithfield’s brief life span it boasted a bunch of Queensland’s most unattractive but expensive harlots, more crime per head of population than any other Queensland centre and so much gold the locals shod their horses with the stuff.

Smithfield, one of Australia’s shortest-living and most bizarre towns, came into being because it was seen as the site of a potential trading centre that would push Cairns off the map.

NEWS

“Celebrating 75 Years of Caravonica” Taken from *The Cairns Post*, 19 September 2002

Courtesy Cairns Historical Society

An Italian born but English trained teacher and agricultural scientist may have been responsible for naming the Caravonica State Primary School, but it was Cyclone Willis which resulted in it being built in 1927.

According to local researcher Kay Crabbe, at the time of the cyclone local cane farmers were pressuring the Department of Instruction to build a school at Smithfield, because of flooding on the Barron River. “Children had to ride two to four miles from Smithfield to the then school near Redlynch. Several pupils on the northern side did not attend school owing to the dangerous river crossing and the distance – so it was decided to re-build the one room school at Caravonica”.

When Cyclone Willis blew the school from its stumps, it was finally relocated.

Flood mitigation scheme – Lake Placid, Caravonica and Kamerunga

In 2009 a flood mitigation scheme was implemented to help protect Lake Placid, Caravonica and Kamerunga residents from future floods on the Barron River. The scheme was designed to provide protection when the river breaks its banks with a 1- in- 15 to 1- in- 20 year flood. A fact sheet for residents explained, “The lower Barron Delta starts to flood long before this, with access from the Captain Cook Highway disrupted by a 1- in -5 year flood event”.

The “gate” that is inserted in the Lake Placid campground wall is part of this scheme.

Old Smithfield Township 1876-1879

The Story of the Port on the Barron River

Cyclones in successive years created floods in the river and gave it a short life of a little more than two years....

Cairns historian John Walters has written this comprehensive account of the history of Old Smithfield. In his introduction he writes: Smithfield, the northern beaches suburb of the city of Cairns and the centre of activity for the region, had a predecessor with the same name. That Predecessor was just a township and it was created with good intentions but little thought. As a result it had a life of a little more than two years, before it was deserted and finished in ruins. The ruins succumbed to the elements, termites and nature itself so that nothing now remains to remind us of its existence except for a lonely cemetery.

Old Smithfield suffered heavy flooding each year from its establishment in 1876 until March 1879. Rain began to fall on St Patrick's Day and continued for another 12... destroying the town.

Tropical Cyclone Rona evacuation – February 1999

Torrential rain associated with Tropical Cyclone Rona fell in Cairns throughout 11 February 1999. River heights for the Barron were predicted to reach up to 9.6m, with Lake Placid being flooded by between 1.4-1.6m of water. It was the first time that local disaster management authorities put an emergency evacuation plan for Lake Placid and Caravonica in place.

Residents were advised by radio broadcasts, emergency services and neighbours door-knocking. Some were alert to the potential danger because they could hear the river, others realised conditions had been worsening overnight, others were surprised an evacuation was necessary.

“Leaving Stoney Creek”, Cyclone Rona 1999

Account from Kylie Bock



Former Stoney Creek area resident Kylie Bock, had self-evacuated to a friend's house in Redlynch. She recalls looking out from the house towards Caravonica where people were walking on the train tracks, but because of how high the water was in the Barron River it looked as though they were walking on water. After this event, the body corp for the complex she lived in had discussions about a better evacuation plan ...

Flooding stories

Account from Frosty and Marina



Lake Placid area residents Frosty and Marina don't regard themselves as heroes, but tell this story about saving a young woman when the river flooded suddenly.

One day the river came up and our neighbour sent someone to get us. There was a woman in the river, trapped. They had been boogie boarding further up the river. The police were busy dealing with two people trapped in a drain. Marina is a stronger swimmer than me, and I am stronger than her, so I tied a rope around her and she went in. The neighbour was holding on to a branch holding the girl. If it wasn't for him she would have been swept down. She didn't want to get out of the river because she had no clothes on – they had been torn off by the flood.

Various accounts

I remember taking the Army Duck from Yorkeys Knob to Cairns North Primary School after being trapped by flood waters in the 1970s. Scott.

We lived in the hot seat for 40 years – on Thomatis Creek. George Jackson.

My mother was a serious asthmatic and had to get the helicopter out with her medication. Cath

During Tropical Cyclone Agnes my kids were little tots and I put them under the kitchen table. Anne Williams

We were cut off many times because of Thomatis Creek being over the road. We would go up Stanton Rd and all you could see for miles was water. Leila and Brian



Tropical Cyclone Monica

Account from Simon Mills, owner of the former “Reflections on the Lake” restaurant, Lake Placid

TC Monica was probably the worst water around for the lake (Placid). Most of the water at the lake follows cyclones – to see a lake grow by 16 metres within a few hours. The power of it. You see logs and once a cow coming down.

Whenever the lake flooded, the hit on revenue was instant and as high as 70%, which was crippling... they were losses you could never really recover from and we had 11 of those in four years! With the benefit of 20/20 hindsight I should have done more research on flood events at Lake Placid over the previous 20 years when compiling my business model and subsequent business plans.



Flooding at Yorkey’s Knob

Account from June Corrie

June Corrie has lived at Yorkeys Knob for more than 40 years. She recalls the flood of 1977 when the water came as high as the 60km sign on the Yorkeys Knob road. Locals were isolated for about 10 days so essential supplies were helicoptered to the community. She remembers people travelling across the cane fields in their dinghies and snakes and fish coming up through the drains. Her husband recalls getting to Trinity Beach for supplies by boat with his mates – beer first, then groceries!

June recalls her community really pulling together by taking people to the airport in their boats and getting supplies for their neighbours, as well as everyone helping with cleaning up.

Account from Gary

Gary grew up at Yorkeys Knob, where he remembers his brother and mates getting in a small dinghy to go to town during heavy floods in the 1970s. Once they got to Thomatis Creek on the return journey the current was too strong and they lost control, having to hang on to a sign and be rescued by the SES. He also remembers mud crabs and snakes in their swimming pool!



Be ready – be prepared!

Account from Werner Schmidt

Werner Schmidt, Yorkeys Knob resident, tells a story of his late mission to get fuel for his generator in 1999 flooding. He had to abandon his car some way from the petrol station.

The worst aspect of the situation was Thomatis Creek was already overflowing and came in a very strong current diagonally across the road from my left and made it extremely difficult for me to walk forward...on the return trip I had no time to waste as I could see the water was rising rapidly. Trying to keep the (petrol) containers out of the deep water was a major effort and my arms soon became tired and sore.... After more than one hour and a half, I was finally back at the car, utterly exhausted and soaking wet. More cars and people had in the meantime assembled at the edge of the “lake” watching the silly bugger that was staggering through the water carrying two red containers.

The moral of this story is – never think you are prepared for any contingency and get lulled into a false sense of security – somewhere along the way you will have forgotten something!

Severe Tropical Cyclone Larry

17 – 20 March 2006

TC Larry developed as a tropical low over the eastern Coral Sea and reached cyclone intensity during the early hours of 18 March, then hurricane force intensity through the day and into the next. The eye of the cyclone made landfall near Innisfail around daybreak on 20 March. Larry remained at hurricane force intensity as it moved over the Atherton Tablelands.

Damage from north of Cairns to the Cassowary Coast and Tablelands areas was extensive, with flooding disrupting road and rail access for several days.

Severe Tropical Cyclone Rona

9 – 12 February 1999

TC Rona began as a tropical low off the north Queensland coast on 9 February. The system was named as a cyclone on 10 February, located about 310km east of the north Queensland coast. The system achieved hurricane strength the next day and continued to intensify as it travelled towards land. Rona crossed the coast just north of Cow Bay on 11 February, eventually tracking eastwards back across the Coral Sea to eventually become TC Frank.

Rona caused significant damage throughout the Cairns and Douglas regions, with heavy rainfall causing flooding from Cairns to Townsville.

Tropical Cyclone Joy

18 – 27 December 1990

TC Joy formed on 18 December south of the Solomon Islands. Residents interviewed for the Living with Water project remember TC Joy “sat off the coast for days”, bringing heavy rain to areas affected by the Barron River.

Joy eventually dissipated on 27 December south of Townsville, having caused severe damage in Port Douglas and areas of central Queensland.

Tropical Cyclone Otto

6 - 10 March 1977

TC Otto travelled from the Gulf of Carpentaria into the Coral Sea near Cape Tribulation and made landfall again near Bowen. The cyclone aggravated already serious flooding between Cairns and Ingham, resulting in \$6 million of crop and property damage. Heavy seas also destroyed 1200m of the esplanade at Machans Beach.

Flooding in the Barron River delta was among the most serious since records have been kept.

Severe Tropical Cyclone Monica

17-25 April 2006

TC Monica began as a tropical low in the Coral Sea on 16 April, reaching cyclone intensity the next day and taking on hurricane-forth strength before making landfall 40k south of Lockhart River the afternoon of 19 April. Although this cyclone did not pass Cairns directly, heavy rain was associated with it causing flooding in parts of the region.

Barron River Delta Investigation

The Report of the Barron River Delta Investigation Steering Committee

Dept of Harbours and Marine, January 1981

This extensive study focused on collecting and analysing data about the river's flood history. Among its findings were these:

The management of major floods in the Delta is a catchment-wide problem and no engineering works on the Delta are likely to mitigate floods on the Delta.

Taken together, all the changes in the river geometry illustrate that the Delta is unstable. Since the Delta land is now largely under intense cultivation, changes that were of no importance in the past assume real importance in the eyes of the farmers who stand to lose substantial amounts of prime land through erosion.

Flood inundation maps produced in this study show clearly that the possibility for extension of urbanisation of the Delta is very limited. These constraints must be taken into account when examining any further proposals for development in the Delta.