

Litchfield National Park



Reynolds River 4WD Track

Blyth Homestead - *Tough lives, tough times*

Blyth Homestead was established by Harry Sargent and his family in 1928. It is a reminder of the tough lives and tough times endured by those involved with the early pastoral and mining industries, two important industries of the Top End

"... there were sixteen of us, fourteen kids and two of them (mum and dad). We had a huge area of country to pay rent on. We were one of the only privately owned stations in the Northern Territory that paid their rent through the depression."

Max Sargent, 10th child

Blyth Homestead was an outstation of Stapleton Station, which was located 40 km east of Blyth Homestead over the Tabletop Plateau, near

Adelaide River township.

Blyth Homestead was originally built on a property neighbouring Stapleton Station. After Harry Sargent bought the property, he and his children dismantled the homestead, then transported it over the Tabletop Plateau using a cart pulled by a team of 32 horses. The teenage children rebuilt the home and packed its earth floor. It became a permanent camp. Only 4 or 5 of the children used it at any one time. From here they managed the grazing cattle on the surrounding floodplains in the dry season and work the Mt. Tolmer Tin Mine in the wet season.

Blyth homestead was named after the land title, Hundred* of Blyth, which was named after Arthur Blyth the Commissioner of Crown Lands for the South Australian Government.

Politics of the time

Between 1911 and 1978 the Territory was administered by the Commonwealth government. The Territory had been part of South Australia between 1863 and 1911 during which time solid foundations were laid for its development. These included the Overland Telegraph and the railway between Darwin and Pine Creek and the goldrush. Chinese people had been imported to work the mines as cheap labour. These optimistic times were followed by The Great Depression (1929 to 1932) which caused prolonged and widespread hardships.

New opportunities

In 1922 Harry Sargent travelled to Darwin looking for new opportunities for his family. He bought the Stapleton property so he could further his interests in agriculture and provide for his wife Alma and his large family of eleven children. Stapleton was a freehold title of one square mile of land on the Hundred of Waterhouse. Over a period of 10 years Harry and his family developed Stapleton Station and its outstation Blyth, into a 1,100 square mile property.

Sargent by name, sergeant by nature

Harry's wife Alma and their 11 children left the Dawson Valley in Queensland to arrive in Darwin in May 1923. Harry had planted crops of maize and cotton, so when the family arrived they went straight to work, harvesting and processing the crops by hand. The Sargent family successfully grew many grain and vegetable crops expecting to sell them to the markets promised by the government. It was a great disappointment to Harry that these markets didn't eventuate.

However the family was self-sufficient. They raised beef cattle, milked cows and grew grains, fruits, vegetables. They had a small roller mill to grind the grains for porridge, breads and cakes.

"We were possibly the best fed people in Australia right through the depression, with butter, cream and milk, cheese, dried fruits and fresh fruits, fresh vegetables and dried vegetables the year round, more than what we could use, but no money!"

Max Sargent

Tough lives, tough times

Harry Sargent worked his family hard from dawn till dusk, even the children. They planted and harvested crops, built and repaired miles of fencing, dug post holes, strung out barbed wire, mustered and branded cattle.

Parks & Wildlife Commission of the Northern Territory

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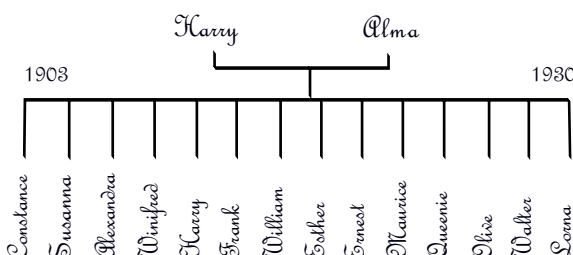
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Blyth Homestead - Tough lives, tough times

They also took on a contract to cut timber for the Commonwealth Railways and supplied timber supports for many of the mine shafts in the area.

The older kids and their father were away from Stapleton Station for months at a time. Alma and the younger children looked after the home and farm at Stapleton Station. Alma also schooled the children. In twenty seven years Alma bore fourteen children.



Choosing the site

Harry Sargent decided on the Blyth Homestead site after he and his son Max found the abandoned Mt Tolmer Mine and a sizeable piece of tin ore close by. Harry immediately applied for a mining licence which he hoped would supplement the income from the cattle grazing leases.

A vital creek

The creek and nearby springs provided fresh water for Blyth Homestead and for processing the tin ore. The family built an effective system of troughs to direct water from the spring to the homestead and its vegetable garden, then back to the creek again.

“We cut hollow logs and made troughing to fetch the water down from the spring to the sluice boxes and for camp use. The sluice boxes we cut out of huge cyprus pine trees with a crosscut saw ... We made wooden train lines from saplings to run the trucks of ore down the creek.”

Esther Sargent, 8th child

Cassava, mangoes and pineapples were the staple crops, excess fruits and vegetables were dried and stored in drums for use later in the year.

Bush medicine

“We were taught that to look for a doctor or someone else to help was a cowardly act and were therefore forced to deal with emergencies on the spot. We had many of these in the early years.”

Esther Sargent

The Sargent children were taught to stick together in case of accidents, a lesson which saved their lives on several occasions.

In their saddlebags they carried Condy’s Crystals, Corrosive Sublimate and Quinine - as a standard bush first aid kit.

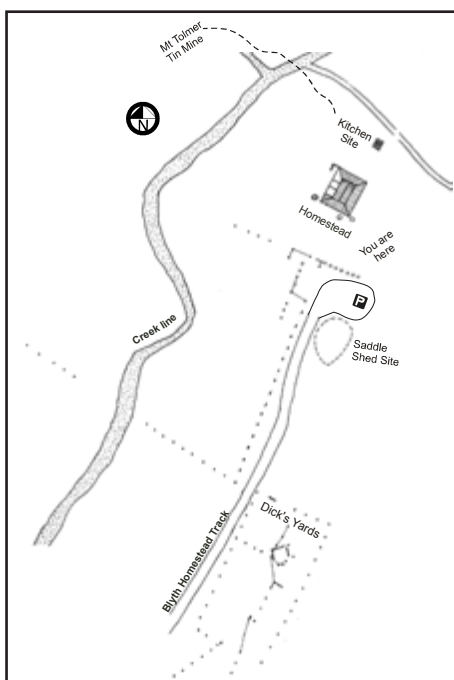
They used their dehorning saw to cut saplings to make stretchers when required.

Cattle mustering

Mustering was hard work and became harder as the cattle spread out over the leases and became wilder.

Tail throwing was the most popular way to catch the rogue cattle.

“... by running them hard on horseback, putting the horse close up alongside and getting a good hold of the beast’s tail and then slipping



Further Reading: Meaney, E., *Esther The true life story of an Australian Country Girl*. Ingham, 1988.

off our horse. As soon as the cow or bull saw you on the ground they would prop and swing around to charge. When this happened we would not back away but pull the tail end towards the head as they whipped around and over they would go with legs in the air.”

Esther Sargent

Harry and Alma Sargent were used to tough times when they arrived in the Top End, Harry through his early life in England, and both of them through living on the land in Canada and Queensland. They were tough enough to overcome the difficulties they came across in the Top End.

The Sargent family developed Stapleton Station and its outstation Blyth over 40 years. The family contributed substantially to the development of the Top End. Today their descendants have dispersed, although many remain as important members of our Top End community.

In 1964, Stapleton Station was sold to the Townsend family. In 1984 Bob and Roy Townsend initiated talks with the NT Government with a view to protecting some of the property as a National Park.

Blyth Homestead was included in the land parcel which became Litchfield National Park in 1986, and in 1997 it was declared a heritage site to be protected for future generations. It is one of the best remaining examples of Top End bushcraft architecture.

Allow time to take in the early 1900’s Aussie battler atmosphere of the Homestead and enjoy its stories, but take only memories and photographs and leave only comments in the visitor book and a footprint or two.

**NOTE: The Hundreds is a land parcelling administration system introduced by the South Australian colonial Government. The term ‘Hundred’ was borrowed from the English term which refers to an area of land containing one hundred square miles.*