

## 13. A Man Of The Community

### The Healer

One of the greatest roles Grampa filled at Maloga and Cummeragunga and in the broader community was that of healer, and this means healer in both the physical health and advocacy/educative sense.

### Indian Healing Wisdom

Grampa came from a strong Indian heritage and from what we have learnt about his past, there is no doubt he would have grown up learning many old ways of traditional healing. But another form of 'healing' that Grampa may have taken from his Indian heritage is his knowledge of the strategies used for the fight for Indian independence and among Indians and other colonised people in places like Mauritius. He may well have drawn parallels between the oppression of Aboriginal and Indian people in their own countries, and learnt much from the way in which the Indians stood up against British occupation. He told his family about the Indian Rebellion (often called the Indian Mutiny) of 1857. He knew a lot about it, even though he had been born in Mauritius and the Rebellion had happened before his birth.

I believe that Grampa took some key 'learnings' from the experience of the people in India and elsewhere under the rule of the British Empire, and that he used these in his active advocacy for, and education of, Aboriginal people on Maloga and Cummeragunga. This means he had a huge role to play in influencing the fight for Aboriginal citizenship rights in Australia. This is all a part of our Aboriginal community 'healing' journey. But I will explain my thinking in more detail towards the end of this book.

Edward Duyker, an author and historian who has long been studying the connection between Mauritian people and the European settlement in Australia, trade links between the two countries, the Australian sugar cane industry and so much more, has written about Grampa in his book *Of the Star and the Key* and has stated the following: 'Inspired by the Indian Nationalist struggle, he [Grampa] used Gandhian passive resistance tactics in his attempts to wring justice from the authorities'.

It's interesting to read this reference to Grampa and his 'Gandhian like tactics'. I believe that Grampa provided a glimmer of hope for our people who were deeply oppressed by British settlers, just as Gandhi did for his Indian people who were equally as oppressed by the British. Grampa's passive resistance tactics along

with his religious faith; his ability to quietly protest against injustices; and his ongoing commitment to bettering the lives of Aboriginal people by educating our people to be *leaders and writers* was also, in my personal view, a beacon of hope for the oppressed and marginalised here at Maloga and Cummeragunga, if not further afield. It was the beginning for our people to be able to forge ahead and take a strong stand against the oppression we had suffered since colonisation. Just as the people of India had done, so many years before.

## Aboriginal Healing Wisdom

As mentioned previously, when Grampa connected with our Aboriginal community at the holiday camp at Brighton, the group healed him of his typhoid tremors. This piqued his interest in Aboriginal bush medicine. Once he returned to Maloga, and eventually married into our Maloga community, he became one of us. This meant that our people were happy to share their healing wisdom with Grampa and he was eager to learn. His knowledge of Aboriginal healing methods grew over the years and he continually encouraged our people to practise their ways. He was also able to provide treatment when called upon to do so.

## White Man's Healing Wisdom

Grampa is understood to have spent a short time studying Medicine at Melbourne University before becoming ill and deferring his studies. Whilst we have been unable to locate a record of his study in the university archives, there is a 12-month period unaccounted for (between his life in Mauritius and arrival at Maloga Mission) in which he could have been studying at Melbourne University.

We have seen in Grampa's letters to R.H. Mathews in 1897 that he had some knowledge of medical and bush medicine healing terms, and we also know he was assistant to the Echuca based doctor who attended the missions. He also refers to his studies in a number of other letters including his letter to Chief Inspector Bridges on 10 October 1895 in which he states:

by exercising a good influence over the parents with many kindly acts by the means of what little knowledge of medicine and surgery I possess ... I have maintained in proportion to the enrolment and do still, an attendance that has been hardly excelled by any school in the district.

I intended seeking for this classification by examination (promotion) but having fallen victim to typhoid fever and being thereby threatened with paralysis I was compelled by medical advice to abandon my studies for five years.

Grampa also established and ran the dispensary at Cummera and Maloga Missions and dispensed a combination of treatments to those in need.



**Grampa and others in front of the Cummera Dispensary.**

Source: GBRN Collection, high resolution copy provided by AIATSIS.

## Dentistry and Surgery

My cousin Murray Moulton<sup>1</sup> gladly shared with us the story as told to him by his Grandmother Becky about her tonsillitis. Apparently, when she was a young girl, she needed to have her tonsils out; so Grampa took her to the doctor at Moama. Those were the days when anaesthetic was not available. So Grampa held her down, while the doctor removed her tonsils. Boy times were tough back then! Poor Aunt! Grampa was also responsible for any dental work required on the mission, or in the region, again without anaesthetic.

## Healing

This combination of Grampa's knowledge in Indian, Aboriginal and white man's medicines and practices was a valuable offering to our communities of Maloga and Cummera in the day, and nothing else has ever come close since.

---

1 Murray Moulton personal interview 2012.

His medical and surgical knowledge and experience in preparing herbal mixtures, powders and other medicines, was not only valued and relied upon by our Aboriginal people living on both Maloga and Cummeragunga Missions but also by the non-Aboriginal people living in the district.

My cousin Alf Turner (Uncle William Cooper's grandson) clearly remembers his uncle Thomas (Grampa) being called out day or night to someone in urgent need of his care. He would even have to cross the Murray River in the middle of the night in a row-boat to tend to the sick, both black and white. He was in his sixties then, a hard task for someone his age. Evidently the community relied heavily on his medical skills and valued them immensely.



**My son-in-law Larry Jackson, me and cousin Alf Turner, 2013.**

Source: GBRN Collection.

## Grampa's Records

Grampa would keep records of all the treatment methods and powder/plant combinations he used over the years in exercise books. When the doctor attended Cummeragunga, Grampa would go to the dispensary to prepare and dispense the medicinal treatments required by patients as ordered by the doctor. When the doctor wasn't there, he would also assess and dispense for the community himself, with his notes in exercise books as a ready reference.



When Grampa retired and eventually moved to Mooroopna, he had a similar arrangement with the local chemist, who held some of Grampa's books, to enable them to work with him to dispense the treatments Grampa had ordered for his patients. Sadly, as a result of the fire at Grampa and Granny's home in 1938–39 and the eventual changeover of chemist owners, all of these records have either disappeared or been destroyed. Many of our family members had seen these books over the years, and many still talk about the loss of this written record today.

## The Testimonials

The ability of Grampa as a healer can't be overstated. My own wife Brenda had told us time and again that Grampa James healed her of St Vitus Dance when she was a young girl; a condition characterised by rapid jerking movements of the face, hands and feet.



**Valda Doody and her sons Larry Jackson (left) and Mark 'Bub' Jackson (right).**

Source: GBRN Collection.

Valda Doody (nee McGee, a Yorta Yorta elder) my son-in-law's mother, is 85 years old now and still remembers when she was a little girl and her mother showing

her a photo of Grampa James saying: 'See this man? This is Mr James. When you were a baby you were very sick with pneumonia and he saved your life'. She believes she may not have lived past the first six months of her life without him.

My wife Brenda's cousin – Melva Johnson (a Yorta Yorta Elder) shares a similar story about her mother Hazel Day who had a rheumatic heart from which she was seriously ill. Melva's grandmother Lydia (Ron Morgan's oldest sister) had told Melva that Grampa had healed Aunty Hazel of her serious illness by ordering her to stay home from school for 12 months, almost bedridden while he continued to treat her. This was an enormous step for a girl in her early teens, but it worked.



**Me with Melva Johnson at my 80th birthday party in 2013.**

Source: GBRN Collection.

And there are many more stories of the great success Grampa had as a healer and the fact our people relied on his healing knowledge. This may well have been because we were now facing white man's illnesses for which we had no cure. However Grampa did!

With his knowledge of white man's medicine, Indian healing methods combined with his growing knowledge of Aboriginal bush medicines, he was able to

support our need for healing treatments. He also eagerly encouraged our people to stay connected to their Ancient practices regardless of white man's efforts to restrict or eliminate our traditional and cultural practices on the mission.

## The Missionary Band

Nanny Pris and Aunty Louisa told me many stories about Grampa's involvement in the missionary band, heading off to Nathalia to preach on Sundays with a couple of other men. At times congregations would come from other areas for the gathering at Nathalia. They said that on Sundays they and other kids would have to walk from Cummera to Picola (14 km one way) so that Grampa could preach to communities there. And even as they got older they would see that he continued to do this ritual every Sunday with other young and upcoming children in the community.



**Grampa and his church members at Cummeragunga.**

Source: GBRN Collection.

Each time he would draw a crowd most of whom were local farmers who gathered to hear him preach the gospel. It was clear that Grampa was well loved by his pupils, church brethren and the community, as he would go on to be for the remainder of his life.

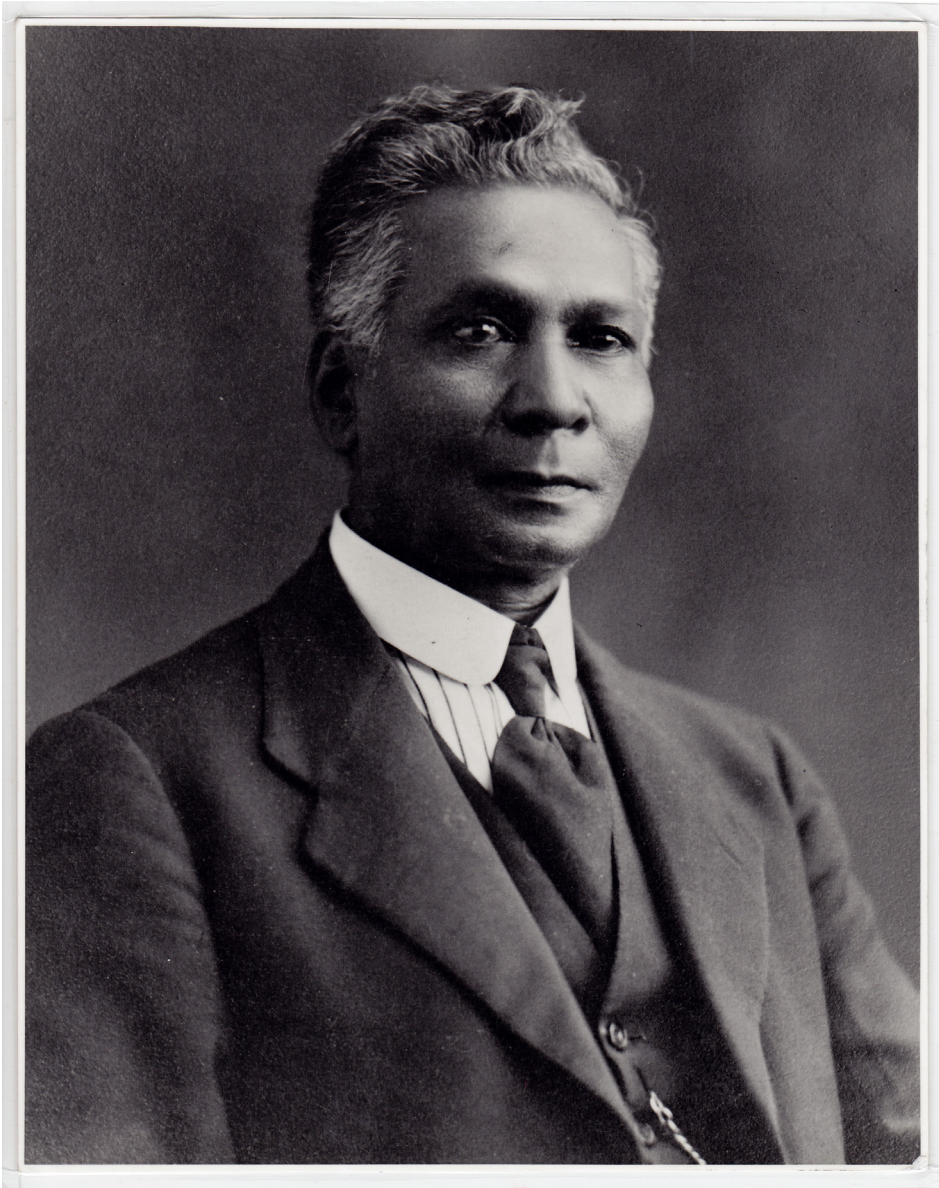
Grampa James was highly thought of by our people around him including Aunty Ellen Atkinson who:

praised the influence of Thomas Shadrach James who was the teacher, preacher and doctor to three generations ... He was the salaried teacher at Cummeroogunga until 1922 and remained a leader of his adopted community until he died in the 1940's. The school, choir and church he founded shaped the lives of Eddy and Ellen. (Barwick 1985)

## **Presentation to Mr Thomas S. James**

Whilst Grampa's life was laced with unrelenting challenges, it is very clear from the letters and other documents I have gathered, that the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal community loved him for all that he did for them. A prime example of this great affection for him is what took place in Barmah in September 1910 while Grampa was still waiting on the outcome from the July hearing into his complaints against Harris and Wilkinson. The town got together and decided to honour him and his contribution to the community. Grampa would have been 51 then.





**Grampa Thomas Shadrach James.**

Source: GBRN Collection.

The community had held a special night to honour Grampa with various people paying their respects to him, telling stories, and providing him with special gifts. After years of attack from Mr and Mrs Harris and friends, and the final transfer of Mr Harris, the entire community of Barmah and the surrounding district decided that the time was right to honour Grampa, the man they had grown to love. An account of the event was printed in the *Riverine Herald* on 25 September 1910:

*Cummeragunga*

*PRESENTATION TO MR THOMAS S. JAMES*

It has often been declared and with some pertinence that a secret shared by two persons is no longer a secret. A pleasing incident which took place at Barmah last week could be given as an illustration of the maxim of our childhood, "the exception proves the general rule". For the whole of the inhabitants of the little township of Barmah have had a secret, which they successfully preserved as a secret, at least for the one individual most concerned and whom the desired should remain in ignorance of their secret until they wished to divulge it. viz, Mr. Thomas S. James, the highly respected and valued teacher of the Public school at the Cummeragunga Aboriginal Mission Station. The residents of Barmah and the surrounding district on the Victorian side of the Murray ... not alone the church people, nor the dissenters, nor the Protestants, but the community generally ... had made up their minds that now was a fitting time to in some manner, publicly recognize Mr James' long and valuable services as a teacher, friend, Christian worker and gentleman. For 30 years Mr. James has lived and laboured among them as a school teacher, lay preacher, sick visitor, kindly advisor and skilful "first aid" in many a time of sudden illness and accident.

All recognized that this valued friend has just passed through a time of severe strain; been subjected to unlimited and uncalled for worry and annoyance all of which had been borne patiently and heroically, and in a manner admired by all who knew him.

No sooner was this recognition of Mr James' useful life among them suggested that the matter was taken up and carried through with the utmost enthusiasm. The unsuspecting gentleman was invited to a meeting to be held in the Barmah State School and during the evening's social ... was presented with a handsomely bound Bible suitably inscribed, together with a volume of Sankey's sacred hymns and solos and a useful and valuable ink ... The Former have upon its fly ... the following inscription:

“Presented to Mr Thomas S. James of Cumeroogunga, New South Wales, by his friends of Barmah township to show their very great respect for himself and their appreciation of his willing services at all times. Barmah September 7, 1910.”

In the absence of Mr Murray who was to have performed the pleasing tasks, the gifts were handed to Mr James by the Rev George Gladstone of Nathalia, who in his characteristic and happy manner, accompanied the offerings with a highly eulogistic and ... little speech. Going in and out amongst the residents of Barmah in ... and at all times, as Mr Gladstone has long been in the habit of doing and ... having witnessed Mr James' life and work amongst the Aborigines of Cummeragunga, no one is in a better position to speak as an actual ... of the recipients services to ... community as is the Reverend Gladstone. Referring specially to Mr James labour in and for Barmah the speaker said that had not Mr James stepped into the breach at a critical time the Sunday school at Barmah must ... have been closed...

## A Rich Life

Grampa created a rich and full life on both Maloga and Cummeragunga with his marriage to Granny Ada. When he married Granny he married into the Yorta Yorta community; and because the missions were made up of Aboriginal people from a range of different tribal groups and regions, it can also be said that he joined the Aboriginal community generally.

Nanny Pris and her daughters Aunty Lulla, Aunty Iris and Aunty Ruby all frequently described what a beautiful soul Grampa was. So gentle, loving, giving, selfless and very much loved by our Aboriginal community, both Yorta Yorta and otherwise.

Colin Walker (a Yorta Yorta elder) tells us today that: ‘all the old people loved Grampa James. They all spoke highly of him’. We needed him as much as he needed us. As it would turn out he gave us a high standard of education, quality health care, religious guidance, friendship, counselling, mentoring, advocacy, dentistry and even surgery. But he also provided us with protection. What stands out for me in reading his letters is that he was forever standing up for us; acting as advocate; writing letters to seek equality for us; and teaching us how to survive in white man's world in the future, through high quality education in the Scholars Hut. He was the buffer zone between our Aboriginal community and those supposedly responsible for our care and wellbeing.