

Kwementyaye Peltharre Lynch

Well known in the Alice Springs region Pop Lynch's passing in October this year was the end of an era. Pop Lynch was largely responsible for the scheduling of

Kwementyaye Peltharre Lynch passed away in Alice Springs on 28 October 2008.

He was a highly respected Arrernte man grounded firmly in Aboriginal law, who throughout his life used his skill and intelligence to take on an ever changing world.

As he often said, he was a man with many names - the three the white people had given him, his Arrernte skin name, and his traditional Aboriginal name.

To people who met him and to his family, he was simply Pop or Popsie.

When I first met Pop, I addressed him with the respectful term 'old man'.

Despite his 64 years of age at the time and his cultural standing, he growled me for using a term that he believed should be reserved for men more senior than him.

This was not so much about counting years but an issue of respect, of knowing your place and behaving the 'proper way'.

The combined qualities of precision and tenacity underpinned his life and his achievements - characteristics he learnt growing up out bush in the "Aboriginal university".

As his daughter, Margaret Lynch, recalls him saying, "I learned the hard way ... I lived off the land, walking, eating grass."

Pop was born in 1928 at the Alice Springs Telegraph Station into an era of enormous change.

The town was known as Stuart then, a fledgling European outpost a mile down the Todd River, the completion of the Ghan railway still a year off.

When the telegraph services shifted to the town, the old Telegraph Station

site was used to house Aboriginal children taken in to learn the European world.

Known later as 'the Bungalow' it was a place his family made sure he was not to end up in.

His parents had the foresight to return to the bush and he grew up at Bushy Park, 80 kilometres north of Alice Springs.

There he learned the skills for station work as well as learning the country of his ancestors while droving cattle for the white pastoralists.

It was hard work, "from Aherlkeme (dawn) to Uterne Irrpeme (sun down)".

On trips to his outstation he would point out the boundary fence between Yambah and Bond Springs pastoral leases that still stands straight today.

Its posts cut from mulga with an axe, dug into the ground by hand, and holed for the wires with brace and bit. A painstaking task, which must have given him plenty of time to ponder the issue of land rights.

With a growing family of his own and under pressure by post-war government policy progressively pushing Aboriginal people into settlements, Pop found work with Milton Liddle's woodcutting business north of Alice Springs and his children went to the town's Catholic school.

He subsequently worked for a contracting company owned by a local Italian family.

He developed high quality skills operating machinery and a fondness for Italian food, as dinner in the camp was regularly pasta with a glass of homemade red wine, or ngkwarle.

Ngkwarle untyeye, the

nectar of the corkwood (Hakea) tree flowers, has the uncanny resemblance to red wine, and its sweet taste is celebrated highly in Aboriginal tradition.

Pop was apmerek-artweye, traditional owner, of the Corkwood Dreaming and knew the potency of the songs and the power of the sites.

He was responsible for looking after the sacred sites on his country, Arnapipe, and as his children had children, he was increasingly concerned that they knew their father's and grandfather's country.

In the early 1970s there was talk of land rights in the Northern Territory.

Pop's land, being under a pastoral lease, meant the Aboriginal Land Rights (NT) Act 1976 was to deliver little at first.

The Central Land Council, however, was established and provided an agency that the Lynches, Turners, Palmers, Rices, and McMillan families, banding together, could use to push a case for some small living areas excised from the pastoral lease.

Although initial negotiations in 1975 with the Yambah leasee looked promising, the dream of families living on their respective countries was to become a drawn out struggle.

In 1984 the Yambah families took matters into their own hands.

Pop, along with the senior members of the other families led a move to set up camps on the stock routes and reserves around the pastoral station.

At the same time the CLC lodged claims under the Land Rights Act to stock routes and reserves across the region to prevent the

government from alienating those small parcels of land.

The families resisted intimidation and gunshots. After five years and growing frustration over the inaction by governments, they established a protest camp on the McGraths stock reserve alongside the Stuart Highway for all those passing to see.

Nationwide support for the protest ensued and ABC program Four Corners covered the story.

Pop spoke to Land Rights News in 1989 at the height of the protests and explained his case:

"Before Kidman got that country, we had the land. The land was there all the time.

"They put the mark around the boundary - that's whitefella way. When they put that line they cut our country in half.

"But we had our map all the time since the earth was put up.

"The Aboriginal map is different than squares. It's just like a snake, not square.

"Between tree and tree, hill and hill, that' how we follow our story. All the country's named. ... We are entitled to that land because its my father's and grandfather's land, it belongs to us."

This was talk of prior Aboriginal title, something the Australian law was not to recognise until Eddie Mabo won a similar argument in the High Court in 1992.

Pop was going to make sure that they were not going to be the people that land rights forgot and the campaign culminated in the protest camp moving off the stock reserve and on to the pastoral lease.

The families were prosecuted for trespass however

the action against them failed, the judge possibly sensing a soundness in the Yambah families' reasons.

The then Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Gerry Hand, intervened decisively and instigated a Memorandum of Agreement which was signed by the Prime Minister Bob Hawke and the Northern Territory Chief Minister Marshall Perron in September 1989.

This allowed for the scheduling under the Land Rights Act of portions of the claimed stock routes and reserves across the Northern Territory.

On 13 December 1991 Pop celebrated the handing of title to the Mpweringe Arnapipe Aboriginal Land Trust and gaining title to a small portion of his country.

Many challenges have followed since gaining title in establishing his family on the land.

Over those years Pop responded tirelessly to the CLC and others seeking his help.

Among other things, he was an important contributor to the Arrernte Dictionary, played a key role in the successful Alice Springs Native Title Claim, and oversaw site protection work in his area for the Alice Springs to Darwin railway.

He turned 80 in June 2008, this last year of his life.

In accordance with his wishes, he is buried on his beloved country. I feel confident now in saying farewell 'old man', a teacher and friend of many.

Rodger Barnes
Central Land Council
13 December 2008