Sheiks, Fakes and Cameleers

Who were the Cameleers?

More than 150 years ago, camels and the men who cared for them were a common sight in the vast, arid interior of Australia's outback to its coastal settlements. Camels, Afghan cameleers and their families were part of a multicultural community, their skills and hard wotkmnthies have at times been forgotten. Today, camels roam the outback in feral herds, and people who are descendants of camel operators and families.

Cameleers transported supplies from cities to regional towns, mined mines and stations. They backed water courses, helped build the country's rail and telegraph services, worked as mailmen, and carted goods to remote Aboriginal communities. In addition to their hard and slow work-a-band, many of these men and their families were also involved in the social and economic landscape, which continues to resonate today.

Known only as 'Cameleers', 'Afghans' or simply 'Sheiks', who were these men and what was their life like once they got here? Take a look through the passage of time to find out.

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1887

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Port Pirie
Broken Hill
Cooper Creek
Bourke
Cunnamulla
Charleville
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Cloncurry
Normanton
Port Douglas
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1896

The grand opening of the railway in Coolgardie was an opportunity to celebrate the enormous economic impact the goldfields had had on the Western Australian colony. This was also a chance to use an active part in the celebrations which involved an 'Afghan Guard of Honour' for visiting dignitaries including the Duke and Duchess of York.

Afghan processions: opening of Coolgardie Railway 1898 (Census & Hall) C026/498

Railway opening celebration, Coolgardie 1898 (Mines Department) C004/0073

Afghan guard of honour at the opening of the Coolgardie railway 1898 (Census & Hall) C026/25

1901

Sulaiman Kober Ovamylah of Coolgardie (Museum of Australian Photo, 1903-04)

Mohamed Bux Immigration certificate (1902-03)

Sulaiman Kober impression of left hand (National Archives of Australia D196, 1904-14)

The immigration Restriction Act (White Australia Policy, 1901-1958, commonly referred to as the Dictation Test) was based on the size of the new law was to test non-white (particularly Asian) immigration and keep Australia European. Denied citizenship, many cameleers were refused re-entry back to Australia after visiting family abroad. Muza Khan's response to the policy was published in a letter to the editor of The West Australian.

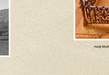
The West Australian 3 Thursday 3 May 1906, page 8

Celebration Coolgardie (Supplied by Coolgardie Heritage Centre)

Afghan Camp, playing cards. Coolgardie (Supplied by Coolgardie Heritage Centre)

Most of the men who came to Australia, arrived as short-term, one-year contracts. Faith was the key cornerstone of the early cameleers' way of life. The men culturally turned to each other to practice their religious beliefs and share a sense of community. Led by its prominent community leaders, the cameleers petitioned the city for permission to build a mosque in Perth which would serve as a community centre and place of worship.

Perth Mosque Project 1904 Fraser Beuchelle papers (ACC 1402)14



1904

Foundation Stone, Perth Mosque 1904 (SLWA 2004

The collective efforts of WA's camel men come to fruition when the foundation stone for the Mosque at William Street, Northbridge was laid.

Interior Courtyard, Perth Mosque (SLWA 2024

Entrance to Perth Mosque (SLWA 2024

1905

For almost 120 years, Perth Mosque has served Muslim communities in Western Australia. It is the country's second oldest continuously operating mosque, built just five years after federation in 1901.

Perth Mohammedan Mosque (Museum Australian Government Photographer) 1905 (C003/0060)

Prospecting party, Eastern Goldfields, Western Australia (Bryant Bennett collection) c. 1905 (C003/0019)

Camel team leaving Marble Bar for Nullagine (Ernest Lock) (Mitchell) 1905 (C003/0019)

The 'camel men' of Western Australia led harsh, military lives in remote locations with their camel teams, living in small in segregated pockets of what were known as 'Cameel Camps' or 'Ghan Towns'.

Hadji Mulla Wahhab grave, Coolgardie Cemetery 2020 (Photographed by Julian Templer)

Ameer Bux 1927-1997 commemoration Coolgardie Cemetery 2020 (Photographed by Julian Templer)

Unable to bring their families into Australia with them, and with the Pearling industry in Broome booming, many live-in-law-in-laws were forced to return to their homelands as the need for cameleers and their camels dried up. Those who married and raised families with European and Aboriginal women created new family traditions which continue to enhance Australia's rich multicultural legacy today.

Some of the oldest non-Aboriginal grave sites in WA's remote regional communities are those of these men who played a vital role in Australia's history from the 1860s to the 1930s.