

Pacific Islander workers in Australia - 1



Queensland, like the rest of the country, had a serious shortage of workers to develop its resources ... but its solution was very different. It found its workers on nearby islands, like Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands. Some of them came because they wanted to, others were tricked into signing three-year contracts which most of them couldn't read, and some were actually kidnapped. (This terrible practice was called 'blackbirding'.)

In 1863, the first group of 67 of these Melanesian people was brought in to work on a cotton plantation, but this project didn't do very well. Two years later another 33 workers came to help establish a sugar plantation. This industry did so well that over the next forty years about 60 000 more Melanesians followed them; and they kept arriving until the recruitment of Pacific Islanders was banned in 1903.

The work these people had to do was so hard that most Europeans wouldn't have been able to do it. They had to clear thick rainforests, and plant, maintain and harvest sugar cane in very uncomfortable, hot, tropical weather. Their working conditions were difficult too. Their diet of meat, potatoes, bread, tea and sugar wasn't healthy and they suffered from diseases such as consumption during winters and from dysentery and typhoid. Even when sick, they had to continue working for ten hours a day. It is not surprising that their death rate was about five times higher than other Queensland workers. They were also very poorly paid, receiving about one-fifth of the money given to other workers. And it is highly likely that some of them were slaves who weren't paid at all.

Although Pacific Islanders were still needed on sugarcane plantations, a decision was made to not only ban any new workers from being brought in after 1903, but to deport any found in Australia after 1906. So most of them had to leave. However, any who had come to the country before 1879, or who were working on ships, were allowed to stay. If they had married into an Aboriginal family, they could apply for special permission to stay. About 10 000 were deported, 1500 were allowed to stay and about 1000 are believed to have stayed illegally. Sadly, not a lot of care was taken to return all the people to their original island homes which caused extreme difficulties for some of them.

There were a number of reasons for the decision to stop employing Pacific Islanders. Federation in 1901 meant that the Queensland government had to work closely with the new Australian government and there were lots of Australian people against having Pacific Islander workers in Australia. Some thought it was cruel and others said that it was against Australia's White Australia Policy. Some of them were worried by what was happening in America, where there were too many slaves to deport. The Australian Workers Union also objected because they believed their own pay and conditions were threatened by Pacific Islanders who worked for so little.

There is little doubt that without Pacific Islander workers Australia's sugarcane industry would not have been as successful. About 20 000 of their descendants remain in Australia today. Many live in Torres Strait Islander and Aboriginal communities.

The reasons people migrated to Australia from Europe and Asia, and the experiences and contributions of a particular migrant group within a colony. (ACHHK096)

WORKERS FROM OVERSEAS