

LAKE TYERS RESERVE

An Anthropologist's Submission

by Dr. Diane Barwick

In 1963 Dr. Diane Barwick wrote a thesis on the contemporary situation of Aborigines in Victoria, the result of three years of study carried out under an Australian National University Research Scholarship. This article is based on the text of a recent personal submission by Dr. Barwick to the Chief Secretary for Victoria, Mr. Rylah, concerning future policy for Lake Tyers Reserve.

Aborigines in Victoria have well-developed kinship and community ties and considerable pride in their racial inheritance. These ties have too long been considered a hindrance to a policy encouraging the dispersal of Aboriginal groups and the "assimilation" of individuals as anonymous members of Australian society. Planners of native policy in Canada, New Zealand and the United States have long used such ties as the basis of community development policy which has effectively encouraged the development of self-respect and responsibility.

Many Aborigines retain a strong sentimental attachment to the reserves at Lake Tyers and Framlingham which have been the homes of their families for generations. They remember how in the past the residents of other Victorian reserves were forcibly dispersed, and know that these lands are now occupied by whites. The remaining reserves have been their only security against seasonal unemployment and discrimination. Many

Aborigines believe that these last remnants of "their" land should be retained for their use in perpetuity.

Similar sentiments are common to Maoris and North American Indians, who have strongly resisted public pressure for their dispersal. Australian governments might with advantage study contemporary reserve policy in these other countries, and copy the community development schemes, the adult education and vocational retraining and leadership training plans which have been successfully established there.

Officials in Victoria have never adequately consulted Aborigines when deciding policy for their future. They have ignored their opinions expressed in informal protests. Many resent and distrust government authority, and have good reasons for their belief that government policy decisions are arbitrary and unpredictable. Efforts must be made to replace *imposed* welfare schemes with consultation. Aborigines must be encouraged to initiate and plan self-help schemes.

Since 1952 families at Lake Tyers have repeatedly petitioned the Victorian Government to consider a programme of community development at the reserve. They have been frustrated by a narrow official interpretation of the "assimilation" policy, which recommends that they should be scattered in towns near and far where they may find work, and hope to find friends, among their white neighbours. The Aborigines Welfare Board did little to improve substandard conditions at Lake Tyers, and has continued the unsatisfactory rations system instead of paying wages, or providing cash relief so the residents could practise allocating their income for daily needs.

Few Australian families could easily leave their familiar home and the security of their circle of relatives and friends to go to a distant town if they were likely to be surrounded by people of a different colour and background who would regard them with wariness and antagonism, if not antagonism. These families are doubly handicapped because the squalid homes from which they were transferred have not prepared them for the use of modern household appliances and amenities, and they have had no opportunity to learn the housekeeping standards expected in normal housing.

The Board's failure to improve conditions at Lake Tyers or to provide adequate training for resettlement is an unnecessary and unjust handicap. It is also an unjust use of government authority, in the Aborigines' eyes: they are not truly free to choose their future life, for they must continue to live in squalor under supervision,

without even the normal right to invite friends or relatives to visit their homes, or be thrust unprepared into unfamiliar surroundings to try and make a better life for themselves and their children.

But they know from past experience of seasonal work in Gippsland that they will meet prejudice and discriminatory practices, that they are qualified only for the lowest-paid labouring jobs, that intermittent work and their lack of practice in budgeting family needs will lead to frequent financial difficulties.

Most of the Lake Tyers residents have left the station annually since the nineteen-forties to seek work in the harvesting season, but were usually able to return to the station in difficult times. Now the Welfare Board refuses to allow families to return. The failure of eight of the thirteen families re-housed since 1959 to remain in their new homes is sufficient warning that *encouragement* to move into the general community is not enough.

No one has the right to order, or even to recommend, that "Aboriginals be kept together". Nor should they be forced by direct pressure or the lack of suitable alternatives to disperse. There is much evidence that loyalty, pride, and common interests will maintain community ties among the majority of the Aborigines of Victoria, whether they live at Lake Tyers or in Melbourne. This is their right. They must also have the right to decide their place of residence, their work, and their future according to their own beliefs and preferences.