

# Michael Sands Interview Monday 2/6/15

## 1. Getting the facts:

I was thinking about my grandmother (that's my mother's mother) on the way out here... you know there is a lot of trauma around being a *stolen generation* child.

When Anglican Priest, Father Gribble was coming along the coast in his boat looking for full blood or half caste aboriginal children, taking them away from their families and putting them into the missions, he found my Grandmother. She was 5 at the time and living a traditional life with her family on Fraser Island. Her mother, my Great-grandmother, was born a *Badtjala* woman living in the scrub on Fraser. When Gribble came along, probably with the police, taking kids, they grabbed my Grandmother and took her with other kids from other places. The stolen children were dropped off at mission places like Palm Island and Yarrabah.

## 2. Michael Sands Family Tree

That's how my Grandmother (May Bennett) came to be in Yarrabah. This could

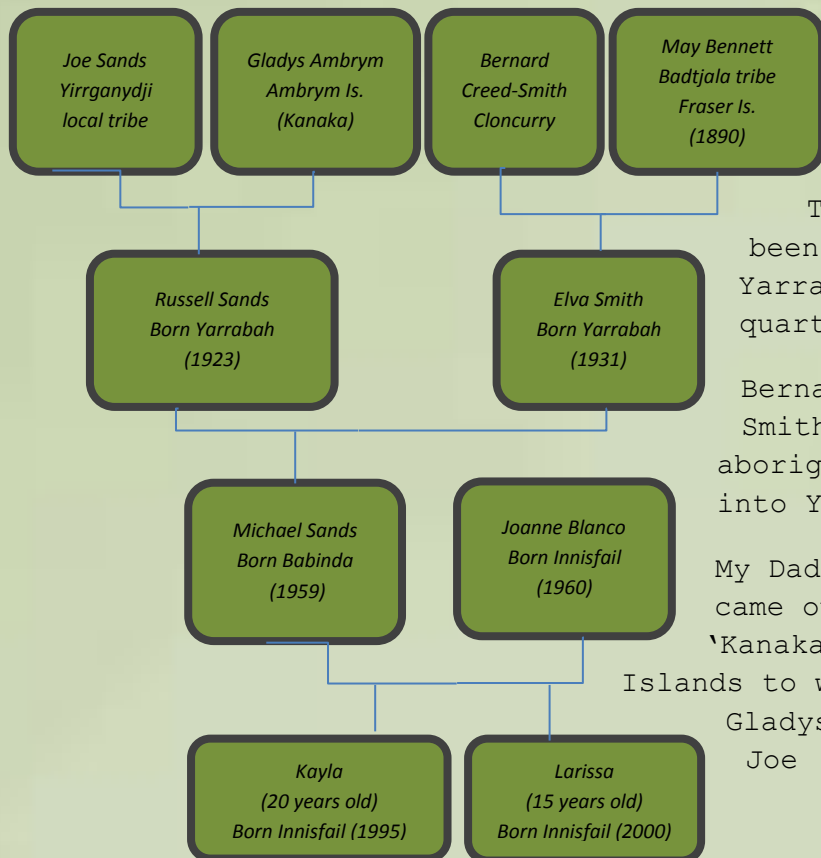
have been 1895 or 1897, she lived to be nearly 100 and died before the Year 2000.

At Yarrabah many tribes were mixed up together. No one was allowed to speak their local language or practise their culture.

The same thing happened to my Grandfather (Bernard Creed-Smith), he had been brought in from Cloncurry and put in the mission at Yarrabah. In Yarrabah the children had to sleep all together in the dormitory (sleeping quarters) - separated into boys and girls.

Bernard Smith and May Bennet married and had a daughter, my mother, Elva Smith (born 1931). Mum is now 84. Dad's father (Joe Sands) was a full blood aboriginal from just south of Yarrabah - the *Yirrganydi* tribe. He was put into Yarrabah mission as well.

My Dad's mother (Gladys Ambrym) came from Ambrym Island (near Vanuatu). She came over with her 2 brothers and sister. They were known then as 'Kanakas' (South Sea Islander indentured labour recruited from the Pacific Islands to work on cane farms and cotton plantations). They landed at Townsville. Gladys was also taken to Yarrabah where she met and later married my Grandad Joe (Joe Sands). Their son, Russell Sands is my Dad. Dad is 92 now (1923).





My parents (Russell Sands and Elva Smith) met in Yarrabah. They would have been children in the mission together. That's where they were born - they got married as young adults and soon after, left Yarrabah. My dad and one of his sisters were the only children (there were 7) in his family to leave Yarrabah, the rest stayed there. Dad (and my Mum) left to get work.

Aboriginal people who stayed at Yarrabah could work but often they got little or no pay - maybe a little food but not much else. My Dad worked in the sawmill, he probably got sick of that, working for no money. He probably thought, if we leave, I could go and work in the cane or on the rail - at least I could get better pay. My Mum would have been put to work as a child/young adult in the mission as well, doing laundry or scrubbing floors.

It would have been hard for Mum and Dad to move from Yarrabah and leave behind all their family and support. This was probably around the 1940's. They would have only been in their 20's. It would not have been easy to travel back to Yarrabah to visit.

**Michael (1964/5)**

My Mum and Dad lived and worked in Babinda - Dad did cane work and worked on the rail. Our family lived in barracks on local cane farms at places like Bellenden Ker. My parents had 7 children, all born in Babinda. I was the 5<sup>th</sup> child, born in 1959. I have 2 older sisters, 2 older brothers and 2 younger sisters.

I remember mostly eating damper as a kid, hardly ever bread. Mum just mixed flour and water and cooked up fresh damper. We used to eat wild pig, turkey, yellow-belly fish, and birds like parrots. Occasionally Dad would even shoot a cassowary. We used to go hunting all the time or spear fish in the creek.

Babinda was where we grew up and went to school - primary school at Bellenden Ker and high school at Babinda High School.



*Joanne, Michael and their two Daughters Larissa and Kayla*

I left school, after completing Year 10, in 1976 and went to work on sugar cane farms in the local area. I also worked at the sugar mill.

I met Joanne Blanco who I later married (1990). Joanne and I lived and worked in Cairns for a while then moved to Innisfail to care for Joanne's sick Grandma who had raised her. I worked at the Goondi Sugar Mill, then later for the Johnstone Shire Council in the Parks and Gardens section.

Joanne and I had two children who went to primary school at Innisfail Central and high school at Innisfail State College. Kayla is now 20 years old and although working locally, is about to move to Brisbane for a career in Tourism. Our younger daughter Larissa, is 15 and in Grade 10.

I stayed with Johnstone Shire Council for 21 years working my way up to be Second-In-Charge, before changing careers and in 2008 when I started work for Mamu Health Service. In 2012, I switched careers again, working in Western Australia building railways for some new mines.

In 2014 I started my current job as a Police Liaison Officer with Queensland Police based in Innisfail. I enjoy my work. Our role is to connect the community to the Police Service. We do things like run a school truancy program (for kids who try to wag school) and we have the role of 'Adopt-a-cop' in local primary schools.

### **3. Make a Map - SEE PAGE 7**

a) Download Map of Queensland to show Fraser Island, Cloncurry, Yarrabah/Cairns

b) Download Map of Pacific Islands/Australia to show Vanuatu and Australia

### **4. Identify a critical event:**

When Michael was asked to identify any critical events, he said, "If Grandmother Bennett, hadn't been taken by Father Gribble from Fraser Is and put at Yarrabah, who knows where we would have ended up - we might have been down on Fraser Island or Woorabinda or somewhere like that. It's the same with Grandad Creed taken from Cloncurry and put at Yarrabah. That's how my Grandparents all got together. That was a big impact - sort of life changing really."



***Russel and Elva Sands  
(recent photo)***

### **5. Looking Back:**

When Michael was asked if there was any lesson or message in his family's history, he said, "My Dad is the only one of his siblings still alive, all the rest have died. So I think getting out of Yarrabah was probably a good thing for him - and for us (his children). He had better living conditions - he would have had better food but also a sense of independence and self-worth often not experienced in mission life."



***May Smith (Nee Bennett) and Michael  
(circa 1982)***

"I know with Dad, when we used to go back to Yarrabah, he used to be really happy to see his family. He felt very connected still to Yarrabah as a place and to his family still there."

"I feel lucky, because where I'm at, I wouldn't want to be anywhere else. When I go back to Yarrabah, to see my cousins, there are many people who are into drugs or alcohol. It's sad. It's a paradise, but there is very little work and high unemployment rates. I feel lucky that Dad came away to Babinda and gave us a better life. Being in Babinda gave opportunities for us that people in Yarrabah didn't get."

"In Yarrabah now, we have some family left, but if we go there it is mostly for sorry business (death of family member) or maybe a wedding."



*Michael and his cricket team*



*Michael and the Babinda rugby league team*

## 6. Summary of Michael Sands Interview: Write up the main events in the right order.

- Grandma May Bennett born around 1890 as traditional *Badtjala* woman on Fraser Island
- May Bennett stolen as 5 year old child by Anglican Priest Gribble and taken to Yarrabah mission near Cairns
- Grandfather Bernard Smith (Creed-Smith) stolen from Cloncurry as a child and taken to Yarrabah mission near Cairns
- Grandad Joe Sands - local Yirrganydji tribe near Cairns - taken to Yarrabah mission
- Grandma Gladys Ambrym arrives with other kanakas from Ambrym Island, Vanuatu. Gladys travels to Yarrabah.
- Joe Sands and Gladys Ambrym marry and have a son (Russel Sands) born 1923 at Yarrabah.
- May Bennett and Bernard Creed-Smith marry at Yarrabah and have a daughter (Elva Smith) born 1931 at Yarrabah
- Russel Sands and Elva Smith marry at Yarrabah and soon after move to Babinda to raise their family and find better paid work. Russel works on cane farms and on the railway.
- Russel and Elva have 7 children. Michael Sands is their 5<sup>th</sup> child born in Babinda in 1959.
- Michael went to primary school at Bellenden Ker and high school at Babinda
- Michael finished school at grade 10 and went to work on local cane farms around Babinda and at the sugar mill.
- Michael met and married Joanne Blanco moved to Cairns and later Innisfail. They had two daughters - Kayla (now 20 and about to move to Brisbane for a career in tourism) and Larissa (now 15 and in Grade 10 at Innisfail State College).
- Michael has worked in a few different jobs over the years - cane farming, railway construction, Johnstone Shire Council Parks and Gardens, and Mamu Health Service
- Michael joined the Police Service in 2014 as a Police Liaison Officer. His job is to connect the community to the Police Service. For example, Michael is 'adopt-a-cop' for Radiant College in Innisfail and also helps with a school truancy program (encouraging kids to attend school every day).

## 7. Further Information:

Talking with Michael led to the need for further research on related places and topics. For example:

"Reaching Back" book on Yarrabah. <http://aiatsis.gov.au/publications/products/reaching-back-queensland-aboriginal-people-recall-early-days-yarrabah-mission>

Fraser Island information on Butchulla (Badtjala) Traditional Owners.  
[http://www.nprsr.qld.gov.au/parks/fraser/butchulla/culture.html#european\\_impact](http://www.nprsr.qld.gov.au/parks/fraser/butchulla/culture.html#european_impact)

Yarrabah information: <http://www.yarrabah.qld.gov.au/history>

Ambrym Island, Vanuatu: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ambrym>

South Sea Islanders <http://www.archives.qld.gov.au/Researchers/Resources/Pages/Australian-South-Sea-Islander-resources.aspx>

## 8. Further Questions

Once Michael's interview was written up and summarised, there are more questions that need to be asked. This will add some richness and detail to the story.

**NOTE: Make sure you send a draft of your written up interview back to the person, so they can read it and check it. Make any corrections or changes they suggest.**

1. Do you know what impact the stealing of children had on the parents of those children?
2. What was Yarrabah like as a place to live? What were living conditions like? Was there any conflict between different tribal groups forced into living together? For your Grandparents? For your parents?  
How did that compare with life in Babinda?
3. Did any of your Grandparents/parents or have you, ever gone back to where they came from
4. What would life have been like for your Grandparents if they had never been stolen? What would traditional indigenous life on Fraser Island/Cloncurry/Ambrym Island or south of Cairns been like?
5. How different would Australia as a nation be today if we had never had a history of 'stolen generation children'? How different would Michael's life have been if his Grandparents had not ended up at Yarrabah?



*Journey of Gladys  
Ambrym from Ambrym  
Island to Townsville*

*(approx. 1920)*



*Journey of Bernard  
Creed-Smith from  
Cloncurry to Yarrabah*

*(approx. 1920)*

*Journey of May Bennett  
from Fraser Island to  
Yarrabah*

*(approx. 1895-1897)*