



Wattie Creek

Video Transcript

CHRIS TAYLOR:

Imagine if someone offered you a job with food and board, but the pay, if you got it was a pittance, the accommodation was a tin shed with no sanitation and the food was not much more than flour, sugar and tea. Sounds a bit like slavery doesn't it? Unfortunately for many indigenous Australians in the cattle industry, that's exactly how it once was, but all that changed when one man inspired them to reclaim the land they loved.

That National Treasure lies in the heart of the top end, 460 kilometres south east of Katharine in the Northern Territory. This is Wattie Creek which belongs to the local Gurindji people.

It's a place that became part of Australia's modern folk lore when a Prime Minister came to visit.

And this is the man whose passion and determination inspired that visit. Vincent Lingiari is his name. For most of his life he worked here on what's now known as Old Wave Hill Station. In 1966, with good reason, this gentle stockman turned activist.

He led about 200 Aboriginal workers and their families in a strike when they walked off the station in protest over pay and conditions.

For 80 years the pastoralists' main interest had been acquiring land – Aboriginal land. For them it made no economic sense to respect black labour. There was no shortage of people wanting to work.

The Gurindji watched helplessly as the pastoralists fenced their land, killed their food supplies and destroyed their watering holes. And even worse, they had little choice but to work for the pastoralists under appalling conditions.

When the Gurindji walked off black stockman had become the backbone of the cattle industry. Widespread loss of these cheap labour source threatened the pastoralists. The Gurindji were worried about violent repercussions so they travelled overland following this fenceline, rather than take the road.

What started as a strike became a nine year battle to reclaim their traditional land. The Wave Hill Walk-Off Route is on the National Heritage list.

The Gurindji arrived here in Wattie Creek in 1967, and they named it Daguragu, in their language, a place for us.

Jimmy Wavehill was an Aboriginal stockman at the time of the walk-off.

JIMMY WAVEHILL:

What old Vincent Lingiari told us is you mob going to keep this place for, if anything happen on me. Well I'm just passing the story with Jimmy Wavehill and he can keep it forever and tell stories, so some kids can understand and keep it for their future too.

CHRIS TAYLOR:

This was always Gurindji land, the place of their dreaming, and now they can visit and maintain their sacred sites and places of ritual. But they needed a modern symbol of their ownership. The pastoralists respected signs, so the Gurindji had one made to announce their presence. What they wanted was title to their land and economic independence.

In the years the Gurindji lived at Daguragu, they were threatened with economic sanctions and had numerous land claims rejected. But the breakthrough came in 1972.

The ALP was back in power after 23 years in opposition and Aboriginal Land Rights was a hot issue.

GOUGH WHITLAM:

We will legislate to give Aborigines land rights.

CHRIS TAYLOR sync: Although full land rights legislation came later, the culmination of the Gurindji's battle has been immortalised in that image of Gough Whitlam and Vincent Lingiari taken in 1975.

GOUGH WHITLAM:

Vincent Lingiari, I solemnly hand to you these deeds as proof in Australian law, that these lands belong to this Gurindji people.

CHRIS TAYLOR:

Vincent Lingiari put it more simply.

VINCENT LINGIARI:

We're all friendly now. We're all mates. We're all mates.

CHRIS TAYLOR:

Vincent Lingiari was awarded the Medal of Australia for service to his people. Today he's buried on the land he fought so hard for.

The Gurindji's strike was the first to attract widespread attention to Aboriginal Land Rights. That makes Wattie Creek, at the end of the Wave Hill Walk-Off Route, a National Treasure.