

BACKGROUND to the Gurindji peoples struggle for Sovereignty and Equality

It was 47 years ago in 1966 that the Gurindji people walked off Lord Vestey's Wave Hill cattle station to protest against "poor wages and living conditions". Now a famous part of Australian history, this strike also sought the return of the Gurindji's ancestral lands, and this was the first such case recognised by Australian law.



Photographer Mervyn Bishop– National Gallery of Australia ¹

The iconic image above captures the historic moment on 16 August 1975 when traditional landowner and elder Vincent Lingiari accepted the crown lease to his ancestral lands on behalf of the Gurindji community, the historic act was forged through the symbolic pouring of a handful of soil, with the words by the then Prime Minister of Australia, Gough Whitlam²;

“Vincent Lingiari I solemnly hand to you these deeds as proof, in Australian law, that these lands belong to the Gurindji people and I put into your hands part of the earth itself as a sign that this land will be the possession of you and your children forever”.

Songwriters Uncle Kevin Carmody and Paul Kelly tell this celebrated story beautifully complete with some historic footage of this event in their song “From Little things Big Things Grow”

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tbHR-apIHLU>

A little less than two years ago, in August 2011 over 200 people gathered in Maurie Japarta Ryan's community of Kalkarindji – 400 kilometres south-west of Katherine for the inaugural Vincent Lingiari Memorial Lecture to mark the 45th anniversary of the Wave Hill walk-off.

¹ Information and photo from <http://cs.nga.gov.au/Detail.cfm?IRN=2554>

² http://www.absoluteastronomy.com/topics/The_Gurindji_Strike

Speakers strongly condemned the Federal Government's Northern Territory intervention.

Gurindji woman Josie Crawshaw delivered the address, saying the intervention had stripped away the rights won in the famous Wave Hill Station strike and that they were back on rations, working for a food card³.

Wiradjuri woman Dr Anita Heiss⁴ writes a compelling overview of the Gurindji's contemporary history in her summary of the 45th Anniversary of the Gurindji Wave Hill Walk-Off held Friday, August 26 2011 and known as Freedom Day. Anita writes

Many staunch non-Indigenous unionists played a key role in activating union members nationally to fund raise to support the Wave Hill mob.

Aboriginal rights campaigner and one of the first to step-up to assist the Gurindji cause, Brian Manning spoke with passion about his role supporting Vincent Lingiari, and stated in his address that

'The Walk-off succeeded in 1966 because of the unity of the people to stay solidly together in the face of all sorts of inducements "

³ <http://www.abc.net.au/rural/news/content/201108/s3304425.htm#.TmLtSFly5Jk.facebook>

⁴ Gurindji – along with all Aboriginal groups in this predicament – found their [waterholes](#) and [soakages](#) fenced off or fouled by cattle, which also ate or trampled [fragile desert plant life](#), such as [bush tomato](#). [Dingo](#) hunters regularly shot the people's invaluable hunting dogs, and [kangaroo](#), a staple meat, was also routinely shot since it competed with cattle for water and grazing land. Gurindji suffered lethal "[reprisals](#)" for any attempt to eat the cattle – anything from a skirmish to a [massacre](#). The last recorded massacre in the area occurred at [Coniston](#) in 1928. There was little choice to stay alive but to move onto the cattle stations, receive rations, adopt a more sedentary life and, where possible, take work as stockmen and [domestic help](#). If they couldn't continue their traditional way of life, then at least to be on their own land – the foundation for their [religion](#) and [spiritual beliefs](#) – was crucial.

In 1914, Wave Hill Station was bought by Vestey's, a [British](#) pastoral company comprising a large conglomerate of cattle companies owned by [Baron Vestey](#). Pastoralists were able to make use of the now landless Aboriginal people as extremely cheap [labour](#). On stations across the north, Aboriginal people became the backbone of the cattle industry, working for little or no money, minimal food and appalling housing. Read more at <http://anitaheissblog.blogspot.com.au/2011/09/45th-anniversary-of-gurindji-wave-hill.html>



However Dr Heiss also notes that “the significant and symbolic gesture of the then Prime Minister Gough Whitlam pouring red earth through the local leader’s hands back in 1975. It was a moment that marked the return of the ancestral lands to the Gurindji mob and yet, it was a moment declared null and void with the introduction of the “2007 NT *intervention*” which shifted the power of Aboriginal lives and land away from individuals and communities, back to the Commonwealth Government”.

From Little things ...Big things Grow

Gather round people let me tell you're a story
An eight year long story of power and pride
British Lord Vestey and Vincent Lingiarri
Were opposite men on opposite sides

Vestey was fat with money and muscle
Beef was his business, broad was his door
Vincent was lean and spoke very little
He had no bank balance, hard dirt was his floor

From little things big things grow
From little things big things grow

Gurindji were working for nothing but rations
Where once they had gathered the wealth of the land
Daily the pressure got tighter and tighter
Gurindju decided they must make a stand

They picked up their swags and started off walking
At Wattie Creek they sat themselves down
Now it don't sound like much but it sure got tongues talking
Back at the homestead and then in the town

From little things big things grow
From little things big things grow

Vestey man said I'll double your wages
Seven quid a week you'll have in your hand
Vincent said uhuh we're not talking about wages
We're sitting right here till we get our land
Vestey man roared and Vestey man thundered
You don't stand the chance of a cinder in snow
Vince said if we fall others are rising

From little things big things grow
From little things big things grow

Then Vincent Lingiarri boarded an aeroplane
Landed in Sydney, big city of lights
And daily he went round softly speaking his story
To all kinds of men from all walks of life

And Vincent sat down with big politicians
This affair they told him is a matter of state
Let us sort it out, your people are hungry
Vincent said no thanks, we know how to wait

From little things big things grow
From little things big things grow

Then Vincent Lingiarri returned in an aeroplane
Back to his country once more to sit down
And he told his people let the stars keep on turning
We have friends in the south, in the cities and towns

Eight years went by, eight long years of waiting
Till one day a tall stranger appeared in the land
And he came with lawyers and he came with great ceremony
And through Vincent's fingers poured a handful of sand

From little things big things grow
From little things big things grow

That was the story of Vincent Lingairri
But this is the story of something much more
How power and privilege can not move a people
Who know where they stand and stand in the law

From little things big things grow
From little things big things grow
From little things big things grow
From little things big things grow