

Oenpelli Mission

1925 – 1975

Other Names: • Gunbalunya

Details

Oenpelli Mission was established by the Church Missionary Society in 1925 at the site of the Government run Oenpelli Aboriginal Reserve. Situated in the Alligator River District the Mission provided accommodation, education, medical care and religious instruction to Aboriginal children. Dormitories for Aboriginal children operated at the Mission until the mid 1950s. In 1975 control of Oenpelli was taken over by a local Aboriginal Community Council and it ceased to operate as a Mission.

Oenpelli Mission was established by the Church Missionary Society (CMS) after the CMS took over control of the Government run Oenpelli Aboriginal Reserve, also known as the Alligator River Aboriginal Reserve, on 18 June 1925. The original Government reserve and cattle station had been operating since 1916 with the former owner of the Station, Patrick 'Paddy' Cahill, who was made a protector of Aborigines for the Alligator River in 1912, acting as superintendent. The Station was not officially proclaimed as an Aboriginal reserve until 1920. When Cahill and his family left the Station in 1924 the Government made the decision to pass control of the Mission to the Church Missionary Society.

The Reserve that included the station, approximately 2800 square miles, was leased to the Church Missionary Society on a Mission Lease in 1925. After the CMS took control the Reserve was renamed Oenpelli Mission. Mr and Mrs Dyer from the Roper River Mission were appointed as the first Missionaries at Oenpelli. In November 1925 the Mission was proclaimed by the NT Administrator to be:

an Aboriginal institution for the maintenance, custody and care of aboriginal half-caste children.

Initially the buildings that already existed on the station were utilised by the Mission. Mrs Dyer began operating a school almost immediately. The former dairy was set up as a boys' dormitory and Paddy Cahill's old 'gaol house' was used as a dormitory for girls. Although a school hall with bark walls and a corrugated iron roof, which doubled as a church for services, was constructed in 1927, in 1929 the same 'gaol house' was still being used as a girls' dormitory. CMS Missionary Dick Harris described the building:

about 12x12 feet with a concrete floor, in the centre of which was a securely anchored a large iron ring, to which prisoners used to be chained. This gaol was now used as a girls' dormitory – sleeping quarters for eleven to twelve girls aged from about 6 to 14 years.

By the 1930s one boys' dormitory and one girls' dormitory had been constructed, each being 20 feet (6 metres) long and 12 feet (3.6 metres) wide. In a 1931 end of year report it was stated that a Boy's House for ex-Dormitory boys was being built. At the end of 1931 it reported that there were 28 girls and 30 boys staying in the dormitories

and attending the school. The average number of children for the year was reported to be 16 girls and 18 boys. The following year an average of 30 – 40 children were attending the school. The school's hours of instruction were reported as being from 9.30-11.30 am and 2.30-4.30pm. The morning was set aside for 'babies' up to the age of seven and the afternoon for older children.

All children attend day school & are taught reading, writing, singing, arithmetic etc. Children are also trained in garden work and animal husbandry; the girls sewing, cooking & household duties. In addition to this, classes have been held for young men who desired to learn to read: a good number availed themselves of the opportunity & several have made such progress that we are encouraged to "keep on".

Annual reports stressed that, "The preaching of the Gospel of course is our chief work." Church services were held in the morning and evening of every day. The morning session was set aside for religious instruction.

Clothing was supplied for the children:

Boys are issued with a naga made on the mission from ordinary blue print material. Girls receive a one piece dress (of the same material) made on the Mission. These are changed once weekly, and sent to the laundry. Boys employed as stockmen are issued with khaki shirt, trousers (khaki or dungaree), riding boots and hat. These are also changed and laundered once weekly.

There was a high incidence of the disease leprosy, also known as Hansen's disease, at Oenpelli in the early days of the Mission. The mistaken belief of the time that leprosy was highly contagious led to attempts being made to isolate those with the disease and separate them from the rest of the Mission population. Some, including some children, were sent to the Government run quarantine areas for people suffering from leprosy, Mud Island Lazarette and after 1931 Channel Island Leprosarium.

From July 1937 all CMS work in Northern Australia was co-ordinated by the CMS Committee for Aborigines. In that year there were three children at the Mission who were considered at the time to be 'half-caste' for which the Mission was receiving an annual subsidy from the Government. Child endowment payments from the government to the Mission for each Aboriginal child resident at Oenpelli began in 1941.

In 1942 the bombing of Darwin by the Japanese led to the evacuation of all female Missionaries and their children, and the women and children considered to be 'half-caste' from all CMS Missions in Northern Australia. The then superintendent, Dick Harris, was moved to Groote Eylandt and his wife and children were evacuated south. Many men from Oenpelli were employed by the armed forces to assist in various capacities throughout World War II.

In 1944 a new CMS policy was adopted by the Federal Council that put forward the idea of placing children who lived on the Missions in 'cottage homes, rather than dormitories'. However, according to CMS historian Keith Cole, implementing the new policies was delayed due to staff shortages and the disruption of World War II.

During World War II the school at Oenpelli continued to operate on a reduced level with between 30 and 40 children in regular attendance. According to John Harris, another CMS historian, the staff shortages during the War meant that dormitory systems on all CMS Missions ceased operating. After the War many dormitories were reopened, but according to Harris, these were chiefly for young girls and by the late 1950s even these had ceased to operate.

The girls' dormitory was reported to have suffered termite damage in a government Review Report from the end of 1952 showing that it was still in operation at that time. However, it stated that the number of girls' resident in the dormitory varied during the year with a number returning to their families. It is interesting to note that a penciled comment in the margin of this report indicates the intention to close the dormitory.

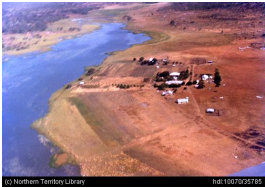
In 1973 a change in federal government policy from assimilation to Aboriginal self-determination brought change to Northern Territory Missions. In 1975 control of Oenpelli was taken over from the CMS by a local Aboriginal Community Council and the settlement ceased to operate as a Mission. The settlement became known by its Aboriginal name, Gunbalanya.

Gallery



Aboriginal people and torres strait islander peoples - Reserves, missions and homeland centres - Oenpelli Mission (aerial of lake and hills), Arnhem Land

Description: This image gives an aerial view of the Oenpelli Mission, established by the Church of England in 1925.



Oenpelli

Description: The description reads: Aerial view of the Oenpelli Mission.

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- [Church Missionary Society of Australia \(1916 - current\)](#)

Related Organisations

- [Channel Island Leprosarium \(1931 - 1955\)](#)
Children and others with leprosy were transferred away from the Oenpelli Mission to the Channel Island Leprosarium
- [Mud Island Lazaret \(1889 - 1931\)](#)
Children and others with leprosy were transferred away from the Oenpelli Mission to the Mud Island Lazaret

Other Resources



Title: Oenpelli Mission Station (1932 - 1938)

Type: Image

Date: 1932 - 1938

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Title: Alligator River (Oenpelli) Aboriginal Reserve File No. 1 Administration (1912 - 1927)

Type: Image

Date: 1912 - 1927

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Title: Church Missionary Society Deputation to Minister re Oenpelli Affairs (1927 - 1928)

Type: Image

Date: 1927 - 1928

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Title: Church Missionary Society - Oenpelli Mission (1949 - 1953)

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Date: 1949 - 1953

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Records

For more information and to access your records, follow the links below:

Records

- [Church Missionary Society of Australia, North Australia Committee \(1907 - 1989\)](#)
- [Oenpelli Mission Station \(1925 - 1925\)](#)
- [Copies of review inspection reports - Hermannsberg \[Hermannsburg\], Oenpelli, Yirrkala, Elcho Island, Groote Eylandt, Finke River, Roper River, Milingimbi and Port Keats \(1959 - 1959\)](#)
- [Oenpelli Mission Station \(1932 - 1938\)](#)
- [Alligator River \(Oenpelli\) Aboriginal Reserve File No. 1 Administration \(1912 - 1927\)](#)
- [Church Missionary Society Deputation to Minister re Oenpelli Affairs \(1927 - 1928\)](#)
- [Church Missionary Society - Oenpelli Mission \(1949 - 1953\)](#)

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