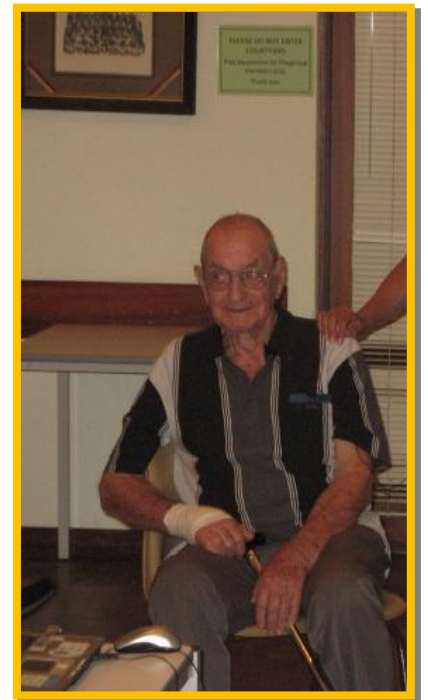


FRANK RODRIGUEZ – WEST KIMBERLEY IDENTITY

Speakers: Cindy Solonec and Frank Rodriguez

On 3 December 2008, the Kimberley Society heard from Cindy Solonec and her father Frank Rodriguez. The talk, supported by an array of PowerPoint slides, depicted a brief glimpse at Frank's life in the West Kimberley from 1944 to 1969. The evening began with an acknowledgment of the traditional owners, *Whadyuk Noongars* and thanks were extended to Cathie Clement and the Kimberley Society for the opportunity to have a chat about Frank's life. Also acknowledged was the presence of friends and members of significant families in Frank's diaries – Frank Rodriguez Jnr, Kim Rodriguez, Peppi Rodriguez-Chappell, Dieter Solonec, Tammy Rodriguez-Solonec, Jonathan Solonec-Thomas, Jacinta Solonec-Thomas, Perpetua Durack-Clancy, Audrey Rose-Bullough and Kim Rose Jnr.

Frank Rodriguez is an 87-year-old West Kimberley identity now living in Broome. He has made a valuable contribution to the social history of the Derby area by virtue of diaries he has kept dating back to 1944. The talk was loosely based on Cindy's Masters thesis titled *Cast(e) in Between: a mixed descent family's coexistence in the West Kimberly 1944-1969*. The thesis investigated the social, racial and economic dynamics of life in the West Kimberley, and it identified three groups defined by their racial characteristics: full-descent, mixed-descent and Gudia (white) people, who co-existed on the land. It argued that despite many people in these different groups being related to each other, their lives followed different trajectories as a result of government policies and laws which defined people by their degree of Aboriginality. During the 1940s, '50s and '60s, for example, the children of station workers Fulgentius and Phillipena Fraser, having received minimal education from the missionaries at Beagle Bay, left their mission haven and entered the world of employment under Gudia management.



Frank Rodriguez, Perth 2008

The diaries start in 1944 when a 21-year-old Spaniard, Francisco Casanova-Rodriguez, ventured to the Kimberley to work as a station hand. He crossed paths with the Fraser family in 1946 and married their eldest daughter, Katie. Frank had a great relationship with his father-in-law Fulgentius who lived with Phillipena nearby at Wilumbuah, an outstation for Liveringa sheep station. Fraser spoke not only his Aboriginal dialects, but some Spanish that he had learned as a boy from the Benedictines at Kalumburu. Frank was accepted into the mixed-descent family, where kindred relationships deepened by virtue of mutual religious belief systems, amidst a life of discrimination and financial hardships. Frank and Katie were devout Catholics and that became the strength of their relationship. Frank had arrived at New Norcia from Galicia in Spain in 1937 to become a monk. But never seriously aspiring to the vocation he went to the Kimberley in 1944 and married into an Aboriginal family; and

there he stayed. Coincidentally, Katie had entered the 'black' convent at Beagle Bay to become part of Bishop Raible's dream to have an Aboriginal Convent.

Cindy first decided to investigate her father's diaries to demonstrate coexistence between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in the West Kimberley. After all she speculated, he had spent most of his lifetime on pastoral properties in the region; *and*, he had married into an Aboriginal family. Surely his diaries would be full of Aboriginal and Gudia inter-relationships? And indeed they were. But what she found was not quite what she had expected by her contemporary mind-set and worldview. In fact, he rarely identified people's ethnicity but you could guess what it was by their name and/or the type of work they were doing. Nobody was writing about black-skinned people in those days, other than anthropologists whose main interest was in traditional lifestyles. Black *countrimin* weren't really noticed or valued, other than for domestic and labouring jobs. Therefore, Cindy began researching and writing up the thesis with the aid of Frank's diaries.



Frank Rodriguez, Derby 1948

Frank first worked for the Emanuel Brothers but became a builder because it paid slightly better than stockmen's wages. The first structure he built in the Kimberley still stands and is now the Manager's residence at Wunkajunka Community (Christmas Creek). His diaries are full of everyday trials and tribulations about his active and hardworking life. They depict a very strong sense of activity on the stations; people coming and going as the pastoral industry was in full swing. The regional social history is full of interesting anecdotes and Frank's diaries hold many stories about his life, the people he met and the places he worked. He was a good writer so he stayed in contact with family in Spain and Argentina and people down south whom he had met before going to the Kimberley. Frank took up correspondence studies and gained a Diploma in "Steel Square and Roofing". In 1946 he commenced work at Liveringa Station, which was owned by the Kimberley Pastoral Company (John Forrest and Associates) and managed by Kim Rose.

Liveringa is set on the side of a hill and the hierarchal status is obvious. The manager's homestead sat at the top, lower down were the white and half-caste workers' houses, and the Black people lived in a fenced enclosure at the bottom of the hill. Frank built a Nissan hut for them all to live in. He remembers that Daisy, Nancy and Topsy, who worked in the top house, lived there, but they didn't like it. When it rained, people preferred to go and sleep in the shearing shed. And the toilets, he decided, were nothing more than a novelty. Frank installed two small huts with cement floors as the toilets, but they were soon full of stones and bottles and they were never used. People preferred the bush.

Well-to-do pastoral families associated with wealthy businessmen, and Kim Rose was no exception. His close friend was none other than Essington Lewis, the Managing Director of BHP. The Roses often flew around the Kimberley in the BHP plane, except for Kim because he didn't like flying and he'd travel by car. The VIPs (as Frank called them) would go on duck hunting trips and fly around the Kimberley and out to Cockatoo Island. But the Rodriguez family had a spiritual wealth bestowed on them. They received a 'benediction' [in document form] that Bishop Raible brought for Frank and his family from the Pope in Rome. The Pope had wanted to give a 'benediction' to a family in this distant diocese, and the Bishop felt that family was Frank's and Katie's. What it meant is that at the hour of death if there was no priest with you, you could use the name of Jesus and be sorry for your sins, and gain plenary indulgence.

Earlier, Frank had built the church in which he married Katie. It was named the *Holy Rosary* after the small church in his home village of Frexio. Today, the Church, the Parish and the School in Derby are called the Holy Rosary. Frank and Katie had seven children, four survived. All were born in the Derby Hospital and baptised in the Holy Rosary Church. (Three of their children later married there in the new church.)

In 1953 Frank bought a pastoral lease from the Kimberley Pastoral Company and he called his station of 52,000 acres *Debesa*. It is named after a 200 square hectare plot of land near his home at Frexio, a lush green paddock sloping on the side of a hill that held special childhood memories for him. Often with help from Fraser and people like Tony and Frank Ozies and Georgy Dann, his station emerged with buildings and fences and windmills. He went into partnerships; with Pat Begley in 1955, which later dissolved; and then with Horrie Miller in 1961.

Frank's legacy manifested in many Kimberley structures from houses, to extensions, to cement works that include – buildings and swimming pools at Liveringa and Camballin; Glenroy Station Abattoir; St. Joseph's hostel, Derby; CWA house, Derby; extensions to the Sister's convent, Derby; Carson River Station; Kalumburu; Debesa; Duncan River; Ellendale Station; Inkarta outstation; and the Derby Fire Station. Over the years Frank combined his construction jobs with working hard on his station. Building roads, windmills, fences, mustering, securing sheep, planting feed, building dams, associating with the Agriculture Dept who had experimental grasses growing on Debesa; and Leo Gugeru put bores down for him. He named all the windmills after both the Miller and Rodriguez families. There's Cintys [sic], Pepitas, Phillips, Katies and Visitas after our family and Marie Soaks, Julies, Robins, Johnsons, Marys, Millers for Horrie's children. And even Leos after Gugeru the driller!! Establishing a sheep station was never easy. The environment was not conducive and, in Frank's case, it was compounded by the culmination of falling wool prices, expensive overheads, and the non viability of sheep in the region, largely due to introduced weeds like 'gallon's curse', and corkscrew grass that played havoc with sheep there.

Frank and Katie transferred their station into the hands of Miller and they left Debesa in 1969 to live in a statehouse in Rowan Street in Derby.



A segment of the audience at the talk

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