

# A Short History



*Nindooinbah Woolshed*

## Nindooinbah Woolshed

*Written by Jon McGhee*



# Short History

*Licence to Depature Crown Lands beyond the Limits of Location.*

No..... 662

Date ..... 14 June 1842

Name ..... Clement & Paul Lawless

Residence ..... New down on Albert Place

Situation ..... at \_\_\_\_\_ at \_\_\_\_\_

District..... of Moreton Bay

Period, viz... From 1 July 1842

To 30th June, 1843

AMOUNT..... £ 10

Original Licence to Depature  
for the Lawless Brothers, of  
Nindooindah, 1842

*When members of the Scenic Rim's Quarry Action Group sat around a table in 2012 to organise a fundraiser for the group, there was plenty of support for the idea of a fundraising art show in the evocative setting of the historic woolshed on Nindooinbah.*

*Then the questions started to flow – and no-one was sure about all of the answers. Who built the shed? Wasn't it restored sometime in the past ten years? Why aren't there any sheep on the property today?*

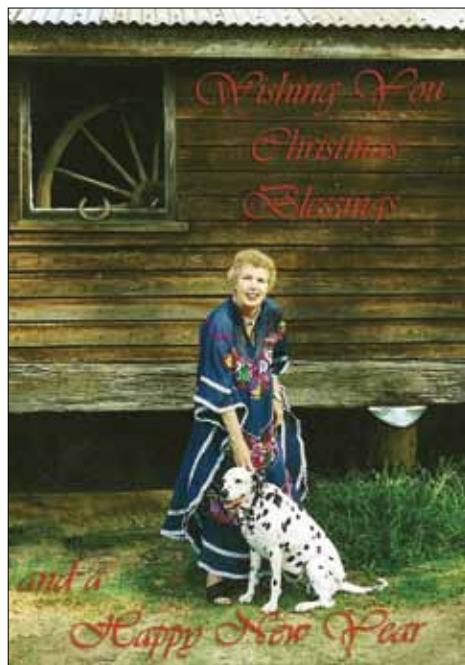
*As plans for the Nindooinbah Woolshed Art Exhibition evolved, so did the thought of producing a short history. This booklet is the result of hours of research and generous support from several members of the local community. It was written by Jon McGhee, whose family's historical association with Nindooinbah includes the Lawless, Compigne, Collins and de Burgh Persse families.*

*The Quarry Action Group stands for values which are intrinsic to Nindooinbah itself, including the preservation of environment, perseverance in achieving a goal, and respect for individual contributions to the whole.*

*We offer our sincere thanks to all those involved in the production of this booklet and to Euan and Kaye Murdoch for opening the woolshed to the public for the art exhibition.*

*We acknowledge all previous owners of Nindooinbah and the woolshed ("The Hut" to family and visitors through the 1900s), including Margaret de Burgh Persse Hockey whose great wish it was to see the old building restored, and who lived to see it happening, but died before it received acknowledgement in the Queensland Heritage Awards in 2004.*

*The history of the woolshed is not over, by any means. Further restoration work is planned by the present owners as part of continuing work on the property.*



Margaret's Christmas card 2003, at the woolshed with Belinda.



# Nindooinbah Woolshed

*Researched, written and compiled: Jon McGhee © 2012.*

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# A Remarkable Structure

*- from an era of pastoral optimism*

## THE NINDOOINBAH WOOLSHED (also Nindoomba, Nindooinbagh)



Nindooinbah Woolshed by Raoul Mellish. Oil on board. Painted early 1970s

The old woolshed at Nindooinbah is a remarkable structure, and its style, scale and robust construction harks back to an era of pastoral and agricultural optimism reminiscent of the earliest years of Queensland's history. It is one of the best known of its type in Queensland, so it is surprising that we know very little of its origins. It was built for an owner of Nindooinbah, Alfred William Compigne, sometime during the 1850s. Evidence suggests a construction date during the early to mid years of that decade. Most interesting though, is the fact that such a fine, substantial building was only ever used for its original function for little more than a decade.

## EARLY YEARS

The Lawless brothers were the first to take up the lease of Nindooabah, in 1842, in country newly opened up for pastoral pursuits. This country lay in districts surrounding the former penal settlement of Moreton Bay, comprising the most northerly portions of the Colony of New South Wales. The rural cash crop of the time was wool, a commodity urgently needed to maintain the production of textiles in huge woollen mills in England. The Lawless brothers left Nindooinbah in 1847, relocating to the Burnett District, and the lease was up for offer. Compigne decided to make a move.

To secure the lease of Nindooinbah, Compigne travelled from a property he was managing at Carcoar, in New South Wales, trekking north in August 1846 with a dray load of stores, some bullocks and a flock of 7,000 sheep. He stocked Nindooinbah with fine Saxon Merino sheep and quality horse breeding stock, both blood and draft. He then set about developing his plans for the expansion and improvement of the station. Official claim to the Lease of Crown Lands Beyond the Settled District for Nindooinbah station was not made until 1848. The Government Gazette for that year described the station as covering an estimated area of 16 miles by one mile average, with an estimated grazing capacity of 4,000 sheep, bounded in the east by the Albert River, the west by Jambroken and Birnam Range, to the north by Flagstone Creek and Mr Collins' run and to the south by scrub and unavailable country<sup>1</sup>.



Original lease document for Nindooinbah, 1842



Alfred William Compigne



*The Moreton Bay Courier*, 29.10.1853, p1

By 1852, Compigne had increased his landholdings substantially by incorporating the Dungogie and Murry Jerry runs<sup>2</sup>. His sheep flock now numbered 9,000 sheep<sup>3</sup>, increasing

1 The Sydney Morning Herald, Claims to Leases of Crown Land Beyond the Settled Districts (from the Government Gazette). 15.05.1848, p8.

2 Runs obtained by Tender, Moreton Bay District, 1850. QSA CLO/12 -15. Z337.

3 Index to Sheep and Cattle Mortgages, Book 8, QSA SCT/EM 1

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by another 1000 in 1853<sup>4</sup>. As well, in 1853, he married Jesse Lambert Collins, the daughter of Capt. Collins of nearby Telemon station, on the Logan River<sup>5</sup>. Six years later, Nindooinbah was carrying 11,000 head of sheep, 900 cattle and 200 horses on splendid country, incorporating Nindooinbah, Kerry and Sarabah stations<sup>6</sup>.

Compigne continued to invest heavily in Nindooinbah, adding a fine homestead estimated to have cost £2,000, along with many other improvements<sup>7</sup>, but all was not well. From his earliest days at Nindooinbah, Compigne encountered numerous setbacks in his attempts to depasture sheep. The local Aborigines were ferocious in their attempts to retain their lands. They attacked shepherds at isolated out-stations, and naturally, feasted on the sheep, and spooked and drove off large numbers of animals<sup>8</sup>. Workers were hard to find, and demanded high wages. The gold rush exacerbated this shortage of workers, forcing Compigne, during 1852, to work the station almost unaided<sup>9</sup>. But the greatest difficulty faced by Compigne was the unsuitable nature of the climate and countryside for the raising of sheep, and wool production. Disease took a huge toll on flock numbers. So serious were these difficulties that by 1862, Nindooinbah was destocked entirely of sheep, and the station turned over to 2,000 head of cattle and 300 horses. Consequently, the woolshed became redundant.<sup>10</sup>



Nindooinbah Homestead 1871, showing the portion built by Compigne. Image courtesy of State Library Queensland.

Compigne persisted with his dream for Nindooinbah, but had overcapitalized and was facing serious financial difficulties. In 1860, he wrote to the Surveyor General's Office,

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4 Index to Sheep and Cattle Mortgages, Book 9. QSA SCT/EM 1

5 *The Moreton Bay Courier*, 04.06.1853.

6 Index to Sheep and Cattle Mortgages, Book 15. QSA SCT/EM 1

7 Letter from W White to G Robinson, dated 18.02.1867. JOL OM 82-42

8 Minutes of Evidence from the Report from the Select Committee on the Native Police, Qld Legislative Assembly, 17.07.1861. QSA

9 Letter from W White to G Robinson, dated 27.10.1852. JOL OM 82-42.

10 Index to Sheep and Cattle Mortgages, Book 2. QSA SCT/EM 2.



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requesting that they transfer the lease of the Runs, Nindooinbah, Kerry and Sarabah to the Corporation of the Bank of Australasia, to whom he had transferred his interest.<sup>11</sup> In essence, this meant the ownership of Nindooinbah was being transferred to Robert Towns.

By this time Mrs Compigne's father, Old Capt Collins, whose health was failing, had moved in with the Compigne family at Nindooinbah. Towns was compassionate enough to allow Compigne and his wife to remain at the station while they were caring for the old man. But, within weeks of the death of Captain Collins, the Compignes were evicted. William White, of Beaudesert Station, in a letter written in October 1866, notes, "*you will be sorry to hear that our old friend Compigne, is smashed. Capt. Towns has had a mortgage over his property for some years and he has not paid interest for some time. He owed him £9,500 and Towns put him out lately*"<sup>12</sup>.

Nindooinbah was listed for sale in the Brisbane Courier 28<sup>th</sup> October, 1865. The advertisement listed and described the extraordinary improvements achieved during Compigne's brief, but dynamic years at Nindooinbah, including the station's distinguished shearing shed. Compigne may have been financially reckless, but his time at Nindooinbah typifies style, taste and an ambitious desire for the best.

## **THE WOOLSHED**

The design of the woolshed was typical for its day in layout, style and structure, but the quality of craftsmanship and finish indicate the unknown builder was skilled, competent and experienced.

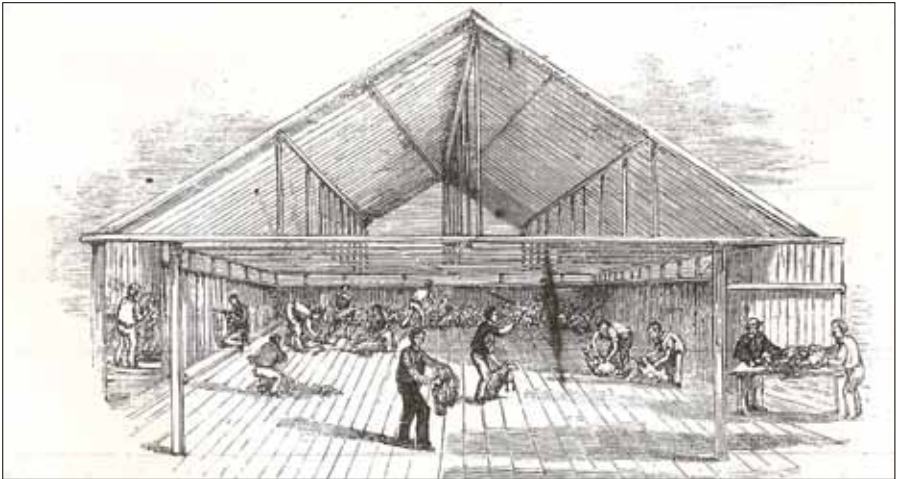
The best of building materials were on hand at Nindooinbah. Early official references describe the local country as a mix of alluvial plains and rocky ridges, with substantial stands of hardwood and red cedar. It was these timbers which were used to build the woolshed and had extraordinary advantages for the builder. Virtually growing on site, these timbers are characteristically long lasting, with the additional benefit of red cedar's resistance to white ants, which are prolific in the district. The woolshed was constructed on a flat above a precinct of slab huts, housing the owners and workers, built on a rise leading up from the lagoon. For the men working in the shed, proximity to the lagoon provided an additional bonus. Prior to shearing, the sheep were washed in the shallow, eastern end of the lagoon, the shepherds then driving the flocks up the hill to the holding pens fanning out from the northern end of the new shearing shed.

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11 Correspondence, Surveyor General's Office, letter dated 22.12.1860. QSA CLO/17, letter no. 4407.

12 Letter from W White to G Robinson, dated 30.10.1866. JOL OM82 -42.

## The Nindooinbah Woolshed



Although no early images of the Nindooinbah woolshed appear to have survived, this illustration in *The Illustrated Sydney News*, January 28, 1854, provides a glimpse of the workings which occurred in very similar structures.

In its original form, the woolshed was a low-slung, stumped building, incorporating a long central gallery topped with a high pitched roof, and skillions attached to the north, east and western sides, altogether forming a pleasant proportion and attractive roofline. The visual appeal of this roofline was enhanced with a beautifully constructed shingle roof, split from red cedar blocks. The interior was a large open area, broken only by the adze-squared hardwood posts, forming a colonnade flanking the central nave. Portions of walls in the northern section were open, but with rails to contain the large numbers of sheep herded up to the shed floor using wooden ramps from the network of holding pens below. After being shorn, the sheep exited the building from similar ramps on the opposite side. Sections of the floor were slatted to allow sheep manure to fall through onto the ground below. The remaining walls were clad with weatherboard.

The large earthen ramp on the southern end provided wide, easy access to the paddock outside, through a set of large doors. This allowed the bales of wool to be removed from the pressing floor, to be loaded onto drays for transportation to the nearest international port at Brisbane.

The construction of the woolshed certainly predates that of the homestead. It could have been built, and operational, by as early as October 1850, when William Pettigrew visited Nindooinbah with Dr Simpson, who was making a journey through the district to map and describe the boundaries of sheep runs of the Logan and Albert Rivers. Pettigrew describes in his diary a substantial woolpress which was operating at Nindooinbah at the time; *“Looked at woolpress. Tried strength of material IB. A piece of Iron bark 2 feet long 1 inch square, placed loosely on two props, broke under a weight of 900lbs placed in its*

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*middle 2<sup>nd</sup> An IB slab sapwood 8ft long + 1/7" X 2 1/4" over a peg 7" long 1" square at one foot from end carried 308lbs on other end, bent 1'5" Peg therefore carried 4312lbs but did not break*<sup>13</sup> Unfortunately he makes no reference to a woolshed.



Sketch from *The Illustrated Sydney News*, December 3, 1853, showing sheep washing methods similar to those employed at Nindooinbah.

### **THE WHITES AND THE COLLINS FAMILY**

In December, 1866, Robert Towns entered into a complicated contract to sell a portion of his interest in Nindooinbah to Ernest White, from the neighbouring Beaudesert Station. It involved the main block of 640 acres, the new homestead, £1000 worth of improvements (including the woolshed), 2,800 head of cattle and about 200 horses<sup>14</sup>. Two years later, the Whites applied successfully to the Minister for Lands to consolidate the runs of Nindooinbah, Kerry and Sarabah under the Crown Lands Act of 1868<sup>15</sup>. The newly amalgamated Nindooinbah had 50 acres of land under cultivation, 110 acres of first class pastoral land and 170 acres of second class pastoral land<sup>16</sup>, and 3,300 head of cattle<sup>17</sup>. The Whites combined Nindooinbah with other stations in their possession, which included Beaudesert, Tubber, Murry Jerry and Coombala.

In 1871, Towns transferred his remaining interest in Nindooinbah to the White family and it became the home of Ernest and Anna White.

The old slab huts which had sheltered the workers in earlier times were now uninhabitable. The need now was for improved accommodation for large numbers of workers involved

<sup>13</sup> Diary of William Pettigrew, October 1850. Royal Historical Society of Queensland.

<sup>14</sup> Letter from W White to G Robinson, dated 18.02.1867. JOL OM82-42.

<sup>15</sup> Letter, William Duckett White to the Minister for Lands, dated 02.05.1868. QSA LAN/A8, letter no 1997

<sup>16</sup> Lease of Pre-emptive Selections under the 14<sup>th</sup> section of the Crown Lands Alienation Act of 1868, Lease no. 3211. QSA.

<sup>17</sup> Index to Sheep and Cattle Mortgages, Book 7. QSA SCT/EM3.

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in the station's labour intensive agricultural and stock work. The large, uncluttered internal space of the old woolshed, with some modifications, provided the ideal solution. It is thought that renovations and minor remodelling undertaken to create worker's accommodation occurred during the 1870s. The area under the side skillions was converted into bedrooms, achieved by constructing internal walls along the length of the building, and divided crosswise with partitions. The builders, believed to be the Mylett brothers<sup>18</sup>, used red cedar, bead edged, T&G boards, attaching them in various horizontal and vertical configurations, thereby creating a pleasant unpredictability and rustic charm to the line of the internal wall cladding. A very picturesque kitchen, with stove recess, was added to the open portion on the western side. A bathroom was constructed by removing the slatted floor on the NE corner of the woolshed, then building a new floor at ground level and walling in the remaining open space. Access was through an internal door, with steps leading down to the bathing facilities, which included hot water produced in a robust woodchip heater.



Old Nindooinbah photograph titled: "Woolshed and Kiddies". Date unknown.

Within a decade Ernest White became quite ill, and retired to Cleveland to convalesce. A large clearing sale was held in 1881<sup>19</sup>, when the station was cleared entirely of stock and plant, and Nindooinbah was leased to the Collins family, from neighbouring Munday. It was during the Collins era that the old woolshed became known as "The Hut". It

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<sup>18</sup> Margaret Persse

<sup>19</sup> *The Moreton Bay Courier*, 20.04.1881, p4.

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was a curious title, apparently coined in the first half of the 1900s by the people who worked on the station, including those who lived in the old woolshed, although this epithet is typical of laconic Australian bush humour. The station was purchased outright in 1906 by William Collins, who died in 1908, leaving a widow Gwendoline, and a family of four very young children. Gwendoline continued to run Nindooinbah with the help of Managers. Eventually, her son John Collins came of age, and took control of the management of the station.

“The Hut” accommodated both married couples and single men. It had become a collection and distribution hub for the station, especially for the five working dairies, sensibly named using their numerical order. Outgoing mail and orders for supplies were delivered to the old woolshed daily, along with the cream from the dairies. Delivery was made using German wagons, or on horse drawn slides. The German wagons working from The Number 2 and Number 4 dairies were constructed by Ronnie Venz, who resided for some time in the Gate House. The wheels for these wagons were made by a wheelwright at Beenleigh. These wagons remained stored in the shed until modern times.



The woolshed prior to the demolition of the old kitchen. Image courtesy Margaret Hockey and Nathanael McGhee.

John Collins would load the cream, and mail and food orders onto his truck for delivery to the rail-head, and the Post Office and Enright’s Store at Beaudesert. For the journey home, the truck was loaded with empty cans, mail and food orders. On his return to the ‘Hut’, incoming mails, supplies and sundry items were arranged and placed into a series of large timber collection trays, ready for collection and delivery to each dairy. The sorting bench and pigeon holes were located just inside the main entrance, each clearly labelled with the relative dairy.

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By now, the woolshed was a part of an extensive precinct of similarly constructed buildings, including an ice house, engine room, killing yards, butcher shop, stables, tack room, black smith's shop and many others. "Arnold Venz was the butcher, and Ronnie Venz kept the motors running for the power plant, compressor and cold-room. Power for the main house was stored in batteries in a little building near the laundry, close to the homestead. It was a 110 volt plant"<sup>20</sup>.

John Collins' great pride, his Lasalle motor car (with a Pontiac body and a Cadillac V8 motor) was garaged in the woolshed, with various station workers living along side. The tale of its purchase is recalled by Rod Venz, from the story told to him by his father, Arnold. "My father was working with John Collins down near the airstrip when the salesman arrived with the car. He told the salesman that he wanted a car with a smooth ride and that if he could drive the car from one end of the airstrip to the other with a glass of water on the bonnet and not spill the water he would buy the car – he bought the car"<sup>21</sup>.

John Collins died in a plane crash at Eagle Farm early in WW2, and his family was devastated. Preparations for the war continued at Nindooinbah, including the construction of substantial air raid trenches. A large contingent of Australian soldiers camped on the flats near the lagoons, close to John Collins' airstrips and aeroplane hanger. American soldiers were billeted in the woolshed during the latter stages, and for a time shortly after the Second World War<sup>22</sup>.

The last people to live in "The Hut" were Joyce (nee Venz) and her husband Jimmy Green, who had been a pilot in the American Air Force. They left the old woolshed in 1947.



Nindooinbah woolshed. Image courtesy David Savage.



Nindooinbah woolshed. Image courtesy Margaret Hockey and Nathanael McGhee.

Nindooinbah eventually passed on to John Collins' sister Beryl, and her husband Rob de Burgh Persse, from Wyambyn, and later to their daughter Margaret. Margaret married Patrick Hockey, and the couple set about re-establishing old and forgotten sections of

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20 Information supplied by Rod and Lloyd Venz, July, 2012.

21 Information supplied by Rod Venz, July, 2012.

22 Information supplied by Rod and Lloyd Venz, July, 2012.

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the extensive gardens and re-establishing colour and light and energy in the homestead. Although conservation work was carried out on the house, the extensive collection of sheds and outbuildings gradually collapsed or were demolished. Widowed in 1992, Margaret continued with her 'welcome all' approach to visitors to the station, and no visit to Nindooinbah was ever complete without the obligatory excursion and tour of the old woolshed. This tradition was carried on until Margaret, in very ill health, could not summons the strength to get there.

By early 2000, the old woolshed was in a dilapidated state, forlorn looking and close to collapse. It was deteriorating at an alarming pace. The precarious circumstances of the old building were a cause of great anxiety for Margaret. Restorative work was out of the question, as she lacked both the means and resources to undertake even the most basic stabilization and bracing work. The loss of this most significant, historic building seemed inevitable. A seventh hour reprieve came in the form of a grant, approved by the Queensland Community Cultural Heritage Incentive Program to carry out basic structural renovations. David and Richard Savage were employed to level, brace and generally stabilize the woolshed. It was a remarkable feat in that it required digging by hand under the building, replacing rotten bearers, and removing stumps which in some cases were 5ft into the ground.



Nindooinbah woolshed. Image courtesy David Savage.

The old Nindooinbah wool shed was saved, and the Savages' work received an award for "outstanding carpentry work in the repair and stabilization of a significant traditional structure involving minimum replacement. The project was notable for materials and skills being sourced locally from the Nindooinbah property".<sup>23</sup> Margaret did not live to

<sup>23</sup> *Time and Place, Queensland's Cultural Heritage Newsletter*. Issue No 8, Winter 2004, p9.

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see or appreciate the award, but she knew, when she died in 2004, that her beloved old woolshed had been saved.

No history of any aspect of Nindooinbah can be complete without an acknowledgement of the contribution of the Venz and Navie families, for their extraordinary contribution towards the running of the station, and their dedication to the care and wellbeing of Margaret, and her family. Their association continued, uninterrupted, for over 70 years.

### **TODAY**

The Murdoch family purchased Nindooinbah, at auction, in May 2005<sup>24</sup>. The homestead, once again a family home, underwent extensive restoration work under the expert management of local builder, Rod Andersen. Rod is also responsible for upgrading facilities at the shed, including the installation of new lighting and security, and the addition of a new bathroom<sup>25</sup>.

Once again, today, the original function of the Nindooinbah woolshed has been creatively adapted. This time, it is to be used as an exhibition space. But, even in 2012, after almost 160 years, people attending this exhibition will share some common time with those men shearing, tarring, classing, pressing and loading bales back in the 1850s. Look carefully and distinctive features of the original building are evident. The slatted floor, the red cedar shingles, the adzed red cedar posts and the care and attention that went into its construction can still be appreciated. But most likely, it will be the people crowding into the shed, the chatter, the energy and the pleasure of experiencing this space which will hark back to its very first days.

Nindooinbah Woolshed 2012. Image courtesy Susan Keaveny.



<sup>24</sup> *Beaudesert Times*, 01.06.2005, p1.

<sup>25</sup> Information supplied by Rod Andersen., July, 2012.





2012. Image Susan Keaveny

