The Attack at Angkwerl (Anna’s Reservoir)
August 1884
This information was collated by Teresa McCarthy for the Northern Territory Library Anmatyerr community history project 2008.
Angkwerl or Anna’s Reservoir as it is known in English is an important water source situated on Aileron Station. Angkwerl was a key water source to John MacDouall Stuart during his exploration trips across Australia. It was Stuart who gave Angkwerl its English name ‘Anna’s Reservoir’. Stuart named it after the youngest daughter of Mr James Chambers, a sponsor of Stuart’s exploration trips. Angkwerl was also an important water source to those constructing the Overland Telegraph line, pastoralists and travellers. Today Anna’s Reservoir is a Conservation Reserve and tourist attraction and remains an important site to Anmatyerr people (info from Parks and Wildlife Service Fact Sheet).

A photograph of a man from Anna’s Reservoir taken by Ethnologist Frank Gillen. Image from the South Australian Museum (AA108_AlbumAp69-photo2).
In 1884 the Barrow Creek Pastoral Company established a vast cattle station of approximately 51,800 square kilometers. The station was managed by William Benstead and the homestead was built at Angkwerl (Anna's Reservoir) (information from Parks and Wildlife fact sheet).

The Attacks at Angkwerl (Anna’s Reservoir) - August 1884

The burning of the homestead and killing of two station workers, Harry Figg (head stockman) and Thomas Coombes (cook), at Angkwerl (Anna’s Reservoir) by Anmatyerr people in August 1884 is an event that resulted in the killing of four Aboriginal men (Clubfoot, Slim Jim, Jimmy Mullins and Boko) during the investigation into the killings. During the attack the thatched roof of the house was set alight, Coombes ran out of the building to escape the flames and was speared. Harry Figg was speared in the shoulder while escaping the flames and was able to scare off the attackers with his revolver. Figg managed to escape and get help taking Coombes with him to the stock camp 50 km away were the rest of the stations workers were. Figg and Coombes eventually died from wounds and burns suffered during the attack (Kimber, 1991:11).

‘[To] his (Figg) astonishment the old cook crawled out from his room, covered in spear wounds. [He was also burnt, but had saved himself by crawling beneath his bullock hide bed]. [The] very weak stockman managed to get a horse and put it in the cart and drive the cook and himself to the [stock camp] (a statement by Eylmann in Kimber, 1991: 11).

Although the exact reason/s for the attack will never be known, historians have proposed a number of possible reasons. Competition over the highly valued water source at Angkwerl (Anna’s Reservoir) and increased encroachment on Aboriginal land would have undoubtably been a cause of conflict between Aborigines and pastoralists. However, in 1896 (12 years after the attack) Erhard Eylmann documented that the attack was in retaliation to the molestation of a young Aboriginal girl by a station worker or a number of station workers (Kimber, 1990: 11).

The Investigation into the Attack by Mounted Constable William Willshire

Under the leadership of Constable Willshire a police party (including four Aboriginal trackers) set out to investigate the attack and arrest those responsible. To follow are pages from Willshire’s report, where he identifies those who were killed. Willshire’s complete report can be viewed on the Anmatyerr Angkety database.
 Mounted Constable Willshire’s Police Investigation Report
The follow passages are excerpts from Willshires report dated 17th September 1884 to the Inspector of Police in Port Augusta, and give an insight into the investigation of the attack at Anna’s Reservoir.

August 11th 1884 – Constable Willshire travels to Anna’s Reservoir to investigate

‘In the Station at the time were two men named Harry Figg and Thomas Coombes who suffered severely from open wounds and burns at this outrage. There were about 150 full grown men and as Figg opened the door to come out the burning roof then falling on him. The natives stood opposite the door with their spears ready to throw them. Figg was kept in this burning house until he could no longer stand it as he then rushed outside and fired a few shots from his revolver which frightened the cowards away a short distance. Next he found Coombs covered in blood and the Natives supposed left for dead. Figg then walked a mile and found an old mare and put her in a (unreadable) and took his disabled comrade out 30 miles west to where some other men belonging to the Station were camped My party formed by your instructions arrived at the station and commenced preparing to go out and try and arrest the principle offender’.
We came upon a large camp the natives had just left. We found five puppies and any amount of weapons we burned and (unreadable) them all up and killed the dogs watered our horses at a rockhole and proceeded on tracks knowing that they were not far off now, that night we discovered them camped and 3am saddled up quietly kept no fire that night and no talking but led the horses up to food of (unreadable) ready to attack camp at daylight we made a rush full gallop up some hills and observed Natives running up with weapons in hand a bigger adjoining hill. Price [?] and I to the front soon had 6 bailed up and our trackers telling them to drop their spears but they said they would not an sent about a dozen 10 feet [?] spears whizzing at us (unreadable) they were climbing on big rocks and I dismounted with a pair of handcuffs in my hand and went straight for Clubfoot who turned exactly and struck me with his boomerang he then jumped on some rocks and was escaping when a bullet from a (unreadable) rifle brought him to the ground after the affray was over I called the men together and enquired what each had done one of the trackers told me he had shot Slim Jim dead this is good news to me knowing that Slim Jim was the leader of the burning of the Station and also the principle ring leader of cattle killing [and] also the Native who stood throwing spears at Figg when he was burned alive in this attack some bucks got away without being wounded.

August 18th 1884  (approximate date)

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September 5th – 7th 1884

On page 29 of his report Willshire reports the killing of Aboriginal men Jimmy Mullin and Boko (wanted for cattle killing).

‘...on the 5th Sept we saw a fat cow just killed with thirty three mulga spears in her some of them 10 feet long soon after this we caught five natives red handed killing a fat beast as soon as they saw us they ran through the mulga scrub towards Reynolds Range we took to them as fast as we could through mulga scrub but they gained the ranges on this occasion. The notorious cattle killer Jimmy Mullin was brought down by a Spencer rifle the rest (unreadable) escaped the same fate in their camp we found fresh meat and heads and bones of over a dozen beast on the 7th Sept another batch of niggers was seen amongst them ‘Boko’ for whom I held a warrant my tracker tried hard to take this fellow alive but I think ‘Boko’ could handle his waddy too well when I left the native I was after I galloped to my tracker and saw ‘Boko’ making his escape the tracker was in a terrible rage at being got at by a wild nigger (unreadable) he levelled his rifle and Mr Boko came toppling down from rock to rock and landed at the trackers feet. The Lubras knew that white men would shoot them so they make it their business to get in front of your horses with yam sticks or else right in front of the nigger you are having to get therefore a man now and then effects his escape. I then returned to Bensteads’ camp and found poor old Coombs very little better he is covered all over with spear wounds …’ Figg was burned very severely about his head ... but is improving fast’.
‘... native both at Anna’s Reservoir and Owen Springs are getting worse instead of better in my opinion they don’t care about death ...’. ‘I worked 30 days at the Anna’s Reservoir Station and believe now that party and (unreadable) have done some good which ought to stop cattle killing for a time anyhow’.
Blackfellows Bones Hill – Massacre Site

Blackfellows Bones Hill is, east of Angkwerl (Anna’s Reservoir), is believed by some to be a site where numerous Aboriginal people were killed in reprisal attacks after the attacks at Angkwerl (Anna’s Reservoir). This site is undoubtedly a site where numerous Aboriginal people were killed. Violence against Aboriginal people in the frontier was common as Aboriginal people fought against the invasion of their lands. However, there is no evidence currently available that confirms or denies that those killed at Blackfellows Bones Hill were killed in retaliation to the attack at Angkwerl (Anna’s Reservoir).
References

Parks and Wildlife Service of the Northern Territory Fact Sheet on Annas Reservoir Conservation Reserve.

Judy Robinson ‘Bushman of the Red Heart: Central Australian Cameleer and Explorer Ben Nicker 1908 – 1941’.
