KATHERINE'S EARLIER DAYS
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Katherine's beginnings came with the Overland Telegraph Line as it crossed the river approximately four kilometres upstream from the present town site of Katherine. It was at the good crossing, where the north-south road crossed the Katherine River, that the settlement of Katherine began to grow. The site in earlier days was referred to as 'The Katherine' or 'Kathryn'. The OT Depot and linesman's cottage were built, a police presence established in 1886 and Barney Murphy opened his hotel and store.

He advertised in the *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, the newspaper of the time, that he had opened the Sportman's Hotel and Pioneer Cash Store and that terms were strictly cash.

The railway had been extended south from Pine Creek in 1917 and stopped on the north bank of the Katherine River, while the approaches and the high level bridge were constructed. As a result of that, between 1917 and 1919, the town of Emungalan came into existence. Whereas Katherine owed its establishment to the OT Line and the good river crossing, Emungalan developed and survived as a result of the railway. There have been many small settlements which have sprung up all over the Territory, which owed their beginnings to the railway, OT Line, mining or some other venture, which, once ceased, so did the settlement. At the original site of Katherine, a punt was used to cross the river and people then made their way across country to Emungalan, where they connected with the train for Darwin.

In January 1926 the first train crossed the Katherine River bridge and because work associated with the bridge was still being completed, Emungalan continued to operate until 1927.

The present township of Katherine was surveyed in 1926 by John Power and in his report of April 1926 he stated in part that, '... there are no stones outcropping or lying about the surface, such as are to be seen on the site of Emungalan ... The surface of the ground has a gentle slope towards the South-East, which should render drainage fairly easy'.

A notice appeared in the *Northern Territory Times & Gazette* on 30 July 1926, stating that land was available for leasing under the provisions of Crown Land Ordinance 1924-1925. The Auction was held on 20 August 1926, the Auctioneer being Mr T J Morgan, then Chairman of the Land Board and assisting him was Mr Wynne Williams.

The Crown Land Ordinance at that time stated that all Town Lands must be offered for sale by public auction to the highest bidder. The Auction though wasn't without some local drama and colour. The European settlers decided amongst themselves not to bid against each other and so obtain the blocks cheaply. When the sale commenced, the Chinese, who had not been considered in the arrangement, commenced bidding and so the prices went up. The Chinese had in fact obtained a number of the best frontage blocks before the arrangement fell through and the whites then proceeded to bid against the Chinese in order to obtain blocks.

Many of the Europeans complained later about what happened and correspondence by the Lands & Surveys Department states, 'There is, and can be, no doubt that there has been a misunderstanding on part of some of the purchasers. But that misunderstanding is one, apparently, of their making: and for which the Crown is in no way responsible and in no way to blame'.

Many continued to complain and requested lower or reduced rental, but to no avail. Of the sixty-eight blocks offered at Auction, fifty-three were sold, and later eight of those were transferred by the original purchasers, and another two were forfeited.
THE NORTHERN TERRITORY OF AUSTRALIA.

PLAN OF ALLOTMENTS

TOWNSHIP OF KATHERINE

Available as Leases of Town Lands.

(Courtesy of the Northern Territory Archives Services)  c.1926
The successful bidders for Katherine's new main street were:

Block 1. Mr E H Davis, who was a teamster and who held a miner's right, transferred the block to Mr John J Roney within days of the Auction. A dwelling was already on the block at the time of Auction and it comprised of three rooms and a detached kitchen. The house was constructed of bark and bamboo on a cypress frame. There was also a goat yard and the block was partially fenced. It was described as '...not a well built place, just an ordinary bush structure'. Even so, the improvements were valued at £150.¹

Block 2. Mr John J Roney also took up this block. In fact he held blocks 1, 2 and 38 so that all of his boundaries touched. He was a drover, and married with three children. One of his sons, Jack, still lives in Katherine today.

Block 3. This block was taken up by Chin Loong Tang, who was married, with two children at the time, one of whom was born at Emungalan. Mrs Chin Loong Tang's mother was with them and she would perhaps be better known to the locals of Darwin as Granny Lum Loy. Chin Loong Tang was an excellent builder, and with the help of his family, built a corrugated iron structure, supported by cypress pine uprights. He ran his tailors and mixed business from the store. He also kept an excellent vegetable garden at the back of the block and the family lived there until they moved to Darwin around 1932.

Block 4. That was taken by Lee Ying who had a green-grocery store in Darwin.

Block 5. This block was one of the blocks taken up by Mr George Lim, who was a tailor. He was married with three children at the time, two of whom were born at Pine Creek and one at Emungalan. George ran his tailors, bakery and store all from the one building. The family resided at the back of the shop until they departed for Darwin in 1938. One of George Lim's sons is now Darwin's Lord Mayor.

Block 6. Wing Chong Loong was a Darwin firm of tailors and storekeepers, who had also had a business at Emungalan.

Block 7. Mr H W Barratt took up this block and later transferred it to Mook Sang, another tailor and storekeeper.

Block 8. This block was taken up by Messrs James W McAdam and Herbert Gill, who were previously pack-horse mailmen. Their purpose for wanting the block was to re-establish their hotel from the crossing. It was decided by the Home and Territories Department in 1925 that '...McAdam & Gill should have preference for one hotel to be granted on the new site of the township to be formed on the south side of the Katherine River, and that until there is considerable development at the new Townsite, no further licences should be granted to any applicants'. With the erection of their new premises, and the transferring of the licence in January 1927. Katherine's first hotel, The Sportsman's Arms opened for business.

Block 9. Messrs McAdam & Gill also took over this block and erected a substantial looking building, from where they ran a store. The two businesses complimented each other. With the compliance of building requirements, the men were granted freehold on both blocks.

Block 10. It was Messrs Rundle & Bernhard who took up this block and they transferred it to Wah Sing, who was a storekeeper. They ended up in some trouble over the transfer, as they were being pressured for back rent on the land and they did not advise that they had sold to Wah Sing until 5 September 1932. It was not a legal transfer and so no title was issued and the block was gazetted for sale again, in June 1936.

¹ $300 approx
Block 13. This block was reserved for the Post Office and all facilities were transferred from Emungalan in June 1927.

Blocks 14 and 15. Mr Timothy O'Shea purchased both of these blocks and was granted freehold on compliance of the building requirements. O'Shea was an Irishman, married with six daughters, and had been running his business at Emungalan under a Billiard Licence. On these two blocks he built the Railway Hotel, which he ran with the help of his six daughters, and his wife Catherine, who held the Licence.

Block 16. This block was purchased by Messrs Reuben R Rundle and John W Bernhard. Rundle and his brother reputedly had a store in Darwin, which was destroyed in the 1897 cyclone. He also had been managing a store in Pine Creek, prior to going to Emungalan. Bernhard had been fencing on VRD and had worked his horses with scoops on the railway line prior to arriving at Emungalan, where he ran a boarding house with his wife Katherine. From block 16 they ran what could be considered Katherine's main store. As they were not in residence in their store until March 1927, they were not granted freehold on their lease until March 1928. Rundle and Bernhard had a dispute, so Bernhard and his wife went to the other end of town and took over McAdam & Gill's hotel and store. Reuben (known to all as Charlie) continued to operate the store alone, supporting many of the locals. Many of the peanut farmers and pastoralists in the area would have found it hard to survive, much less succeed, without the credit on supplies given to them by Charlie Rundle.

Block 17. This block went to Wing Chong Loong, who also held block 6.

Several blocks were forfeited for non-payment of rents and were auctioned again in the later years. Several blocks were set aside for public purposes. The police station at the old crossing remained operational until the new one was built on block 26 in 1928. It was to remain there until the new station was erected on block 54 — where the station horse paddock had once been — on the opposite corner, in 1959.

Obviously no thought was given to street names, for the main street was in fact the main north-south highway. The other streets were imaginatively called First, Second, Third and Fourth Streets.

People living in the area included Mrs Amy Conway on block 27, Mr and Mrs Cox on block 39 and William Bray, a blacksmith, who held block 115. It is interesting to note that when Bray chose his block, it was ‘...owing to the advantage of the River Front and Road Corner'. In fact that area has changed slightly and Third Street does not go through, so if Mr Bray was alive today, he would not have his corner block.

It was on block 11 that the town’s people, through donations and voluntary work, built the Public Hall in 1928. It was decided in December 1930 to make the block a recreational reserve and as a result, a Board of Trustees had to be established.

Blocks 83, 84 and 85 were reserved for the school, which often had great difficulty in staying open. The school continued to operate at Emungalan until the building was removed and re-established at the new Katherine township. It was decided to take advantage of the move and effect the necessary additions to the teacher’s residence.

It appears as though the school operated until 1930, when the school teacher was transferred to Pine Creek. The locals were very upset and a Reverend H Griffiths was responsible for the correspondence between the town’s people and Darwin. He should be commended for his perseverance, for it was quite obvious that matters relevant to Katherine were getting no one’s attention in Darwin. It was also obvious that due to a lack of buildings, it was not possible to
have a doctor and a hospital operating in the town if there was a teacher and a school functioning. The hall therefore was used as a school or hospital at different times. The teacher's residence also doubled as the doctor's residence, and so the people always missed out on someone until the hospital was built in the mid-thirties.

Block 46 was allocated to the Methodist Church and because their Minister lived there when he was in town, the locals referred to it as the Parsonage. The house was often rented out when it was vacant. In January 1935, the Education Department in Darwin was advised that the school and quarters had been vacated by the Medical Services Branch. The hospital had been completed and they no longer required the buildings. Miss Elliott, the school teacher, who had been living at the Parsonage, then moved to the teacher's quarters.

Although the population of the town was averaged at 150 at that time, it was made up of many races. The Government Resident's report for the year ended June 1937 shows 22 children were enrolled at school, the break up being: '4 British, 1 Russian, 11 Chinese, 1 Quadroon, 3 half-caste, 2 Indian Aboriginal'.

It was close to the hospital that Katherine's airport was constructed. The land was cleared originally in 1919 and during 1933/1934 further clearing, extensions and levelling were undertaken. The airstrip was far from satisfactory, but the cost factor appears to have been the main reason for not re-allocating to another area. It was on the morning of 8 January 1939 that the Guinea Airways aircraft named Koranga, registration VH-ABI, crashed into the Katherine River and all on board were killed. The three crew and one passenger are now acknowledged in Katherine through street names.

Once the railway extended further south, the railway workers left the area and Mataranka became established, there seems to have been no reason for Katherine to grow. It was still the crossroads for all travellers but most pastoralists obtained their stores through some other outlet, not through Katherine. The only industry was peanut farming.

Mr H K G Mair who was the Superintendent of Agriculture, took up his appointment at the Botanic Gardens in Darwin late in 1936. In 1937 the estimated crop of peanuts in the Katherine area was 250 tons, allowing an average of 20 bags to the acre. Mair tried every avenue in an effort to obtain markets for the Territory peanut crop. He frequently did trips to the Katherine and Daly River farms, and seemed genuinely interested, both personally and professionally, in the lives of the farmers. He stated that there were seventeen peanut growers at Katherine in 1938 and these included, Sergeeff, Ivanetz, Slinko, Kanevsky, Zoueff, Gorrie, Kriloff, Fomin and De Julia. Many Russians who had left the turmoil in their own country had made their homes on the Katherine River.

Peanuts suggested for use on the Katherine River farms included a number of varieties from the Phillipines and Southern Rhodesia. The most successful appears to have been Virginia Bunch. Nigel Bruce was a peanut farmer who had been on the Katherine River for quite a few years. He had a Benthal peanut thrasher which he used to thrash peanuts for the farmers for a fee.

Mr Mair tried desperately to obtain market outlets to move the Territory peanut crop each year. However, these did not materialise, for Kingaroy in Queensland had moved to tie up all the outlets, so there were no avenues left for the Territory farmers. The practical interest of Mr Mair was such a contrast to the apparent indifference the town and most of its people received from other sources.

There were numerous inquiries as to the feasibility of growing cotton on the Katherine River. Whilst all replies to letters stated that it was being looked into, there does not appear to have

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1 — 250 tonnes  
2 — 0.405 ha
been anything constructive done about it.

The Progress Association was formed on 25 March 1937 and meetings were held in the Public Hall. The problems the Association tackled included the future use and maintenance of the Hall and communications with the outside world. There was much correspondence between the Progress Association and the Administrator in Darwin, requesting a public phone booth, better telephone communications, i.e. a trunk line, and more air mail and passenger air services. None of these requests were treated very seriously.

The town at the time had 2 hotels, 2 stores, numerous Chinese traders, and the store at the old crossing still traded with a ‘Gallon Licence’. Mr and Mrs Frederick Knott lived there and ran the store at the old crossing for many years. The store operated with a ‘Gallon Licence’ until 1949. The area is known locally as Knott’s Crossing.

Darwin was bombed for the first time on 19 February 1942, and on 22 March Katherine was bombed in the area of Knott’s Crossing. One Aboriginal was killed and there was minor damage to the airport. All women and children were evacuated and although some of the men remained in town, nothing was done without the consent of the Army and all stores were issued with ration cards.

Many old timers of Katherine feel that the best thing that ever happened to Katherine was the Second World War. With it came troops and the building of good connecting roads. A weir and concrete bridge was constructed over the sandy, low level crossing, and the locals have ever since enjoyed the shady swimming and picnic area, a legacy of the War years.

At the end of the War there was much rebuilding and the Territory generally did not appear to be as ‘forgotten’ as it was prior to the War. Many of the soldiers returned and settled on the Katherine River. One old resident of Katherine stated, ‘Katherine and its people were a forgotten lot until the War and the Yanks arrived’.

The end of the War saw a time of optimism and growth in the town. The resumption of Civil Administration took place initially during 1945, and continued into 1946.

It was decided at an interdepartmental conference held in Melbourne in February 1945, that the lifting of Emergency Control Regulations should take place in two stages. The first was an area south of Pine Creek and the second would be north of Pine Creek. Many civilians, some of whom had been forced to evacuate, were eager to return. Many soldiers liked the area, and were keen to take up residence once they were demobbed. They were armed with enthusiasm and full of ideas to start new business ventures. Much of this was curbed by the Army and ‘National Security’ was the over-used excuse for stopping progress or not making a decision on something. One couldn’t help but question the decision to refuse a couple, who had arrived with a truck load of furniture, permission to open a cafe, on the grounds that is was a threat to National Security.

The whole of the area from the train line to the power house was full of army camps. There were numerous disposal sales and after suffering a shortage of building materials for years, the locals now had a flood of corrugated iron and Sidney Williams huts to use in construction.

Plans were also made for a new town. The area west of the train line, going almost as far as the power house, was to be residential, with provision made for a new shopping complex. The locals were outspoken regarding the lack of consultation. They resented people in other places planning a new town, and making decisions as to where they would live, without even discussing the issue with them.
A Departmental letter sent to Canberra in September 1944, stated that, 'The town at present, with the exception of the Police Station and school, is a collection of shanties and humpies which include the two previous hotels, and all these should be abolished'. The old Katherine town area was then to be made into an industrial area. In August 1945, the Chief Surveyor and a Mr Rudduck, from the Department of Post-War Reconstruction, visited Katherine with the view to replanning. The Government was slow to have the blocks surveyed, the debate continued, and although the proposed planning was spread from 1944 to 1948, the plan never did go through.

The Army vacated the school buildings and after some repairs and renovations the school reopened on 17 August 1945. By 1947 there were 32 school children in attendance and the population of the town was 371. The hospital returned to civilian control on 30 June 1946.

A matter which was very significant to Katherine's growth in the eyes of the Commonwealth Government was the continuation of the meatworks. The Army had an abattoir and freezing chambers, a 30 000 bird poultry farm, and a major camp on Manbulloo Station, several kilometres west of Katherine. Construction had also begun in March 1945 for a by-products plant adjacent to the meatworks, but this was eventually abandoned, due to cost factors.

With the departure of the Army becoming imminent, early in 1946 a concerted effort was made by the Government to find someone capable of taking over and running the meatworks. Many local pastoralists were contacted, but it was Bovril Australian Estates Limited who ultimately purchased the 'Manbulloo plant and equipment for £10,000' in April 1947. They then leased 2 260 acres of land close to the racecourse area and began erecting the 'Bovril Meat Extraction Plant'. The project stopped and started several times and was finally abandoned on 3 January 1951.

To this day, the enormous concrete shell still stands, only now it houses a multitude of trades, including a panel beating shop, a mechanic, and a furniture factory. Also still standing a short distance up the road, are the staff quarters and engineer's house which were erected by Bovril and which are now part of a caravan park.

Unfortunately for the town, much of the proposed expansion by the Government hinged on the completion of the Plant, and the growth in population and trade it would bring.

Farming revived slightly on the River, after the Army departed. In many cases they had taken over the farms and as the owners returned, new crops were grown. CSIRO became established near the power house on what had been an Army farm. Bert Nixon, who had done well during the War, selling vegetables to the Army, continued to do so, as did Ted Fuller, who also supplied the town with beef. Some of the farmers started growing peanuts again, and Jimmy Zimmin grew pearl millet and broom millet. John Ivanetz is credited as being the first person to grow Bowen Mangoes on the River and Bert Nixon who started the hay business in the area, began pasture improvements in 1945. Tom Ronan, who had Springvale Station, had a large herd of goats, and he with his children delivered goats' milk to the locals, serving it in billy cans.

Once again the old Hall came into use. There was a shortage of buildings, as had happened many years earlier, and the Municipal Officer, Charles Fuller, had his office there. In the end, the building was almost falling down around his ears, but no one would allocate funds for repair work.

In his recent work, 'Government and the Community in Katherine', Dr John Lea stated that, 'Between 1953 and 1960 Katherine doubled its population and emerged from being a small railway town and pastoral centre to a recognised central place on the Stuart Highway south of
Darwin, with a diversifying economy.'

A look at Katherine's main street, for a talk similar to this in 1982, showed that both sides of the street had been developed in the intervening years. A comparison of the establishments in the main street showed that there were no Chinese traders left, yet six of the original fourteen blocks were held by people of Oriental descent. Of all other business houses which operated, only the two hotels and two stores remained in the same concept, these all having changed hands numerous times over the years.

A look in 1988 shows that the main street is landscaped and attractive. But by now Rundle's old store has gone. In July 1987 progress came to Katherine with a bang, with the opening of Woolworths. In my opinion, with the opening of that shopping complex and the demolition of the old store for a car park, Katherine's earlier days are gone forever.