An introduction to the Fleming ruins

A brief history of James Fleming and Michael Fleming on Douglas and Oolloo stations

James Fleming was born in Inverell NSW in 1878 and his brother Michael in 1879. On coming to the Northern Territory both men worked on the Overland Telegraph Line. They had spent many years in the Victoria River region before moving to the Douglas region and applying for the Pastoral Permits.

James Fleming applied for land in the Douglas Daly region in 1916 and at that time he was described as being single, 58 years old and had spent 40 years in the pastoral industry. He was granted land in 1917. James Fleming and his brother Michael held adjoining blocks of land and it appears that they jointly shared some of the Pastoral Permits.

They were articulate and most of the correspondence between them and Lands Department in Darwin went through ‘the Officer in Charge of Police’ at Brocks Creek, that obviously being the closest largest settlement at that time.

During October 1919 James Fleming ordered 2 ton of fencing wire to erect a horse paddock. He stated that he had lost ‘a number of horses each Wet season, taken by alligators’.

He had a number of creeks and springs across his land, but the main source of water came from the Daly River. Every Wet season part of his land was flooded preventing all access to the area.

Leased in 1920 James Fleming held Pastoral Leases (PL) 2267, 2279, and 2414 covering 908 square miles for a total rental of £121-8-6 ($242.85). Although in the original application James applied for ‘Ulooloo’ station, the spelling of the name eventually became Oolloo.

He was struggling to meet the rent payments on the three leases and so transferred one block to his brother. Under the new ordinance new Pastoral Lease 149N at 2 shillings and 6 pence (26 cents) per square mile rental was issued. He lived in a one-room dwelling constructed of bush timber and iron and the separate kitchen was also constructed of bush timber and iron. The two sheds were constructed of bush timber with bark roofing.

On 8 August 1927 he wrote to Lands Department to say that he had sold two small lots of bullocks for £181 ($362) and £60 ($120). He had further bullocks for sale, but no market. He asked for an extension of time to pay the rent payments. His brand was 279.

Approval to transfer a Pastoral Lease 2279, which included hot springs, from James to Michael Fleming was approved by Lands on 1 August 1922. Later, Mick Fleming surrendered it, along with other leases and, under the new ordinance, new Pastoral Lease 103N, covering 581 square miles commenced on 2 December 1924. He called the lease Douglas station.
Aboriginal people worked on both stations but how many and for how long is not known. James Fleming had a daughter Elsie, to an Aboriginal woman on Douglas station. She later married Peter Talbot in Darwin.

Both men wrote regularly to Lands Department stating that although they had stock, there were no markets and therefore they had a problem paying their rents.

James Fleming died on 17 November 1929 and was buried the following day in the Gardens Cemetery, Darwin. Michael was the Executor of his brother’s estate. James Fleming’s daughter Elsie received £100 ($200) from his estate. It was to be paid to the Reverend Mother at the Darwin Convent to be held in trust for her and a further £100 ($200) was for the Convent.

James had 637 head of stock and 68 horses at the time of his death. All saddler yards and equipment were old and in poor condition.

Mick Fleming then attempted to sell off some of the land to near neighbours. No rent was paid on Oolloo station from 1930 and by 1934, £391-16-4 ($783.64) owed. In November 1930 Mick Fleming wrote to Lands Department advising that there was no market for his stock, he owed money to others apart from Lands Department and he resented being harassed and threatened with forfeiture of land. The attached three page letter written by M J Fleming on 17 November 1930 explains his situation and his feelings well.

Fleming made good use of the fresh water in the creek and the many sink holes near the spring. One of the sink holes had rocky edges down the sides making it look like a well. He also had a spring reasonably close to the house. By using man-made catchments between the spring and the creek he was able to catch and hold water during the Wet season and while the spring was running. It also appears that he used a hydraulic ram as part of his watering system. He had about 40 acres under cultivation and grew corn and fruit trees among other things.

It appears that the Douglas station homestead was constructed on stone, with some timber uprights and what other building materials were used is not known. Remaining timber posts indicated that there was an entryway or small verandah on which Japanese honey-suckle grew.

Although there is no archival evidence, there is visible evidence of a race track Michael Fleming built not far from his homestead site. He had a race horse named Black Douglas. It is also possible that Tom Liddy, or members of his family, used the track in later years. Wherever Tom lived he always created a race track to work his horses. If he was droving and happened to be in an area where there was a race meeting being held, he then pulled horses out of the camp and raced them.

During 1935 a further 200 miles was surrendered from each station. Fleming requested detailed information from the Lands Department about his block in 1937. He stated that he could be giving evidence at the ‘Fletcher Payne Commission’ and as all of his records had been lost in floods in March, he required new documents.

By that time Fleming was well in his seventies and not a well man. In 1938 Arthur Hugh Wilson and his family moved onto Douglas station with Mick. Arthur Wilson had been in the 1st Australian Light Horse and 2nd Light Horse Brigade on Gallipoli and Palestine. Arthur had been a Vestey’s manager and had extensive experience with cattle and the
land. They entered into a ‘gentleman’s agreement’ in relation to the station. Lands Department were not helpful to Arthur as substantial rates were outstanding on the leases, they felt that that was Fleming’s personal business and they were concerned about the extent of Wilson’s personal finances.6

Fleming was almost blind when he died on 11th June 1939. He was buried on Douglas station. Arthur Wilson was the executor of the will.7 He stated in correspondence that Mick Fleming had ‘willed’ him both stations. In correspondence Wilson makes reference to the money to be paid to Elsie Fleming and the Convent in Darwin. Apparently it was not paid after James Fleming’s death.

Wilson was in the same situation as the Fleming men had been earlier. He sold 154 head to Vesteys and 216 head to local butchers, but there were no markets for his stock. In August 1940 he advertised the property for sale and received no offers.

In July 1941 just as war was getting close to Northern Australia’s shores, the Administrator Mr Abbott said ‘Mr Wilson impresses me as making a very good fight against tremendous odds’.

A month later, in August 1941, Wilson found a buyer in Messrs Cyrus (Mick) William Liddy and Thomas Andrew Liddy who purchased both stations.8

Tom Liddy asked to have everything surveyed so that he would know exactly where his boundaries were, but was told that Lands Department was short of Surveyors. Tom discovered that his neighbours were mustering on his land and helping themselves to his cattle. He was not happy.

A year later Mick Liddy requested that the stations be transferred to Thomas Andrew Liddy and Sons. The Douglas station brand was $\text{TZM}$ and the Oolloo station brand was $\text{CTF}$. The Liddy family homestead was built near Bull Creek on Oolloo station. Tom Liddy died on 7 March 1965 aged 73 years.9

Pearl Ogden
Darwin. October 2011

Please Note:
This is not a complete history of Oolloo and Douglas stations. It is recommended that for a full history Pastoral Lease file 149N and 103N should be researched. Personal research files held by Pearl Ogden along with conversations with Paddy Liddy and Reg Wilson were used in this Introduction.

1 Genealogical Society of the NT. Pioneer Register.
2 CRS F630 PL 149N
3 CRS F630 PL 103N
4 PL 103N. Northern Standard 19 November 1929.
5 PL 103N
6 PL 103N
7 Genealogical Society of the NT, Pioneer Register Probate records
8 PL 149N
9 Territorian Vol 2 No 2 April 1965 Obituary