

THE MYSTERY OF THE POISONED *BULGUL* at TUREE CREEK STATION, 1941

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Above: The late Dinny Tumbler at Turee Creek Station. His parents were central characters in the poisoned tobacco case. Photo: Bill Day

THE MYSTERY OF THE POISONED *BULGUL* – TUREE CREEK 1941

In September 1941 it was pinkeye time at Turee Creek station. For most of the thirty-six years that Joe Maguire had owned the station, Aboriginal people came from Rocklea, Ashburton Downs, Mundiwindi and from as far as the Western Desert to the Turee Creek law grounds. Tumbler, one of the station stockmen, had been on the station for 13 years and his wife Cuboo had been born there. The couple had a four year-old boy named Dinny. In 1941 Cookie came from Duck Creek for the ceremonies. Jerrawing, Tommy, William, Rueben, Alex, Old Bobby, Jack Smith, Bobaderry, also known as Nugget, and his wife Mummy came from neighbouring Rocklea station.

A Ngarlawonga elder named Paddy Wingbuddy and Brumby Billy Leake from Prairie Downs were also at the corroboree. Tumbler was concerned that his wife Cuboo was seeing too much of 'Little Brumby Billy.' It was well known at the camp that Cuboo and Billy were often together. Billy had left his wife about two years before. Since then, Billy was often seen around Tumbler and Cuboo's camp.

Nugget brought tobacco with him from Rocklea, which he mixed with ashes to make *bulgul* for chewing. During the dancing at night, Nugget gave some of his *bulgul* to Cuboo. She kept it in her hand to share with Tumbler after the dancing had finished. Soon after Cuboo began chewing the *bulgul*, she noticed that it tasted bitter. She quickly spat it out on the ground. Tumbler soon felt sick and began to vomit. He also spat out his *bulgul*, but saved the chewed ball of tobacco in his hat.

That night, the couple lay groaning on the ground and could not get up. Their legs were weak. Duck, who was Cuboo's father, heard them singing out and brought them water, but Cuboo and Tumbler vomited each time they drank. Next morning, Tumbler suspected that he had been poisoned with strychnine which he knew they used on the stations to kill dingoes. Although he still felt weak, he put the tobacco he had been chewing into a matchbox tin and took it to Joe Maguire.

Joe Maguire used strychnine on the station, but only in small quantities and he always made sure that the unused poison was returned. The Smiths on Rocklea always mixed poison baits themselves, before giving the baits to their men to spread around the station. Nugget reckoned that the poison could easily be picked out of the baits.

Jerrawing was Nugget's brother. He said that on the way back to Rocklea from Turee, he met Tumbler near the Turee boundary. Jerrawing claimed that Tumbler asked him to pick up a bottle of poison on top of a post a Cuyunano Hill. Jerrawing said that he found the bottle of poison on the post and gave it to Mr Smith at Rocklea. Jerrawing suspected that Tumbler wanted Billy out of the way, and left the poisoned tobacco where Billy would find it. Maybe someone then warned Billy that Tumbler was going to poison him. Jerrawing reckoned that Billy could have then changed Tumbler's good tobacco for the poisoned *bulgul* which Tumbler and Cuboo both chewed that night.

At first Tumbler told Joe Maguire that Tommy from Rocklea had given him the tobacco. Later, he said it was Cookie, who also worked for Joe Maguire. Tumbler claimed that William had told him this. Nugget had a different story. According to him:

At five o'clock in the afternoon Cuboo come and asked me for some of my *bulgul*. Cookie was with me when she ask. She gave Tumbler her poison *bulgul* and not my good *bulgul*, and she say it was mine. She and Billy not like Tumbler because she want Billy.

Nugget claimed that Cuboo was seen going behind the tent to mix the poison. According to Nugget, several witnesses in the camp told him that Cuboo tried to kill herself by drinking Condy's Crystals when they accused of putting the poison in the *bulgul*.

Maguire posted the *bulgul* to Peak Hill police station, where it was forwarded to the Geraldton police and from there to Perth CIB, who had the *bulgul* analysed. As a result of the analysis, investigations were made and statements taken. Nugget admitted that he gave *bulgul* to Cuboo but it was 'good *bulgul*' with 'no strychnine in

it.' The police said that up to that time, 'nothing had been mentioned about strychnine to any of the natives.' Nugget was then charged with attempting to poison Tumbler and Cuboo. He resisted arrest violently and received one month's imprisonment in Marble Bar. While in the lock up, he cut his way out of the exercise yard and found his way back to Rocklea. The warrant for his arrest stated:

Bobadarry @ Nugget, Aboriginal native, age 40 years, height 5 feet 11 inches, black hair, brown eyes, black complexion, erect stout build, station hand, speaks good English, top joint left thumb damaged, dressed in old trousers and shirt, leather sandals on 13th day of August 1942 escaped from legal custody.

Nugget was rearrested at Rocklea and imprisoned in Marble Bar for three months for escaping custody. The police reported that he 'made a further attempt to escape by smashing his chains, picking the lock on the cell door, and cutting a hole in the corrugated iron in the exercise yard. He had his head and shoulders out this hole when he was discovered.' A police report describes Nugget as 'one of the Heads from around that portion of the district.' Another report in 1943 recommended:

Bobadarry be removed from this country, as I consider that he would be a bad influence amongst the other natives and would be the cause of a lot of trouble amongst them, being far away from Police supervision.

Turee and Rocklea Stations which is his Country, is some 300 miles from either Nullagine or Onslow Police, and regular patrols are not made there.

I consider Bobadarry a bad and cunning type of Native, and if discharged on the present charge and allowed to remain in his own country I feel certain that he will cause further trouble.

The Gaoler wrote:

I have to report that the prisoner Bobadarry @ Nugget was committed to this Gaol on 2-5-42 for one month for resisting arrest, also remanded on a charge of administering poison. (Section 301 Criminal Code). The Native was in good condition at the time of admission. Tall well built, well spoken, very plausible, intelligent and cunning to the last word, but quite the most untruthful native I have had to deal with. He was a good eater.

A telegram was then sent to the Marble Bar police station:

Minister has approved issue warrant for removal Bobadarry to Carrolup Native Settlement Stop Warrant will not be executed until expiration present sentence and Native Court sentence if any Stop Warrant will be forwarded to you through district Office ... Native Affairs

On 13 March 1943 Nugget was found guilty by the Court of Native Affairs for administering poison and received one month's imprisonment. He was not removed to Carrolup. While serving his sentence at Marble Bar, Nugget became seriously ill and was transferred to the Port Hedland Lock Hospital where he stayed until he died on the 4th February, 1944.

The statements taken by the police from witnesses give no motivation for Nugget to have given Cuboo poisoned *bulgul*. The evidence does show that the police feared him as a troublemaker and wanted him out of the district. Cuboo and Brumby Billy Leake became partners. World War II finished and Joe Maguire died a few years later. A succession of bad managers ran Turee Creek Station and the Law meetings were held there less often. By the end of the century, all of the elders involved had passed away. Dinny Tumbler, Cooboo's son, passed away on May 11, 2004. Alice Smith and Peter Stevens are some of the few who remember the stories of the poisoned tobacco.

Note: The above information is taken directly from police reports and witnesses' statements 1942-1944.