

MAYORAL SPEECH

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Combined High Schools Languages Day – St Andrews Christian School 7 August 2008.

Guten morgen, bon matin and welcome to all language students from the Anglican school, South Grafton High and St Andrews Christian School on this combined high schools languages day, which I understand is a first for the Clarence Valley.

I bring you greetings and best wishes Clarence Valley Council. Let us pay respect to the traditional custodians of these lands and to their elders past and present.

Learning and understanding a second language is an important means of enabling us to understand other world peoples and their other cultures. Without doubt such study aids in communication and of course with greater communication and understanding the world would be less war torn and we would all be better understood.

Yesterday the St Andrews school principal Mr Lindsay asked talk about early Clarence Valley migrants and their contribution to our valley. With great help from staff some hasty research was undertaken yesterday afternoon.

During mid-nineteenth century approximately 200 German immigrant families settled in the Clarence Valley of NSW. Most of them originated from the South Western States of Germany. A majority of them settled permanently, and their descendants are still to be found in plentiful numbers living in and around the Clarence Valley today.

A Mr W Kirchner born at Frankfurt on Main established a soap and candle factory in the late 1840's in Grafton. He brought out from Germany a number of his countrymen with families and employed them at sawmilling and soap making.

German migrants were a city-loving people, artisans and tradesman of all varieties, chemists, saddlers, tailors, artists and publicans. They brought the culture and the 'know how' of the old world with them to their adopted country.

German musical traditions and their cultural background meant that they were culturally active in Grafton. As a frontier town, Grafton lacked the sophisticated delights of the capital at Sydney, but the German presence meant that a lively culture, which extended beyond racing horses and drinking which characterised so many towns, was not the sole diversion at Grafton. There is ample evidence that the non-German community appreciated the diversity that German cultural activity and music added to their town. They also attended their functions and enjoyed the culture on offer.

Very little information is available about the Chinese miners who worked the gold fields of the Timbara and Clarence. It appears that little was ever written about them and almost no references to them occur in the newspapers of the day. They left no descendants here and hardly anybody can remember those who remained after the majority had moved on.

There are stories of hundreds of Chinese coming off the boats in Grafton, bound for the Upper Clarence gold fields but very few Chinese remained in the area. Before the 1890 flood, the biggest ever on record, three Chinese conducted a market garden in South Grafton. A Chinese cabinet maker was also in Business in South Grafton in October 1891. In 1900 there were a number of Chinese market gardeners in Grafton.

No less than four distinct languages were spoken in the District in the middle of the 19th century. It was common to hear German and Gaelic in shops and streets along with English and Aboriginal. The Clarence Valley became home to English, Irish, French, Italian, Swiss, Scottish and German citizens.

Italians were important and discoverers and diggers at the Solferino gold fields. A number later invested their profits in Grafton, sometimes in the form of hotels.

My own forebears came from County Clare in Ireland to settle at Illarwill near Maclean in 1861 as a result of the so called Irish potato famine. So we had a real “melting pot” of nationalities but alas there is no evidence of French presence in our Valley!

You will notice at the forthcoming Olympics medal presentations that three languages will be used – Chinese for the host nation and English and French which are the two recognised world languages.

Enjoy your languages day and I wish you well with your future studies.

Ian Tiley
Mayor Clarence Valley Council
6th August 2008