

Century-Old Lugger *Floria* Laid to Rest



Former crew members on *Floria*.



Floria under sail.



Dale Chapman skippered *Floria* in 1974.



Floria in Sydney in 1988.

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A trip to the Port Douglas Markets on a Sunday will most likely include a chat to a well-known stall-holder with many stories to tell about pearling in Broome and the Torres Strait. Whilst we have known each other for many of years, my recent trip to the markets was to see Dale Chapman, specifically to share his stories of the historic pearl lugger *Floria* A48, following her recent destruction and loss of yet another important piece of maritime heritage.

Given that the *Floria* was 105 years old, an attempt to retrace all of her history - and a colorful history at that - would require a great deal of conversation and fact-finding. *Floria* was 46 foot short but she was fast. She was a more than capable lugger with her fair share of pearl shell collected in her days. Word has it she went South to Sydney in 1988 joining the Tall Ships bicentennial and a New Year's Eve party in Sydney Harbour that had more rum than diesel on board.

Floria was also not afraid of being on the wrong side of the law, being part of a Japanese people smuggling ring in the Solomon

Islands in the 1920's and arrested in New Caledonia, busted fishing there illegally years later. On both occasions, owners *Burns Philp and Co* seriously thought she was pearling in the Strait and completely unaware their Japanese skippers were on such seedy voyages in the South Seas!

Former pearl diver Dale Chapman had twice been involved with the *Floria*. The first as skipper and diver in 1974 as part of a trial in the Torres Strait. The second time when *Floria* was the famous *Cairns Pearl Lugger Museum* in the early 1990's.

"It all started with Western Australian pearlivers, Pearls Proprietary Limited who were operating out of Broome. In 1970, Keith Dureau, one of the owners had asked me to trial and investigate more modern diving systems using Australian divers in an attempt to guarantee their supply of pearl oyster and to stem the system of indenture of crew from New Guinea."

What Pearls Proprietary Limited wanted was new ways of doing things. What Dale hadn't done before was pearling. A former champion spear fisherman, professional salvage diver and a licensed abalone diver, Dale was to trial and use new equipment and systems to implement this new way with his team of divers.

In his first foray, Dale went on to become skipper on the *John Louis*

having first bought her back from Thursday Island to Broome in 1971 to join one of their other luggers *Centurian II* to fish the pearling grounds there and start the new system trials. Three years later at end of the 1974 season, their catch was 159,000 live shell being fished with the *John Louis* being the top boat with 55,310 shell.

It was then that Keith Dureau notified Dale he was required to take a team of his divers and fish 20,000 shell for a contract from the Torres Strait. Again as part of a trial of new techniques and again in an attempt to restrict the importing of indentured labour from New Guinea.

Dale said it caused a bit of a stir amongst the locals who were told these "white divers" were coming to take their jobs.

"We were there for a job. It was more about the indentured New Guineans and not the locals. We gave them as good as we got but one of the divers Allan Badger missed some diving with injured ribs!"

Floria was acquired by Pearls Proprietary Limited who had by that time also acquired *Galton* and *Grafton* as part of their fleet and they worked the Torres Strait pearling grounds for that season. Already 60 years old, the *Floria* needed a lot of work.

"When she was repaired we mainly

fished the area North of Booby Island from Hammond to Mabuiag and up to 20 miles off each of these Islands.

"We finished the Thursday Island contract at the end of November with 20,166 shells delivered and a further 120 pairs left in a pile off Badu that we never picked up. We had a lot of inconsistency with the shell carrier *Pleaidies* keeping to schedule so shell had to be dumped and collected later. We had our contract and never went back for those 120."

"The second time I was involved with the *Floria* was in the early 1990's when we set up the *Floria* in Cairns as the Cairns Pearl Lugger Museum with Pirate Pete and Graham Chibnell."

The *Cairns Pearl Lugger Museum*, (aka the *Floria*) was only 46 foot-long on deck but for a number of years she hosted school students and tourists, displaying information on pearling and selling pearls and jewelry before being sold to new owners.

"When we first set her up we had many of the former skippers on board and some Torres Strait dancers down to welcome her," Dale said.

Built in 1914, *Floria* was the second historic Torres Strait pearling lugger to be destroyed in the last twelve months following the 113 year-old *Grafton* being demolished where she lay in the mudbanks of the Dickson Inlet in Port Douglas in

March of last year.

One of only three pearling luggers left being over 100 years old, *Floria* leaves behind the remaining two century-old luggers being *Tribal Warrior*, built in 1899 (formerly *Mina*) and *Waitoa*, built in 1907. This loss officially takes the total of remaining luggers to 14, along with one shell carrier, *Pleaidies*, and two missionary vessels including the *Stephen Davies* and *Torres Herald*.

Whilst two luggers were lost in the last twelve months, the Pearl Lugger Heritage Fleet in Cairns have three being slowly restored including *Antonia A99*, *Anniki A98* and *Triton A82* along with the former Cape York and Torres Strait Missionary vessel *Stephen Davies*.

In a slight twist of fate the *Stephen Davies* will undertake some of the same duties as *Floria* becoming the new home of the *Blackbird & Pearler's Locker Museum* at the Cairns Marlin Marina in the next few months, again selling pearls, pearl shell carvings and jewellery from local Torres Strait Islanders along with a range of souvenirs, replica dive helmets and artworks along with a range of historical artifacts and objects on board.

More information can be found at www.pearlingluggers.com.au.