

Map showing the location of Thursday Island, Queensland, Australia. Map courtesy of Mark W. Jackson, BYU.

Making Friends Down Under: The Beginnings of LDS Missionary Work on Thursday Island, Queensland, Australia, 1961

Fred E. Woods

The year 2011 marks the fiftieth anniversary of the beginnings of LDS missionary work on Thursday Island. On this jubilee occasion, it is fitting to ask how the message of Mormonism came to this tiny Australian isle and how American Mormon missionaries adapted to a region far removed from their culture and homeland. Using journal entries, letters, and interviews from the first three full-time elders to preach on the island, it is possible to sketch a portrait of what these young men experienced.

Known also as simply TI, this island in the Torres Strait serves as a commercial and administrative center of the Torres Strait Islands—twenty islands with about twenty-five thousand inhabitants who mostly make their living from fishing and the pearl industry.¹ TI is twenty-four miles from the north coast of the Cape York Peninsula in the state of Queensland, Australia. The island measures about 1.4 square miles and has a population of fewer than three thousand. TI has been inhabited by Melanesian Torres Strait Islanders for millennia. They named the island *Waiben*, meaning “no water,” because of the scarcity of fresh water supplies.²

FRED E. WOODS (fred_woods@byu.edu) is a professor of Church History and Doctrine at Brigham Young University. He received his BA and MA from Brigham Young University, and his PhD from the University of Utah. He served as the Richard L. Evans Chair of Religious Understanding from 2005–2010, during which time he sought opportunities to build bridges with other cultures and faiths.

The Call

At an LDS missionary conference held in Sydney, Australia, on Christmas Eve 1960, the call came to open up four new regions for proselytizing where Latter-day Saint missionaries had never been before.³ Elder Gordon Holt recalled that President Snellen N. Johnson, one of the counselor-assistants to mission president Weldon V. Moore, waited until the very end of the missionary transfer announcements to assign missionaries to the new areas. Johnson said, “Elder Sharp and Elder Tuttle, you will go to Darwin. . . . Elder[s] Turley and Reid, you will go to Lae on the North Coast of New Guinea. Elder[s] Jones and Okelberry, you will go to Port Moresby on the south side of Papua New Guinea.” Finally, “Elder Holt, you will take Elder Blacker and go to Thursday Island in the Torres Strait.” Holt noted, “I was so stunned I just didn’t know what to do. The tears ran down my cheeks.”⁴ This announcement also came as an emotional jolt to Elder Gary Blacker, who wrote in his journal that day that the words of the call “shook me in my seat. . . . I even broke down. I have dreamed of going there ever since word was out that it was part of the mission. No other thing could have been given me that I wanted more.”⁵

The Journey and the First Days on TI

The day before his departure for TI, Holt wrote of the responsibility he felt in being one of the first two elders to take the message of Mormonism to the inhabitants of the island: “I am truly terrified in going up there for I know that so much is expected. This is so much responsibility and if we were to handle it incorrectly we will have to answer for so much.”⁶ The next day, January 18, 1961, the elders commenced their weeklong journey with a series of flights, including stops at Brisbane, Cairns, and Cooktown. Yet flight connections and radio and engine problems led to delays. Holt, a licensed pilot before his mission, remembered that during part of the trip into northern Australia, the elders traveled aboard a cargo plane. Holt explained, “It was an old DC-3, and they only had one pilot, and I don’t even recall there being a door between the cargo and going up to the pilot’s seat. . . . I talked to him, told him I was a pilot, and so he allowed me to sit in the co-pilot’s seat. On the trip up, we actually had some engine trouble.”⁷ Holt also wrote, “The last leg of the flying, . . . our poor sick plane went down in the jungle on an uninhabited air strip [*sic*] and we were there in that hot old place for about five hours before some one [*sic*] came along who could help us. . . . There were ant beds on the end of the field 12 feet high.”⁸ However, the missionaries eventually made their way safely to their destination with a final two-mile boat trip from Horn Island to TI. There the elders found themselves over two thousand miles from

mission headquarters with no one to welcome them because their travel had been delayed.

A taxi driver took the missionaries to meet Flo Savage, one of the only Latter-day Saints on the island, whom they had met when she was baptized at the Christmas conference.⁹ Apparently she had asked the mission president to send missionaries to TI.¹⁰ Savage soon arranged for the elders to stay at the Torres Strait Hotel. A single mother of two, Savage sold goods in a kiosk at the local hospital. The elders soon learned that many people congregated for food and conversation at this kiosk—a great launching pad for missionary work.¹¹

The elders' arrival and need for room and board were soon announced in the local newspaper, the *Torres News*: "Elder Gary Blacker and Elder Gordon Holt of the church of Latter-day Saints arrived to spend a few months on T. I. Both are interested in securing board and lodging with a private family."¹²

On January 26, 1961, the day after their arrival, the elders decided to climb to the uppermost spot on the island, known as Milman Hill, to dedicate TI for the preaching of the gospel. Although their destination was only 341 feet above sea level,¹³ Blacker struggled to reach the top:

Up at 5:30 A.M. This is the morning we had decided to go up to the tallest hill & dedicate the island to the Lord. We left before 6 A.M. & it was still dark. . . . I never felt the power of Satan so strong as I did that morning. When we finally got to the top I was so sick I had to sit down. We waited til the sun shone thru about 7 A.M. then we both offered a prayer to set the island & the people apart. After the prayer I had a peaceful feeling come over me. The sickness had gone completely. We left the hill & were really happy.¹⁴

Bonding with Each Other and the Islanders

Such happiness continued through the three months during which these two elders served together. Their love and admiration for each other are evidenced in both of their private writings. For example, soon after Holt heard that he would be serving with Blacker, he wrote home to his family, explaining, "My new companion is one of the mightiest Elders in the Mission. . . . He is really a mighty man." Holt also told his parents that he and his companion had been "picked to go into the Island for our testimonies."¹⁵ However, neither of the elders had any experience cutting hair, and their friendship was soon tried when they each served as the other's barber. Blacker remembered, "We cut each other's hair and Elder Holt wore a hat for three straight weeks after I got through with him . . . because I butchered him badly. . . . We were not barbers and . . . we certainly didn't have someone to go to, to cut our hair. . . . I think it was the last time that we ever cut each other's hair."¹⁶ Holt also could

not resist relating this hilarious event to his family. With a touch of humor, he explained:

Since two days ago[,] my companion and I hate each other. We cut each other[']s hair. . . . I though[t] I did a good job on him, but he really butchered me. One side looks good, but the other is minus a side burn [*sic*]. He forgot to shave it off. And the back is nice and neat, but . . . he hasn't learned to taper it yet. It'll be alright unless he finds two mirrors so he can see what I did to the back of his. It looks kind of like a terrace farm. He has promised to improve[,] so we are back on good terms.¹⁷

Holt and Blacker were also on good terms with the native islanders from the moment they docked on TI. Just three days after arriving, Holt recorded how the elders had quickly formed friendships with the islanders: "We have been accepted by what you would call the elite [elite] of the Polynesian group. They really have accepted us. . . . Most of the day we just spend going around meeting people. Everywhere we go the people go out of their way to follow us and talk to us. They will just do anything for us."¹⁸ The elders also quickly met a number of influential people, including a woman named G. Moloney, editor for the *Torres News*, an acquaintance that would later prove advantageous to the missionaries' image. By the end of the month, articles had already been written about the elders' arrival.¹⁹ Just a few days after landing on TI, the elders went to watch the best tennis play on the island but noticed a touch of segregation with the whites seated in the upper levels and the blacks on the main level.²⁰ At about this same time, Savage explained to the elders that "our first big problem was to get accepted socially with the people on the island." As he had outlined things, "There are several different groups, . . . Polynesian, Mel[a]nesian, White leaders in Government and School teaching [teachers] and so on."²¹

Holt was filled with righteous indignation at the inequality he was not accustomed to. Privately he recorded, "There are some very strict Island customs . . . here which don't agree with the Gospel. . . . The main issue was equality of people. The natives on the island have color bars among themselves and also a cast[e] system."²² Holt also explained that once the missionaries arrived on TI, he and Blacker "set out to show these people there is a better way. We could put our arm around a polynesian boy and be friends and five minutes later have a milian [Melanesian] child in our arms, and later be playing with some okenawaians [Okinawan's] children. There [*sic*] all the same to us."²³

Throughout their ministry, the elders had ample opportunities to exemplify the teachings of Jesus to and connect with various cultures and people of all ages. One of these chances arose soon after the missionaries arrived on TI. On their way home, they decided to walk down to the pier, where they met a

group of native girls fishing from the bank and native men spear fishing. The elders introduced themselves and connected quickly with the mixed crowd. Holt remembered, "Pretty soon we were singing and dancing and the whole group was really carrying on."²⁴

This positive first encounter opened up the door for preaching the gospel. Holt further related, "The following evening they said they would like to have a party for us and invited us to one of their places. . . . We had a tremendous evening. We showed slides of the Church and got them all very interested."²⁵ Such slides included pictures of a number of LDS temples, Joseph Smith, and Utah.²⁶ The elders invited their potential investigators to church, and a humorous incident took place at their first meeting. Holt recalled, "We didn't have any sacrament trays, so I decided to see if I could make some. . . . I got a couple pieces of wood and drilled out the holes, got some little glasses, and then I shellacked the boards, . . . so when I put the cups in, they glued in there, and we couldn't get them out."²⁷

Even with this good start, the elders had to adjust to TI customs. For example, during the first week of proselytizing in this new environment, Savage arranged for the elders to teach her uncle Toa and his wife. However, Toa would not consent to be taught the discussions until his older brother Tom (Savage's father) gave Toa permission to do so. Blacker noted, "We are going to have a little problem with island customs. . . . Island custom is [that the] eldest leads the family. Flo also warned us on the morals of the island. Elder Holt made a little blunder by asking, 'Whose child is that?'" The elders soon discovered that "the people are bashful & don't like to speak up," adding another dynamic to the missionaries' ministry.²⁸

As Blacker completed his portion of teaching at the first cottage meeting with the Tom Savage family,²⁹ the elders were told, "We are of the family Savage and we are Church of England, but we do not follow that God. Our God is a Man, not as they teach, a spirit. We get this from our forefathers' legends. We know what you teach is right. We must discuss this with the rest of the family before we make any commitments." Elated, Holt wrote to his father, "The island is just opening up to us. We see it on every side night and day."³⁰

Holt's letters home also show that the missionaries were able to attract some of the islanders to the LDS worship services. During the first church meeting the elders held in early February 1961, Holt recorded that four people came: "Our enthusiasm was an inch high all day, but [there will] be a lot more out this time[,] we hope."³¹ A week later, church attendance improved: "There were 13 there today counting us. We were just so happy. The Lord is really opening up the way."³² Another letter the following week noted, "Last week 7 investigators were to church and we thought that was great."³³ An early March letter stated, "Sunday we held Church and had 10 out plus us, . . . better in-

vestigators than the previous week. We both gave Sunday School classes and gave the lessons in them.”³⁴ Five days later, Holt wrote, “Sunday we had 20 out to church, plus us. We really felt good. I had 11 in my class & Elder ‘B’ had 9. It sure was fun teaching again. My class is 15 years old & on down.”³⁵

Building Bridges with Basketball

Less than a week after the elders came to TI, the *Torres News* announced that the missionaries were “extremely interested in basket ball [*sic*] [and] they are keen to start.”³⁶ This athletic tool immensely aided the elders as the islanders continued to open up like a spring flower. The missionaries quickly recognized a great prospect for gaining more extensive influence among the island’s youth by teaching basketball. On February 11, 1961, Holt wrote, “They are about to start basketball on the island, and maybe we can snow them with a bit of tricks for a few times and talk them into letting us coach the teams. That would give us a good in with the young boys and girls. I hope we will be able to get the opportunity.”³⁷ Five days later, he added, “The other day we got a basketball from Sydney in the mail so we have got another tool we can use now to meet the younger men of the island. . . . Hope everything works out. All I know about the game is how to keep score, but Elder Blacker[,] my companion[,] played college ball back home.”³⁸

Two weeks later, March 3, 1961, the opportunity came: “We were asked to coach two basketball teams. This was indeed a big break. . . . I watched and Elder Blacker coached. There is a boys and girls team about our same age. . . . They really ate up the stuff. Then that evening Elder Blacker and I joined in there [their] team and had a game with another team of the island. It was really quite a breeze. They aren’t on to some of the Yankee tricks, so we had a few on them.”³⁹ Yet the elders were not used to playing on the island courts. Holt explained, “Both of us came home bleeding and licking our sores. The baskets are different, and both Elder B and I went in for lay ups [*sic*] and they pealed [peeled] us off the backboard. The pole comes right down under the basket and every time we went in to tip or rebound we ran smack into the bloomin[g] thing.”⁴⁰

A week and a half later, Blacker recorded in detail the makeup of the teams:

We have 9 on each team. For the Ladies, Sema Majid; Maisie [May], Palsie & JoAnna Tatipata, Pam Millars, Bernice Hedgelong, Priscilla Loban, Alice Loban & Joyce Dubbins. The men’s team is composed of Elder Holt & myself, Richie Majid, John Turner, Connie Mye. Hasson Bin Tahl [Hassan Bin-Tahl], Kevin Awang, Nasser Ahboo & Blair Meldrum. At the meeting it was decided that I was Captain—Coach, & Blair Meldrum, Sec. [Secretary], & Pam Millars as Treas[urer]. Richie & Sema Majid were elected committee members. So that’s our organization. Our colors are red,

white & blue & our name is the ‘Saints’—no pressure just tact. The men will order their uniforms from Cairns this week & the women are trying to make theirs. They will really be sharp when they all get finished.⁴¹

Because Blacker also wanted the team to look sharp in their play, he earned the reputation of being a somewhat demanding coach. He recalled:

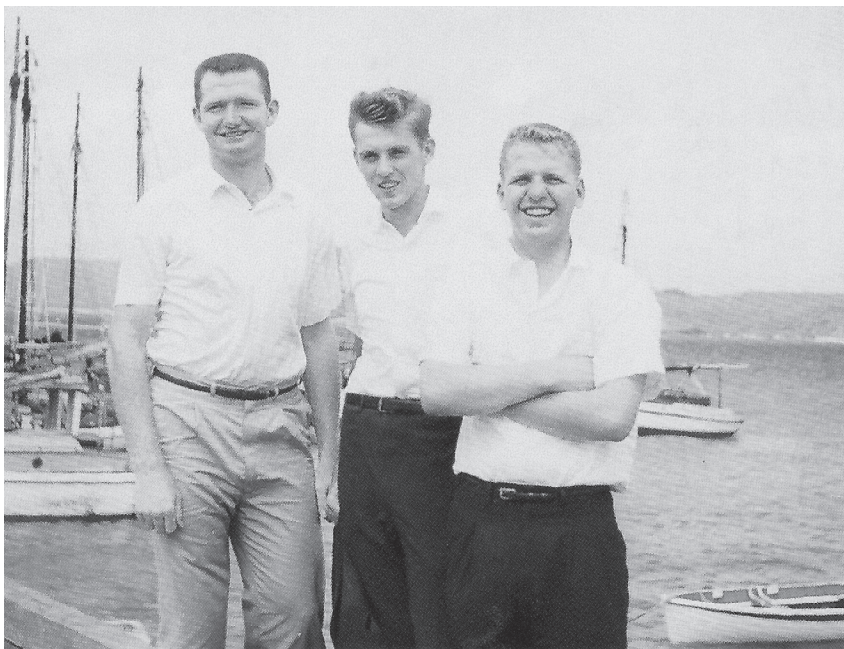
Sometimes they thought Elder Blacker, Coach Blacker, was a little bit rough on them, just a little bit tough. . . . I knew as we coached them that the talent level was not there, so we would have to do basic fundamentals, so I’d have them run, run, run. I just said one thing: you’ll be in shape. You may not score too many points, you may not make too many correct passes, but you’re not going to get tired. So we ran them and ran them if they made a mistake. . . . I remember that besides laps, we would do jumping jacks; we would do jumping rope to get legs stronger.⁴²

Joyce Dubbins, who played on the select women’s team, remembered, “He was a real mean coach. If you messed up, he would make you run laps up the stairs and back. When we wanted to sit down[,] we weren’t allowed to; [h]e was a real tough coach. The practices were in the evenings and afternoons at about 4 or 5 o’clock. We practiced on the tennis courts.”⁴³

However, the hard work paid off, and the basketball teams Blacker coached proved to be successful:

Our Saints club is going real good now. We have about 18 members of boys and girls. Most of them are in their early twenties. The girls have their uniforms now and really look sharp in those Red, White, and blue uniforms. At the last game they came on the field with the record playing When the Saints [C]ome [M]arching [I]n. The Mormon Yankeys [*sic*] wore a real bright Gold and Green uniform. It was those realy [*sic*] silky kind and they hadn’t seen them before and they realy [*sic*] hooted when we first came on the field. We won the game against [the] thursday island boys 72–30. The Local newspaper is about 8 pages long and after the . . . Basketball Game . . . we pulled down about a four page spread.⁴⁴

This particular Mormon Yankees team was formed solely for an exhibition game on TI and included two teammates who were new to TI. Two additional missionaries, Elder Reid Goldsberry and Elder Wayne S. Peterson, had come up from Sydney for the game scheduled for March 30, which was advertised in the *Torres News* just over a week before. An article titled “AMERICAN BASKETBALLERS” explained, “Two more Mormon missionaries are coming for a short visit. They are President Goldsberry and Elder Peterson from Sydney. They hope to play with local Missionaries and play a Rep. [representative] team from the Assoc[iation].” In addition, the article noted that Goldsberry had been the coach of the New South Wales Mormon Yankees team, while Blacker had played for and coached the Mormon Yankees in Queensland.⁴⁵



Gary Blacker, Gordon Holt, and James Lundahl—the first LDS missionaries to serve on Thursday Island, April 1961. Photograph courtesy James Lundahl.

After the game, although the final score was not reported in the *Torres News*, the paper did mention that the Mormon Yankees were “vastly superior in every department of the game.” Still, the article noted, “All T.I. boys did well, [yet] Blacker and Goldsberry were the best and we are indeed fortunate to have Blacker here acting as a coach to the teams and also willing in [the] future to coach our Rep. team.”⁴⁶

With this increase of visibility and success, the basketball teams coached by Blacker encountered some opposition. On April 12, Holt wrote to his parents about the highs and lows the players faced: “The little saints club is going real well. [Yet] the old Catholic father and the Church of England father really terrorized the members of our club last week. Those timid little bears just banded together and told them to Hang it in their ear. . . . On the other hand a lot we had as friends, but weren’t so close [to,] have been terrorized and we rarely see them any more [*sic*].”⁴⁷ A week later Holt further related, “The Catholic and Church of England Fathers gave us another blast. Also the Jehovah[’s] Witness and the Pent[e]costal. Well[,] the last two mobs received an ear trimming. Both came over to the flat and we taught them a bit of respect. Our poor investigators have really been getting the persecution.”⁴⁸

Elder James Lundahl, who replaced Holt⁴⁹ as Blacker's companion on April 20, 1961, also noted that there were opportunities to teach the Latter-day Saint health code as a result of playing basketball:

The Word of Wisdom would come up . . . as we were playing basketball and they were getting tired and they just kept playing and kept working, [and] it would come up there, when we'd go to these parties. At first, they would come up and say, "Would you like a drink?" And we'd explain, "No, we don't [drink alcohol]." And then we'd explain to them about the Word of Wisdom and after that, after a period of time, they didn't ask us anymore; they respected it.⁵⁰

Lundahl remembered that the islanders "always seemed to have a lot of parties, and we were always invited to those parties, and we ate very well. . . . They were always very friendly to us . . . with the basketball team. . . . They were just very supportive and very nice."⁵¹ Lundahl also recalled the charge from his mission president when Lundahl was sent to Thursday Island:

I was told by President Moore, "Your main purpose is to go there and just make friends with the people. Members have never been there; we just want you to make friends with them." And through basketball, the Church was able to do that because they all knew that these were the Mormons, helping their kids play basketball, and they hadn't played very much before, and so . . . I think that was good, and I think that helping them improve their tennis skills, going to all their parties at night, it got to the point where they couldn't have a party unless they invited the elders.⁵²

Not only did the elders attend the parties, but Blacker livened things up at several town social events with his impressive piano abilities. For example, in the spring of 1961, the *Torres News* reported a Saturday night party at the Grand Hotel on TI and noted, "Elder Blacker's long stand at the keys was much appreciated by all—cool man cool."⁵³ Two weeks later, the *News* recalled another public event at the town hall for the National Heart campaign. Among other events, Blacker and an electric guitarist (Richard Majid) performed.⁵⁴ The following week, Blacker played at a dance at the TI town hall and with another musician "rendered a hot number."⁵⁵

The Cairns Basketball Tournament

Publicity continued to sizzle as plans were made for TI to participate in the annual basketball tournament in Cairns. Blacker recalled that he did a lot of coaching for many youth and selected top competitive teams with players ranging in age from sixteen to twenty-five.⁵⁶ After working hard to develop the skills of the youth and to get them in top shape, Blacker arranged for them to travel to the mainland of Australia to compete in the three-day tournament, held June 10–12 during the Queen's birthday weekend.⁵⁷



James Lundahl and Gary Blacker with Thursday Island's women's Wongais basketball team, 1961. Photograph courtesy Gary Blacker.



Members of Thursday Island's men's Wongais "A" and "B" basketball teams, 1961. Photograph courtesy Di Potter.

This was the first time TI had ever competed in the tournament, so it was a time of much excitement for the islanders. Just the trip to the mainland created a great deal of anxiety, as five of the eight members of the women's team had never flown before. Speaking of the scene before the flight's departure, one editorial described this team as "eight apprehensive, nervous and excitable females."⁵⁸ Blacker also noted that this event was surely the most significant thing that had ever happened in the players' young lives, and the community rallied to support the teams. While the young women made their own skirts as part of their uniforms, other people had "bake sales" to support the teams, which both placed second in their divisions at Cairns.⁵⁹

Lundahl, commenting on the festivities in the TI community to raise funds for the Cairns tournament, observed:

They made this cake and it was kind of on a wheel and if you spin the wheel, depends on how much you paid for the cake. So that, you'd spin the wheel and if you get to buy the cake and if [it] landed on a 3, you paid 3 dollars; if it landed on a 10, you'd pay 10 dollars. . . . They just wanted to give their kids that opportunity to go and say that they had gone to a basketball tournament in Cairns. . . . Some of the kids had never been off Thursday Island. [This] built a good name for the Church.⁶⁰

May Dewis, the only convert during Blacker's time on TI, recalled:

When we had the fundraising, they put on a show and everybody was thrilled over it. They raised money by putting on a Basketball Carnival Fundraiser. We ran dances and sold cake wheels. We would sell a ticket to you and run a raffle. I have never seen a community support a team like TI. The Torres Strait people supported our teams. There were about 3,000 people on the island that could contribute because of the administrative centers, but many would also come over with the lugger boats and participate in the activities on the island.⁶¹

John Turner, one of the men who played in the Cairns tournament with Blacker, remembered:

The tournament was A-grade. We had teams from Cairns, Townsville, Mareeba, Papua New Guinea. At this time the Townsville team was virtually made up of all-Queensland players. Of course, we were just scrubbers. I will say that the standard of basketball from the time I started playing here[.] . . . Elder Blacker took that a step higher. We went from playing zone defense to playing man-to-man, with different moves and things like that. That was the start of our climb. By the time we got to Cairns, the ladies ended up [playing] the final against Cairns, and they went down by one point. They had a chance to win. They were one point behind. Loretta Tetapeta [Tatipata] took a shot at the goal from just outside the keyway. It rolled around and round the ring and then dropped out. Of course, they went down by one.

We played against Townsville in the Final (the T.I. men's team) and I think went down by five points in the end. We played in an outdoor court. There were two or three thousand people there. When we went onto the court, the Townsville team came on with their Queensland track-suits. And we're going on. . . . Elder Blacker had an

old track-suit coat from his college days. Here we are with old [different] track suits. We're just the blokes from Thursday Island—the Wongais. We had to play a total of nine games. We got there on a Saturday. We virtually got there and went straight on the court. We then played every game (because we didn't play on a Sunday)—Saturday we played mid-day through until midnight. Elder Blacker had to come off there in the final because it was so hot—but only was off for a very short time.⁶²

Hassan Bin-Tahl, a young Muslim player on the men's team,⁶³ noted, "I believe that Gary [Blacker] brought American basketball that nobody knew and nobody ever saw; it was exciting to watch. So in fact, we were representing an American style of basketball in an Australian competition, the only team with an American coach." Bin-Tahl also related that the sun got the best of Blacker. "He actually collapsed on the court; he got knocked down so he had to leave the court. Since they couldn't play on Sunday, they would have to double up games on the next day when the other teams were fresh."⁶⁴

Loretta Tatipata, who played on the women's Wongais, remembered that the crowd at the Cairns tournament was surprised by the athletic abilities of the TI players: "We were very popular in the tournament. In the crowd there was standing room only when we were playing, but it was outside so people could prop themselves up, and even though there was standing room only, we packed about 200 people into each game."⁶⁵ Tatipata's teammate Priscilla Loban recalled, "We were a little dot on the map that came down and made a statement because no one knew that we even played basketball. To have a couple of teams come down, and no one expected TI to be competitive. We never played basketball and never had participated in a competition. In fact, many people didn't know where TI even was."⁶⁶

An editorial for the *Torres News* reported the fate of the women's Wongais at the tournament and paid grateful tribute to Blacker on behalf of the Thursday Island Basketball Association. Blacker was thanked "for the time, thought and energy . . . given in making Basketball on T.I. the great game it is today." Further, the editorialist noted, "I could go on for quite some time listing the various ways he has helped T.I. but time and space [are] not permitted. All I can say is basketball[-wise] and social-wise, he will leave a big gap that will be hard to fill and if everyone knows where where [*sic*] are some ripe WONGAIS, would they please give him one to ensure his return to this island."⁶⁷

Soon after the Cairns tournament, Blacker's mission came to a close. Just before he left TI, the *Torres News* announced that a special dance would be held "in honour of Elder Gary Blacker who will be leaving for home. . . . Everyone is cordially invited to attend and pay their respects to Elder Blacker for all he has done here on the Island. . . . Let's all attend and make this a night that Elder Blacker will always remember."⁶⁸ After his departure, the *News*

reported, "A large crowd attended the farewell and dance in honour of Elder Blacker held last week." He had been presented with such gifts as a traveling rug and bag and a clock. The "next day the wharf was crowded with basketballers to bid farewell to Elder Blacker[,] who left for America."⁶⁹

Dewis also reflected on what took place when this fair-haired elder left TI:

We had a social at the town hall; the president of the basketball association congratulated Gary and presented him with a certificate because it was the first time a team from TI traveled to Cairns for a tournament. When Gary left, the wharf was just packed when he went. People were on the wharf and back onto the road. There was the undertaker, Bernie Clark, with a big gift of shells. . . . Everybody put Lays [leis] on his neck. Even those that didn't play basketball came down . . . and wanted to see. The school kids came down and said goodbye to him.⁷⁰

Conclusion

Blacker and his companions put TI basketball on the map in Queensland, Australia, and also brought the gospel to this little island. When he left TI after laboring there for over five months, he and his companions had made a significant impact on the islanders. Gone, but not soon forgotten, Blacker maintained contact with his TI friends and even returned with his wife, Karma, in 1987 to visit the people he loved. And now, even though it has been fifty years since they first set foot on TI, neither Blacker nor his companions have forgotten its loving people. Memories of singing, playing, loving, and laughing still ring in the hearts of those first missionaries, who helped unite diverse cultures and who brought salvation to this isle of the sea.

Notes

1. "Thursday Island," Far North Queensland Digital Holiday Library, <http://www2.eis.net.au/~nqtds/fnq/2ptb10.html>, accessed May 2, 2011.

2. "Thursday Island, Queensland," *Wikipedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thursday_Island_Queensland, last modified June 8, 2011.

3. At about this same time, a mission pamphlet edited by Elder Sherman Day noted, "At present there are over 125 missionaries serving in the mission." "Australian Mission 'New Era of Progress,'" Australia Sydney Mission Records, 2, unpublished manuscript, 1960, Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah.

4. Gordon Holt to his family, December 25, 1960. Holt provided the full name of Snel-len N. Johnson, whom he only referred to as President Johnson in his letter to his family. Gordon Holt, Interview by Fred E. Woods, May 13, 2011.

5. Gary Blacker, Journal, December 24, 1961.

6. Gordon Holt to Gordon C. and June Holt (his parents), January 17, 1961. The

Latter-day Saints were not the first missionaries to introduce Christianity to these island people. Judith M. Fitzpatrick notes that Christianity was established in the Torres Strait region by the London Mission Society (LMS), who sent Polynesian missionaries there in 1871. Fitzpatrick notes that the LMS insisted on a number of social changes for the islanders, including the cessation of certain ceremonial traditions and dances. When the Church of England took over for the early LMS missionaries in 1914, the Anglicans relaxed these restrictions and began training local natives to be priests for their people. Fitzpatrick further writes that in the 1980s, other Christian denominations commenced proselytizing efforts in the Torres Strait region. However, Fitzpatrick seems to have missed the entry of the Mormons in the 1960s. See Judith M. Fitzpatrick, ed., *Endangered Peoples of Oceania: Struggles to Survive and Thrive* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2001), 216–17. On the coming of Christianity to the Torres Strait during the early period, see also Jeremy Beckett, *Torres Strait Islanders: Custom and Colonialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 39–44; Noel Finch, *The Torres Strait Islands: Portrait of a Unique Group of Australians* (Milton, Queensland: Jacaranda Press, 1977), 41–45; A. C. Haddon, *Reports of the Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to Torres Straits*, vol. 1, *General Ethnography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1935), 15–18.

7. Gordon Holt, Interview by Fred E. Woods and Martin Andersen, July 6, 2010.

8. Gordon Holt to Gordon C. and June Holt, January 25, 1961.

9. Blacker, Journal, January 18–25, 1961. Between the Christmas missionary conference and the time the elders arrived on TI (January 25, 1961), Savage had written letters to them which seemed to reveal her strong desire to bring them to the island to introduce the gospel. Blacker noted in his journal, “Elder Holt & I had had a couple of letters from Flo Savage at Thursday Island & she told us some of the things about the place.” Blacker, Journal, January 5, 1961. Gordon Holt indicated the LDS Church members on Thursday Island were “Charlie Matters, Flo Savage, and her two kids, Sissy and Tutu.” Gordon Holt to Mike Holt, February 11, 1961.

10. Gary Blacker, Interview by Fred E. Woods and Martin Andersen, July 8, 2010.

11. Blacker, Journal, January 26, 1961.

12. “Snippets Katoora,” *Torres News*, January 31, 1961, 6. According to Elizabeth Barron, librarian at the John Ockley State Library of Queensland, “The *Torres News* would have been distributed across all the inhabited islands of the Torres Strait and throughout the five communities of the Northern Peninsula area (NPA) of Cape York and also Cairns.” Elizabeth Barron to Fred E. Woods, June 7, 2011. Appreciation is expressed to Elizabeth Barron for this information and for searching the *Torres News* for articles on the Mormon missionaries from January to June 1961. Blacker notes, “We got the weekly ‘Torres News,’ today & there was a couple of small articles about us arriving & also B’Ball [basketball].” Blacker, Journal, January 31, 1961.

13. Milman Hill served as “a [defense] facility” during World War II. “Thursday Island, Queensland,” *Wikipedia*, last modified June 8, 2011, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thursday_Island_Queensland. For a history of Thursday Island during the war see Robert A. Hall, *The Black Diggers: Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders in the Second World War* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1997).

14. Blacker, Journal, January 26, 1961.

15. Gordon Holt to his family, December 25, 1960. In another letter to his family Holt provided his inquisitive mother, who had apparently pelted her son with questions about his companion, this description of Blacker: “He is about 6’ 3” tall and has soft red hair. He is very fair skinned as most red heads [*sic*] are. He is extremely athletic and was captain of the Northern Mormon Yankees Basketball team. He is the top elder in the Australian Mission, that’s why I describe him as mighty.” Gordon Holt to his family, January 28, 1961.

16. Blacker, Interview, July 8, 2010.

17. Gordon Holt to Sandy and Ken Peay (his sister and brother-in-law), February 8, 1961.

18. Gordon Holt to his family, January 28, 1961.

19. Blacker noted in his journal, "Meeting people & looking around. Met Mrs. Maloney[,] who runs the Torres News newspaper & is quite influential." Blacker, Journal, January 27–28, 1961. The online records of the John Ockley State Library of Queensland for the *Torres News* indicate that the publication commenced in 1957 (confirmed by librarian Elizabeth Barron) and shows that the editor to whom Blacker refers was G. Moloney. Less than two weeks later, Gordon Holt noted that the missionaries had been "invited to the home of the Editor of the Torres Strait [*Torres News*] newspaper. It only comes out once a week and it[']s no New York Times, but it does carry some weight and is good to have on our side." Gordon Holt to Mike Holt, February 11, 1961.

20. Blacker, Journal, January 27–28, 1961.

21. Gordon Holt to his family, January 28, 1961.

22. Gordon Holt to Gordon C. and June Holt, February 17, 1961. Author Jeremy Beckett explains that because of the "extraordinary racial diversity[,] . . . Thursday Island was known as the 'Sink of the Pacific' . . . in which native and foreign, white and coloured, mixed freely and sometimes interbred, [and] there emerged a stratified society, caste-like in its rigidity." He further notes, "In general terms the hierarchy approximated that of contemporary scientific racism, with north Europeans at the apex, black skinned peoples at the bottom, and the rest distributed according to their position along the colour spectrum." Beckett, *Torres Strait Islanders*, 57–58.

23. Gordon Holt to Gordon C. and June Holt, February 17, 1961. A week later, Holt wrote another letter to his parents in which he described another segregated setting: "We went to see a picture. It was an open air theater and they have the white people sit in one section and the darkies in another." Gordon Holt to Gordon C. and June Holt, February 25, 1961. Hassan Bin-Tahl, a Muslim youth who played basketball with the elders, recalled, "When I was young we weren't allowed to mix with the whites, they couldn't play any sports with us. But when Gary [Blacker] came, he closed the gap of that administrative division between us when he brought basketball." Hassan Bin-Tahl, interview by Ben Watson, in Ben Watson, "The Mormon Yankees," 66, unpublished and undated manuscript in possession of the author. The author wishes to thank Ben Watson, a former LDS missionary to Thursday Island, for providing a copy of this document. Gordon Holt noted, "There was a lot of discrimination on the island; we fought this all the time." Holt added that when he and Blacker went to a presentation in a little hall to see a show (presumably about the same time as the theater experience noted above), they were "asked to sit in the back, and that was one of the first times when I really saw they discriminated again[st] us." Holt, Interview, May 13, 2011.

24. Gordon Holt to his family, January 28, 1961.

25. Gordon Holt to his family, January 28, 1961. The parties continued for some time. For example, Holt wrote that the islanders had held a party for him on his twenty-second birthday. He recalled, "First of all they played records while the people were coming and then the island boys played their guitars. The girls of the island hula danced for us and was it nice. Some of those dark skinned girls are really beautiful. They had a big birthday cake with 22 candles and then they gave me a beautiful sea shell." Gordon Holt to Sandy and Ken Peay, February 8, 1961. The *Torres News* even caught wind of the party: "Happy Birthday to Elder Gordon Holt who celebrated his 22nd birthday last Thursday. Miss Flo Savage and several friends arranged a party in his honor at the Town Hall and a happy time was had by all. During the evening dance music was rendered . . . and a demonstration of

the Hula.” *Torres News*, “Social Jottings,” February 7, 1961, 4. The following month the *Torres News* reported, “A ‘Flat Warming’ was held . . . by Elder Holt and Blacker. Some 40 guests were entertained in their new flat. Dancing and singing were the highlights of the night.” *Torres News*, “Social Jottings,” March 14, 1961, 4.

26. Holt, Interview, May 13, 2011.

27. Holt, Interview, July 6, 2010.

28. Blacker, Journal, January 29, 1961.

29. Flo Savage was married at this time but went by her maiden name.

30. Gordon Holt to Gordon C. Holt, January 30, 1961.

31. Gordon Holt to Mike Holt, February 11, 1961.

32. Gordon Holt to Gordon C. and June Holt, February 19, 1961.

33. Gordon Holt to Gordon C. and June Holt, February 25, 1961.

34. Gordon Holt to Gordon C. and June Holt, March 3, 1961.

35. Gordon Holt to Gordon C. and June Holt, March 8, 1961.

36. “Snippets Katoora,” *Torres News*, January 31, 1961, 6.

37. Gordon Holt to Mike Holt, February 11, 1961.

38. Gordon Holt to Margaret Moss (his grandmother), February 16, 1961. Gary Blacker noted, “I grew up in eastern Oregon, [in the city of] Ontario. . . . It seems like I always had a ball in my hands. I love sports; I’ve played since I was a young man. Any spare time I’d go to the neighbors’, even on dirt grounds I’d play basketball, but I love football, I love baseball, I love tennis, I love them all. After graduating from Ontario High School, I got a college basketball scholarship to play at Boise Junior College.” Blacker, Interview, July 8, 2010.

39. Gordon Holt to Gordon C. and June Holt, March 3, 1961. Holt is referring here to the Mormon Yankees basketball teams on mainland Australia where Blacker was a player-coach for the Queensland team prior to his transfer to Thursday Island. Blacker was an outstanding player who was often talked about in various Queensland newspapers. By this time, he and Holt had already begun practicing basketball with a TI team formed by a local man named John Turner. The local newspaper reported, “John Turner’s team fielded a complete team and should do very well this season, as they are strengthened by two Mormon players, and we’ve heard they have been practicing.” “Basket Ball Note,” *Torres News*, March 7, 1961, 5. Turner also soon joined the TI team coached by Blacker. Ultimately, the missionaries ran an A team and a B team on TI.

40. Gordon Holt to Gordon C. and June Holt, March 3, 1961. Holt further noted, “They had some poles and nets, but the pole would come down straight under the basket, so when you’d do a lay-in [layup], you’d run into the pole, and both of us had trouble with that.” Holt, Interview, May 13, 2011.

41. Blacker, Journal, March 13, 1961. During this time, several articles about games played or to be played by the men’s Saints basketball team are mentioned in the *Torres News*: “Preview of Wedn[e]sday’s Games” and “American Basketballers,” March 21, 1961, 6; “Basketball” and “Individual Scorers,” March 28, 1961, 6; “Basketball” and “Men[’]s Basketball,” April 4, 1961, 6; “Basketball,” April 11, 1961, 6; “Men[’]s Basketball,” April 25, 1961, 6; “Men’s Basketball,” “Special Notes Cairns Trip,” and “Scores Last Week,” May 9, 1961, 6; “Men[’]s Basket Ball” and “Individual Scores,” May 16, 1961, 5. Blacker is often listed as the high scorer in these games.

42. Blacker, Interview, July 8, 2010.

43. Joyce Dubbins, Interview by Ben Watson, in “The Mormon Yankees,” 66. Holt recalled that Blacker was indeed a tough coach. “He made them run up and down stairs, and what he made them do was get in shape so they could play a whole game.” Holt, Interview, May 13, 2011. Elder James W. Lundahl, who was Blacker’s companion after Holt, added

that Blacker told his players, “‘You’ve got to run up and down the court; we’ve got to be able to outrun these guys.’ And he was just good, but he was hard, but he was fair.” James Lundahl, Interview by Fred E. Woods, May 17, 2011.

44. Gordon Holt to Margaret Moss, April 4, 1961.

45. Goldsberry was an assistant to the mission president at this time, so he was also known as President Goldsberry. “American Basketballers,” *Torres News*, March 21, 1961, 6. The following week, a newspaper article again announced, “Basketball at its finest will be played THURSDAY NIGHT at Hockings Tennis Court. . . . President Goldsberry and Elder Petersen [sic] arrived today to add support to local Elders Holt and Blacker. President Goldsberry played University Basketball in Utah, while Elder Blacker played in Idaho. . . . Elder Peterson and Elder Holt have played on teams in Brisbane and Broken Hill and will help balance off the squad. The other starters will be locals, John Turner and Bob Elliott.” The article also mentioned that after the game, a social would be held at the local town hall, where people could meet the team and also celebrate Blacker’s birthday. “Basketball,” *Torres News*, March 28, 1961, 5. Further, Holt noted in a letter that Goldsberry and Peterson had come up to TI for a visit. Gordon Holt to Margaret Moss, April 4, 1961. He also explained that these visiting elders played with Blacker and Holt on the Mormon Yankees team on TI, a team that was formed just for the evening of March 30, 1961, inasmuch as the additional elders were visiting. The cost of admission was four shillings for an adult and one shilling for a child, a shilling equaling about twenty-five cents in today’s US currency. Holt, Interview, May 13, 2011.

46. “Basketball” and “Men[’]s Basketball,” *Torres News*, April 4, 1961, 6. This issue of the newspaper also clarified that TI was just one stop for Goldsberry and Peterson, who were visiting missionaries in various locations on their trip to Queensland. The article explained that Goldsberry and Peterson “very much enjoyed their stay [on TI] and commented on the friendliness of the people.” The elders also wanted to “express their thanks to the Rep. team, and those connected with them, for their interest and fine sportsmanship.” “Social Jottings,” *Torres News*, April 4, 1961, 4.

47. Gordon Holt to Gordon C. and June Holt, April 12, 1961.

48. Gordon Holt to Gordon C. and June Holt, April 19, 1961. Holt mentioned that in addition to these denominations, “there were absolutely witch doctors” and that some of the people “called us the white witch doctors because we were religious and that is what they associated with religion.” However, he noted that because he and Blacker were Americans and it was not long after World War II, the islanders generally treated the elders well, and as the missionaries continued to serve the TI community, there seems to have been a bit of softening towards the missionaries by those of other faiths. Holt, Interview, May 13, 2011. For example, Elder James Lundahl remembered a priest by the name of Father Rogers who became very friendly to the elders towards the end of his mission. Lundahl, Interview, May 17, 2011.

49. The *Torres News* announced a farewell party for Holt, who had completed his mission and was leaving for America. The party was also for Priscilla Loban, who had played on the women’s Saints team and was leaving TI to begin a nursing career in Brisbane. Farewell gifts were presented to both Holt and Loban. “Social Jottings,” *Torres News*, April 18, 1961, 4. Holt left TI on Friday, April 21, 1961. See “Passengers for the South on Friday,” *Torres News*, April 25, 1961, 2. The newspaper reported that “Elder G. Holt . . . is replaced by Elder J. Lundahl of Logan, Utah[,] U.S.A.[,] who arrived last week. Elder Lundahl has been in Australia 16 months and hopes to stay on T.I. for three months.” Social Jottings,” *Torres News*, April 18, 1961, 4.

50. James W. Lundahl, Interview by Fred E. Woods, July 8, 2010. The Mormon Yankees teams commonly included a discussion of the Word of Wisdom at their basketball

clinics in Australian towns. According to seven-time Australian Olympic basketball player Lindsay Gaze, by living their health code, the Mormon Yankees had an impact without even opening their mouths about their religion. Gaze noted that by “observing the Mormon players who were noted for not drinking or smoking, and playing really well, just as role models, I thought, ‘That might be a good idea, not to indulge in these sorts of things.’ So without the proselytizing, just merely their behavior was an influence on me, personally, to say this might be worthwhile to be a non-drinker, a non-smoker, and have a fairly decent appearance, which at that time I’d never had.” Lindsay Gaze, Interview by Fred E. Woods and Martin Andersen, December 10, 2009.

51. Lundahl, Interview, July 8, 2010.

52. Lundahl, Interview, July 8, 2010.

53. “Parties for Port Moresby,” *Torres News*, May 9, 1961, 5. James Lundahl referred to this occasion when he stated, “I remember that they had a reception there in town, in, I think, the hotel, a place big enough that a lot of people could attend. And I always said that the whole island was there, and Gary played the piano. And you know, they all really liked him.” Lundahl, Interview, May 17, 2011.

54. “Lugger & Strait News,” *Torres News*, May 23, 1961, 7. Richard Majid, who played on Blacker’s Saints team, and some other members of the Majid family later joined the LDS Church.” Lundahl, Interview, May 17, 2011.

55. “Dance,” *Torres News*, May 30, 1961, 5.

56. Blacker, Interview, July 8, 2010.

57. “T. I. Basketball Men’s Team,” *Torres News*, May 16, 1961, 6; also “Basket Ball,” *Torres News*, June 20, 1961, 6.

58. Catherine M. Fyfe, “Sister Sue’s Views on the Cairns Effort,” *Torres News*, June 27, 1961, 5. Blacker also gave a full-length report of the Cairns Tournament. He explained that there were three teams that went to Cairns, two men’s teams (an A team and a B team) and one women’s team. He noted, “On Saturday morning June 10th[,] 24 Rep. players from T.I. left the Engineers wharf and were wished a successful week end [sic] by a large crowd. This was the beginning of a memorable 3 days.” Following a three-and-a-half-hour plane ride, the teams landed at Cairns just in time for play to commence. Blacker’s report concluded, “During their 3 day visit to Cairns, the T. I. Wongais won the hearts and praise from all spectators. Time and time again all 3 teams received compliments for being the best sportsmen in the Carnival.” “Basket Ball,” *Torres News*, June 20, 1961, 6. *Wongais* was the name used in the Cairns tournament for both the men’s and women’s teams from T.I. Before this time, these teams went by the name of Saints. See May Dewis, Kitty McCullen, Hassan Bin-Tahl, Joyce Dubbins, Priscilla Loban, and Palsie [Tatipata], Interview by Ben Watson, in “The Mormon Yankees,” 185; see also Blacker, *Journal*, March 13, 1961. Wongais are Aboriginal people in western Australia. See “Wangai,” *Wikipedia*, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wongai>, last modified June 7, 2011.

59. Blacker, Interview, July 8, 2010. Bonnie Turner recalled, “We were told that the rule for the uniforms was that they had to be so many inches below the knees. Of course, we go there and in the first game the other girls were wearing shorts and singlets (shirts). So before the next game they went home and cut all the clothes short.” Bonnie Turner, Interview by Ben Watson, in “The Mormon Yankees,” 64.

60. Lundahl, Interview, July 8, 2010.

61. May Dewis, Interview by Ben Watson, in “The Mormon Yankees,” 67. May Tati-pata (May Dewis after her marriage, also known as Mae Mae, Maisie, Masie, or Macie) was the first convert baptized on T.I. Her baptism was performed on May 5, 1961. Blacker, *Journal*, May 5, 1961. Gordon Holt noted that May belonged to a Muslim family and apparently was quite fond of the elders. Gordon C. and June Holt, February 19, 1961. Holt

also noted that the island girls would “put a deposit” on the boys to let them know if the girls were interested in the boys and the possibility of marriage, adding that May “was all the time asking if she could put a deposit on me.” Holt, Interview, May 13, 2011. May also appears to have had a good sense of humor. James Lundahl noted that he was “kind of a scrawny little elder” and recalled that just a few days before May was baptized, “a shark had come out and eaten a dog that was swimming there in . . . the ocean. And I said, ‘Mae Mae, what happens if a shark comes after us?’ She [said], ‘Don’t worry, Elder Lundahl, I’ll protect you.’” Lundahl, Interview, July 8, 2010.

62. John Turner, Interview by Ben Watson, in “The Mormon Yankees,” 63. Turner was correct about the outcome of the women’s game. The final score was 23–22. However, Turner must have confused the men’s final with another tournament game that the men’s Wongais played in. The men’s Wongais lost to Townsville by a score of 46–27. See “Stop Press From Cairns,” *Torres News*, June 13, 1961, 6.

63. Hassan Bin-Tahl was referred to as a “Moslem by Religion.” Gordon Holt to Margaret Moss, April 4, 1961. This reference sheds light on the fact that the missionaries brought together not only different cultures but also different faiths.

64. Hassan Bin-Tahl, Interview by Ben Watson, in “The Mormon Yankees,” 66.

65. Loretta Tetapetta [Tatipata], Interview by Ben Watson, in “The Mormon Yankees,” 65.

66. Priscilla Loban, Interview by Ben Watson, in “The Mormon Yankees,” 66.

67. Fyfe, “Sister Sue’s Views on the Cairns Effort,” *Torres News*, June 27, 1961, 5.

68. “Notice,” *Torres News*, June 27, 1961, 6.

69. “Social Jottings,” *Torres News*, July 4, 1961, 4.

70. May Dewis, Interview by Ben Watson, in “The Mormon Yankees,” 67. Concerning Dewis, Gary Blacker noted, “Mae Mae was one of the greatest people I have ever met. . . . [During] my [five] months on the island, I was involved with one baptism, and that was Mae Mae. . . . Then after that, she got married [and] had her husband join the Church. She had five children; three of them went on missions. Mae Mae went on a mission, and I was even able to support Mae Mae.” Blacker, Interview, July 8, 2010. Dewis was consistently involved with Church activities several years after Blacker’s departure. In addition, several of the families who were associated with the women’s basketball team are listed in these minutes as attending church meetings of the Thursday Island Branch. The records include such names as “Sis D. Tatipata” and “Bro. M. Loban,” “Bro. T. [Ted] Loban,” and “Sis F. [Frances] Loban.” Such names suggest that the women’s basketball team had rippling effects which blessed lives beyond the court. See General Minutes [of the] Thursday Island Branch, Australian Mission, 1964–1965, Church History Library. Furthermore, on October 11, 1964, twenty-two investigators attended a Mutual Improvement Association barbecue activity at the home of Brother Loban indicating that Church members continued to have a positive influence on TI.