

Ludwig Leichhardt in the Valley of the Lagoons

The discovery of a Leichhardt-tree in North Queensland

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At the beginning of May 1845, the first Ludwig-Leichhardt-expedition came closer and closer to the headwaters of the Burdekin River. Today, this is the region around the settlement of Greenvale, situated on the Gregory Developmental Road between the regional town Charters Towers and the Forty Mile Scrub National Park. The Valley of the Lagoons can be reached in an easterly direction via a 100 kilometre long track through the outback. One has, however, to ford all the rivers and creeks.

The members of the Ludwig-Leichhardt-expedition had hitherto followed the Condamine River (3 days), the Dawson River (10 days), the Robinson Creek in the Expedition Range (6 days), the Comet River (16 days), the Mackenzie River (8 days), the Isaac River (20 days), the Suttor River (28 days) and the Burdekin River (42 days) and had conducted geological, botanical as well as zoological research.

When the group reached the Valley of the Lagoons, it had completed 212 days and a distance of approximately 2000 kilometres through the Australian wilderness. The expedition still had 10 bullocks and 15 horses with it.

During that seven-month overland journey, six cows had so far been slaughtered. The first had been butchered at Dry Beef Creek on 28 October 1844. The party had by then covered approximately 430 kilometres since leaving its starting point at Jimbour Station. The weight of the dried meat the men carried was approximately 40 kilograms.

On 18 December 1844, a second ox was slaughtered for additional provisions at their campground “Brown’s Lagoons” in the Expedition Range. The drying yielded approximately 80 kilograms of jerked meat.

The third ox was butchered on 16 January 1845 at the Mackenzie River. About 60 kilograms of dried meat were produced. Up to that point, the party had travelled 850 kilometres through the Australian wilderness.

On 17 February 1845, the fourth ox supplied provisions for the expedition in the form of about 80 kilograms of dried meat. The party was then camped by the side of the Isaacs River and had covered approximately 1300 kilometres through the outback.

The fifth ox was slaughtered on 28 March 1845 at the Sutton River. The party had camped alongside the Sutton River having travelled roughly 1700 kilometres through unknown wilderness in the course of the previous six months.

The group butchered the sixth ox (a bull) on 25 April 1845. The Leichhardt-expedition was now camped at the Burdekin River and had covered approximately 1900 kilometres through forest, steppe and desert in the course of their seven-month long travels.

When the Ludwig-Leichhardt-expedition reached the Valley of the Lagoons in early May 1845, they were running out of their supplies of flour, sugar, salt and tobacco. The daily ration now amounted to approximately 150 grams of meat and 100 grams of flour per member. Wild fruits, plants and honey, game such as kangaroos, emus, possums, , lizards and snakes, birds (ducks, doves, partridges, pheasants and cockatoos) as well as fish and mussels added to the daily food ration.

On 06 May 1845, expedition leader Ludwig Leichhardt noted in his travel log:

Mr. Roper came in with sad tidings; in riding up the steep bank of the river, his horse, unable to get a footing among the loose rocks, had fallen back and broken its thigh. I immediately resolved upon going to the place where the accident had happened, and proposed to my companions, that we should try to make the best of the meat, as the animal was young and healthy, and the supply would greatly assist in saving our bullocks to the end of our long journey; and they declared themselves willing at all events to give a fair trial to the horse-flesh. Our bullocks were foot-sore and required rest. We, therefore, shot the horse, skinned and quartered it the same night; and ate its liver and kidneys, which were quite as good as those of a bullock. (Leichhardt 140)

On 07 May 1845, Leichhardt continued his notes about this incident: “We cut the meat in slices, and dried it; and though there was some prejudice against it, it would have been very difficult to have detected any difference between it and beef; particularly if the animals had been in the same condition” (Leichhardt 140). The horse yielded approximately 60 kilograms of dried meat.

On 10 September 2006, I made a first attempt to find Leichhardt’s Valley of the Lagoons campground of 06--08 May 1845 . I could narrow my search with the help of aerial photographs. Although I found the travel route of the expedition along the Burdekin River and through the Valley of the Lagoons, I could find no evidence of the campground.

However, during another search in the Valley of the Lagoons on 01 October 2011, I did find a previously unknown Leichhardt-tree. The eucalypt was approximately 12 metres high and still living. It was around 80 centimetres in diameter and clearly showed a marking in the bark. The blaze was approximately 30 centimetres in height and 20 centimetres in width. It was located on the southern face of the trunk. A number “7” which was seven centimetres in height and three centimetres in width could be seen in the top right of the blaze. In the bottom left there was a letter “L”, 11 centimetres in height and seven centimetres in width.

The tree, which was supposedly blazed in close vicinity to the campground, was quite near (around 30 metres) to a waterhole, one of the numerous ponds (lagoons) in the valley. The

Leichhardt-party would have had easy access here to the water it needed for slaughtering and preparing of food.

I found no traces of a slaughtered horse, like hooves or large pieces of bones. Most likely, the party would have butchered the horse in a rough fashion at the site of the accident on the Burdekin River, and then carried large cuts of meat to the campground in the Valley of the Lagoons in order to further process them there. This would have involved cutting the meat into slices and drying it in the open air. Then, on 09 May 1845, the party continued its overland journey in the direction of the Lynd River.

A commemorative marker to the Ludwig-Leichhardt-expedition of 1844/45 was solemnly unveiled in the Valley of the Lagoons in the context of an international 'Ludwig Leichhardt Rally' held from 06 to 10 September 2006,. Further markers are in close proximity, at Lucky Downs Homestead and at Reddy Brook.

Translated by Asja Harder

Notes:

Leichhardt, Ludwig. *Journal of an overland expedition in Australia from Moreton Bay to Port Essington, a distance of upwards of 3000 miles, during the years 1844-1845*. Sydney: University of Sydney Library, 2002. <http://setis.library.usyd.edu.au/ozlit/pdf/p00050.pdf>. Accessed 20 March 2017.