

Borgas, Ludwig “Lou” Alfred (1887–1981) and Ruth Kate (Giblett) (1889–1975)

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Lou Borgas was a mission superintendent and sawmill manager who worked together with his wife, Ruth Kate (Giblett), mostly at the Mona Mona Aboriginal Mission in North Queensland, Australia in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s.

Early Years

Ludwig Alfred Borgas was born on August 24, 1887, in Hawker, Northern South Australia, to Heinrich Johann Martin and Fredericka Willamina (Menz) Borgas.¹ Lou’s father was a respected, innovative farmer who settled on a property near the foothills of the Flinders Ranges.² Lou’s primary school years were at Hawker. Then, at 13, he attended the German College in Petersburg, South Australia, where in 1902 he was confirmed in the Lutheran church.³ Violent sandstorms caused havoc in the Flinders Ranges to many properties in the 1900s, and this led the Borgas family to move to the Narrogin area in Western Australia in 1905.⁴ Farming endeavors occupied his father and older brothers. Lou spent his time traveling the district with a chaff-cutting plant and tractor,



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Ludwig (Lou) Borgas

Photo courtesy of Heather Steed (nee Borgas).

purchased by his father.

In 1906, American Nils J. Waldorf conducted a tent meeting series in Narrogin, resulting in Lou and his brothers and then later his parents becoming Seventh-day Adventists. A church company was organized in 1909, and in 1914, a stone church was built by Lou's family.⁵ Lou attended the Darling Range School (later Carmel College). He spent 1912 in literature evangelism before returning to complete his schooling.⁶

Ruth Kate Giblett, born in 1889, arrived in Narrogin in 1915 to open the Narrogin church school.⁷ She had graduated from the preparatory course at the Darling Range School in 1913 and, prior to being assigned to Narrogin, had been employed in office work for the Western Australian Conference office.⁸ After three years in Narrogin and a year teaching in Kalgoorlie, Western Australia, Ruth married Lou at the Giblett home in Manjimup in November 1919, with Pastor E. S. Butz officiating.⁹

Ministry at Mona Mona

Lou and Ruth Borgas were appointed in 1919 to the Mona Mona Aboriginal Mission in North Queensland, Australia. Lou was initially responsible for sawmilling and direct care of dormitory children who had been removed from their parents according to mission policy. The mission was well-established by this time, having been pioneered in 1913 by Philip "Bulpit" Rudge and James Lewis Branford, with the support of the Australian Union Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and Queensland Chief Protector of Aborigines. By the time of his arrival a large number of Aboriginal People from the Mareeba and Kuranda areas had been forcibly moved to the mission by the police, usually against their will, and apparently for their own "protection."¹¹ The Queensland Government provided 4,000 acres (1,600 hectares) but stipulated that the Adventist mission would be required to receive all Aborigines sent by police, the courts, and native affairs. The mission reserve consisted of four houses and gardens for missionary staff, fifty houses built for Aborigines, dormitories, a kitchen and dining room, and other buildings. Aboriginal children were taken from their parents when old enough to go to school and lived in the dormitories, where they remained until married. A sawmill plant operated together with several hundred cattle, 11 horses, and 60 working oxen. Thirty acres were under cultivation, with various crops producing food and cows supplying milk. The government required the mission to feed and clothe the (often needy) Aboriginal people with only a minimal subsidy. Part of Lou's work was felling the abundant timber in the forests, assisted by some local men. With the mission's emphasis on holistic education, Ruth made steady progress in teaching the children reading, writing, and arithmetic.¹²

A severe cyclone in early 1920 caused devastating damage to the settlement, flattening most of the buildings and destroying crops, fences, and trees. Rain caused flooding and left the settlement flood bound. Thirteen Aborigines died of exposure. Lou's house was one of the few left standing. His brother, Gustav Borgas, was sent to help rebuild the settlement and assist with the farm. It took about two years of rebuilding before the settlement was functional.¹³ The main support of the mission was timber hauled by ox teams to the railway

siding to sell in Cairns and other districts. For the mission to be self-supporting, the role of the sawmill under Borgas was central not only in the rebuilding program but in the production of timber to cover expenses!¹⁴ In 1924 Lou Borgas was appointed the assistant manager of the mission, and his wife was appointed the matron. But after further discussion, the Union Conference made Lou the superintendent. This released James Branford (superintendent since the Mona Mona Mission's inception) to give more time to spiritual work among the mission family.¹⁵ The Borgases' daughter, Beryl Eulalia, was born in 1925.

In 1926 both Borgas and Branford dedicated the first church building at the mission.¹⁶ Lou's new role led to him being more resourceful in continuing to keep the mission on a self-supporting basis, which was a government expectation. He was to be judge and to provide fatherly counsel to all those under his care. He found it challenging to try to correct bad habits, which often resulted in administering stern disciplinary measures to mission and non-mission Aborigines.¹⁷ Positive recognition was acknowledged by visiting Queensland officials and Dr. Baselow. The methods used at the Mona Mona Aboriginal Mission in training and management of residents were seen to be ahead of other government- or denomination-run settlements.¹⁸ Visits to the Mareeba, Cairns, and other districts by Lou and the Aboriginal choir left positive impressions in people's minds toward the work at Mona Mona. Lou and Ruth's son, Warren Lloyd, was born in 1927. By 1930, additional duties led to Lou and Ruth also being in charge of the boys' dormitory. Ruth attended to the secretarial and office work of the mission.

Solomon Islands

Lou and Ruth were next appointed to the Solomon Islands mission field in 1932. Prior to the family move, Lou visited the Solomon Islands alone.¹⁹ The visit with other missionaries left from Batuna for Tulagi (Marovo Lagoon), Malaita, Guadalcanal, and the Russell Island group. On his return to Australia, he was ordained to the ministry at Wahroonga, Sydney, in 1932.²⁰ Now based in Batuna as superintendent and being aware of teacher shortages, Borgas saw the need for prioritizing and addressing the needs of this vast field. There was the dedication of the ship *Portal* for Malaita, which had been two years without an expatriate to oversee the advancement of the work, and a replacement was now imminent. Previously Norman Ferris had made initial contact with a young Rennell Islander, and prospects for opening this unentered field looked bright. Both Borgas and Ferris traveled to Rennell Island, where they were welcomed by islanders and an influential chief.²¹ However, in discussing their intentions with the acting resident commissioner, they were denied approval to conduct a mission. A second visit to the island was futile, but Borgas promised the chief that they would return at another time.²² Some years later this promise was honored by Pastor Ferris. In 1933 Borgas took some indigenous teachers with him to assist the work on the Bougainville Islands. He visited isolated missions, giving Bible studies and talks, and he provided medical treatments to a large number of sick islanders. Lou Borgas found time for overseeing the work of the sawmill because timber was needed for the upgrade of buildings and

boat building. Logs were floated down to the mill, and some were taken by rail to the wharf to be used for other mission projects.²³

Return to Mona Mona

In 1934, Borgas and his family returned to Australia, and Lou was again superintendent of the Mona Mona mission.²⁴ He immediately set about to make the settlement self-sustaining. While there were new initiatives such as granting married Aborigines their own farms, the timber supply was gradually diminishing, and the run-down sawmill needed a lot of attention.²⁵ The Queensland Minister for Health praised the notable progress of the mission under Lou's administration.²⁶ A visit by Adventist Church officials resulted in discussions with Pastor Borgas over the continued support of the Aboriginal workers' future on the mission.²⁷ The mid 1940s saw the start of a major rebuilding of the entire mission settlement. Initially there were difficulties in securing the necessary materials, but progress slowly went forward, taking 15 years to complete.²⁸ By the late 1940s, the mission school had grown rapidly in student numbers, with an increase in teachers. Borgas conducted Bible study classes for the young people, resulting in baptisms. While at Mona Mona, the Borgases reared Vohnray Borgas, an Aboriginal boy left orphaned at birth. He lived in Cooranbong briefly but eventually returned to Northern Queensland.²⁹

New Britain Mission

Pastor and Mrs. Borgas gave their last years of mission service on the island of New Britain, New Guinea. Lou joined the building team at Put Put (later Kambubu), which had been destroyed during the war and was to be rebuilt. Lou's building and mechanical skills were well recognized, and he was put in charge of the sawmill to provide timber for the building program and timber for stations in the territories.³⁰

Final Years

Pastor Lou and Ruth Borgas retired to Cooranbong, New South Wales, in 1951.³¹ Their daughter, Beryl, trained as a Sydney Sanitarium nurse and married Alleyne Thompson on May 5, 1955.³² After Ruth passed away in 1975, Lou lived with his daughter in Mullumbimby, Queensland, until he died in October 1981, at the age of 94. Their son, Warren, worked at the Signs Publishing Company until 1992.³³

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