

# The Dimers of Nanambinia



Nanambinia Station was established by Heinrich Dimer, a butcher from Germany. He learned his trade from his father, who died when Heinrich was only 14 years old. In 1879, he emigrated to America at 18 years of age, and went to work in an abattoir in New York. After working there for three years, Heinrich wanted a change. He signed on as a crew member on a whaling ship called the *Platina*. After two years of backbreaking work and poor conditions, Heinrich decided to 'jump ship' in Albany. Ship jumpers faced severe punishment if they were caught, but luckily for Heinrich, he happened to meet a man called Campbell Taylor, who helped him to hide from the authorities.

## The *Platina*

was a whaling ship from New Bedford, Massachusetts. At the time, whaling was a huge worldwide



industry, with whale oil used for many different purposes, mostly in lamps used for lighting and as lubrication in machines, as well as in making some cosmetics and soap.

Whaling ships from many countries travelled to the waters off our coast to hunt the whales as they migrated in our southern waters.

Campbell had a property called Lynburn Station to the east of Esperance, and he took Heinrich there to work for him. In 1885, after a year of working for Campbell, Heinrich went to work for another one of the early European settlers in the district, John Paul Brooks, at Balbinia Station. His job was to shepherd the Brooks' sheep. As there were no fences on the properties at that time, shepherds would take the sheep to surrounding food and water sources, watching out for poisonous plants and dingoes.

Heinrich was to be paid £40 per year by John Paul, which he supplemented by shooting kangaroos and selling their skins. After three years of this work, he decided to go out on his own. John Paul didn't have the money to pay his wages for the three years' work, so Heinrich received 40 ewes and two rams instead. He got some Aboriginal people to shepherd his sheep, while he went kangaroo hunting. During this time, he met a Ngadju woman called Belang, and the two of them had a daughter, Catherine, in 1889, and a son named Jacob in 1891.

While working as a shepherd, Heinrich found he had spare time in the evenings, so he started writing his life story by the light of a 'slush lamp' - an old jam tin filled with mutton fat, with a piece of flannel put in the middle as a wick. He'd written 400 pages when tragedy struck - returning to his camp one night, he found the tent had burnt to the ground, with all his belongings inside.

In 1890, Heinrich met a woman called Topsy Whitehand. Topsy was the daughter of a Nyungar woman called Anna Whitehand and a European man, believed by many to be William Ponton, one of the Ponton brothers who came to the region in 1873. During that time period, many European settlers had relationships with Aboriginal women, but due to the social stigma of these kinds of relationships at the time, they often went unacknowledged.

Heinrich and Topsy began a relationship, moving back to Lynburn Station to work for Campbell Taylor. In August 1894, they had their first child, Harry Keith. At that time, the telegraph line, a major method of communication, went through Israelite Bay. The line was in bad shape, so the Government was constructing a new line further inland, and in 1896, Heinrich got a contract to cart telegraph poles from Israelite

Bay to the new section of telegraph line. When the new Israelite Bay Telegraph Station was completed that same year, the family rented the old weatherboard station building, which would have been very comfortable, as they were used to living in tents. Here, their second child, Bertha, was born in December 1897. That same year, Heinrich became a naturalised British subject – thirteen years after his desertion from the *Platina* - and from this time on he anglicised his name to Henry.

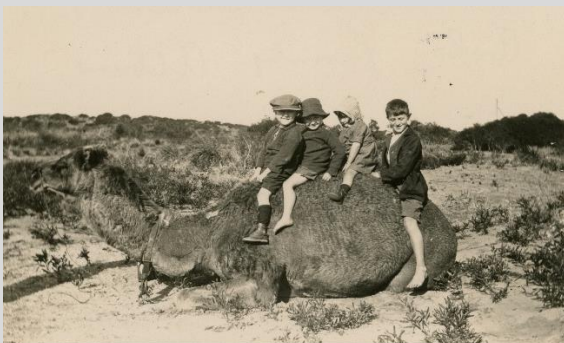
Henry and Topsy were officially married at Israelite Bay in May 1899 by the Reverend Alfred Burton, who made the 240-kilometre trip from Esperance for the occasion. After this, Henry built a two-bedroom limestone cottage at Israelite Bay, completing it by the time their third child, Hettie Annie, was born in May 1901.

## ONLY THE ESSENTIALS

Imagine jumping from a ship to start a new life in a new country like Heinrich Dimer did. You can only take a small bundle that you carry with you as you swim to shore. What are the most essential things you would want to take with you? What do you think would be most useful if you were alone in a strange land? What sentimental items would you take with you?

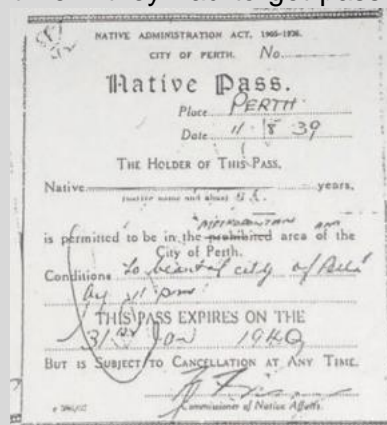
### A New Type of Transport

Camels were introduced to Australia in the 1800s. Most of them came from India and Afghanistan, and they were prized by early explorers and pastoralists as a mode of transport. Camels can go for long periods of time without water, making them much better for use in dry areas without reliable sources of water. Henry Dimer had a camel team that he used for carting goods throughout the region.



### A Hidden Identity

Topsy Dimer was a Nyungar woman, but the Dimer children did not openly acknowledge their Aboriginal heritage. One reason for this was that the government was beginning to take mixed race children away from their parents and place them in Missions. As well as that, Aboriginal people had less freedom to move around at the time – they had to get passes to go into some

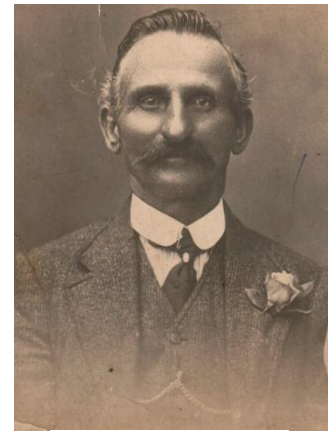


towns and were forbidden from entering other areas. At the same time, Henry employed many Aboriginal workers at Nanambinia and he learned a lot from them.

In February of 1902, Henry applied for a lease of 26,000 acres inland from Israelite Bay, near the Brooks family's Balbinia station. According to his son, Karl Dimer, the property was named after the Aboriginal word for a wattle tree that grows in the area, narnoo, and the suffix -binya, which means 'something small'. Narnoobinya was changed or mispronounced to become Nanambinia. Henry began building a house on the property in 1903, starting with a one bedroom stone cottage with a kitchen. Before the house was finished, their fourth child, Thomas, was born in 1903.

Over time, the family gradually added to the house, until it became a substantial five bedroom homestead with a kitchen, dining room, store room, 'wash house', and an underground cement tank for collecting water. They added to their lease holdings over the years, and by the 1930s, they had over half a million acres. The couple had more children, with Fred born in 1905, Walter in 1908, Sydney in 1911, Karl in 1913, and Barney in 1915.

The children were involved in all aspects of station life, with the girls, Bertha and Annie, working just as hard as the boys. As well as taking rations to the shepherds, checking water and stock, and working in the garden, Bertha kept milking cows, so the family had their own milk, cream, and butter.



**Henry Dimer**

In 1918, Topsy got sick and Henry called for the nearest doctor to come from Norseman. Sadly, Topsy died soon after at the age of 42. Henry and his children continued to run the station. They had vegetable gardens, fruit trees, crops, chickens, sheep, cattle, donkeys, horses, and camels, as well as running a shearing team, and a butcher shop in Norseman for a time.

Henry died in 1936, and the property passed on to his children who ran it until it was sold in 1980.

### Problems with Isolation

When the Dimer family was living at Nanambinia, their nearest neighbours lived on the stations close by, such as Balbinia and Deralinya. Their closest neighbours were at Booanya, 11 kilometres away. The Dimers took this in their stride, and often travelled many kilometres to visit their neighbours. Harry was a keen tennis player, and would often ride his bicycle to Israelite Bay, a distance of 128 kilometres, for the weekend to play tennis. He would also frequently ride to tennis matches at Balladonia, 37 kilometres away. They loved having visitors, and Bertha and Annie would entertain them by playing songs on the organ. They also had a gramophone and they'd put on records and dance the night away!

As well as bicycles, which were a common mode of transport at the time, the family also had horses, donkeys, camels and motorbikes, and in 1926, they bought their first motor car, a model T Ford which was called 'Daisy'.



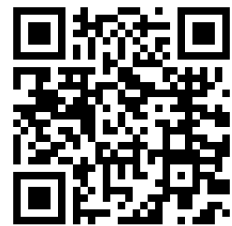
Nanambinia's isolation caused difficulties for the family as well – if they wanted to sell their livestock, they would have to take them on the long journey to Norseman or Esperance, herding them along rough tracks with horses. Most of their goods came by ship to Israelite Bay, and later on, by railroad to Rawlinna. One of the biggest difficulties was getting to a hospital if they were sick. The nearest doctor was 180 kilometres away from Nanambinia in Norseman. On one occasion, Harry Dimer almost died from appendicitis. He was taken to hospital in Kalgoorlie, a journey of two days, where he had urgent surgery to remove his ruptured appendix.



## Activities and Research

1. Henry Dimer was born in 1861, and he arrived in Albany in 1884. Using the information mentioned in this handout and in the Dimer Family of Nanambinia documentary, write a timeline of Henry's life, detailing all the major events and when they took place.
2. In the 1800s, whaling was a huge industry. How was Western Australia involved in the whaling industry? What kinds of whales were hunted off our coastline? What year did whaling cease in Western Australia?
3. The Dimer family used bicycles, horses, camels, and donkeys for transport, and later cars and motorbikes, as well as ships and trains from time to time. What are the pros and cons of travelling by each of these types of transport? Which would you prefer to use?
4. Topsy and Henry Dimer's children faced extra difficulties if they acknowledged their Aboriginal heritage. One of these difficulties was that they were prohibited from entering some towns. In Perth, there was a designated area of the city where Aboriginal people were not allowed. Go to the website [www.perthprohibitedarea.com](http://www.perthprohibitedarea.com) and watch the short video there. How do you think restrictions like this affected Aboriginal people? What kind of ongoing impacts from this kind of discrimination do you think Aboriginal people face today?
5. Imagine the kinds of work that the Dimer family had to do to keep their station running. Every day they had to shepherd sheep, milk cows, tend the crops and garden, and care for their other animals, as well as preparing food and having some leisure time. Write a journal entry imagining that you work on the Dimer's property. What would your work day look like? What would you enjoy doing? What do you think your least favourite tasks would be?

Watch this episode of the Esperance Historic Homesteads documentary series online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4nm3M4ROFE0> or scan the QR code →



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Produced by Karli Florisson 2024

### References

*Elsewhere Fine*, by Karl Dimer, South West Printing, 1989

*Black, White, and In Between*, by Peter Gifford, Hesperian Press, 2002

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