

MONGRELISM AND MANA

THE RISE OF THE PATCHED STREET GANGS, 1960s–1970s

Around the same time that the Hells Angels were transitioning from milk bar cowboys into an outlaw motorcycle club, a group of bodgies created what became arguably New Zealand’s most notorious street gang, the Mongrel Mob. The Mob began in the early 1960s as a small group of predominantly Pakeha youths from Wellington and Hawke’s Bay who went on to establish the gang’s name and some of its defining behaviours and symbols. But the Mob, like the gang scene generally, underwent an ethnic transformation as immigration and internal migration created a social environment conducive to the formation of Polynesian gangs. By the mid-1970s, all street gangs were patched and using the same organisational structures as the outlaw clubs. The Mongrel Mob spread rapidly throughout most of the country. But acting as a counterbalance was their greatest rival, a gang that attempted to forge a positive presence, and which also expanded at express pace: Black Power.

THE MONGRELS

Given the dearth of literature on New Zealand gangs, the legend of the Mongrel Mob’s inception has been recorded surprisingly often – albeit in somewhat contradictory versions. The Mongrel Mob – or ‘Mongrels’ as they were known

until around 1970 – is widely reported to have formed in 1956,¹ when a group of youths are said to have appeared before the Hastings Magistrate’s Court and been denounced as ‘mongrels’.² It is the belief of many authors, and indeed Mongrel Mob members themselves, that the pejorative label appealed to the youths, who adopted it as their gang name.

None of the literature cites a reference for the year 1956, but its source may have been an article in the *New Zealand Truth* published in 1971 in which a Mongrel Mob member claimed that the gang was in existence at that time.³ In 1956, however, the founding members of the Mongrels were only about ten years old and had not yet met, so the date is clearly incorrect. Exactly when the gang did form remains uncertain.

While all of the original members believe the Hastings Court story to be true, none I have spoken to – when pressed for details – can specifically remember the court incident in Hastings from which the gang’s name is said to have derived, except one who says it happened in 1962 and occurred in either the Hutt Valley or Wellington.⁴ Another founding member, while not dismissing the story, believes the name was first adopted after local police in Wellington habitually called the youths ‘mongrels’:

It [the court case incident in Hastings] probably did [happen], but it happened in Wellington first and it was from the CIB it used to be in them days. You know as far as I can remember back, they [the police] just used to think we were a pack of mongrels [and would call us that].⁵

After speaking with many of the original and early members of the Mongrels, I am not convinced that the court incident occurred at all. The name was nevertheless adopted by the gang as they saw it as an apt description of themselves.

One long-time (but not original) Mongrel Mob member, Dennis Makalio, has become something akin to the gang’s unofficial historian, but his efforts at detailing its early history have proven equally troubled. Even without exact data, Makalio has concluded, contrary to popular belief, that the gang’s name first emerged in the Wellington region – not Hawke’s Bay – in 1962. As such, he believes Wellington and not Hastings is the gang’s ‘Fatherland’, the term used by Mongrel Mob members to recognise Hastings as the gang’s birthplace.

One reason for the lack of clarity regarding the gang’s precise origin is the transient early lives of many of its founding members. Prominent original Mongrels like Peter (‘PD’) Steffert, his brother Chappy, and Gary Gerbes met

in the early 1960s after being sent to welfare establishments in the Wellington region as adolescents. Following stints in state care, the youths remained in Wellington for a short time, where some were part of a group called the Petone Rebels, before following Gerbes back to Hawke's Bay where he had grown up. The youths' style at this point was a hangover from the fading bodgie movement: 'We had long hair . . . earrings, gloves – no leathers – pea jackets, purple socks – that's what we were, man.'⁶

For several years, the young men, singly or collectively, split their time between Hawke's Bay and Wellington, making friends in each region. Apart from lags in borstal, they moved around often, motivated by a desire to seek adventure. The abundant employment market of the 1960s allowed a freedom to pick up jobs when required. Founding member Chappy Steffert recalls:

We never stayed anywhere too long. Buying cars and lairing it up here and there. [We would get] out of Borstal and many of these guys would have nowhere to go so they'd go to Wellington because there was that much work . . . We were always coming backwards and forwards . . . we always used to come back to the Bay. There was shearing and all that.⁷

Although Makalio believes the Mongrels' name was first adopted in 1962, I have been unable to find references to it in the media until very late in the decade, and these are from Hawke's Bay and not Wellington. In 1967, four original members of the gang were arrested in Hastings for wilful damage, obscene language, assault and resisting arrest, but there is no mention of them being 'Mongrels', or members of a gang at all.⁸ The first specific mention of the gang that I have found is in reports of the disturbances at the 1969 Hastings Blossom Festival.⁹ After this time, the name becomes common in both Hawke's Bay and Wellington newspapers.¹⁰

The paucity of media references to the gang in the 1960s is noteworthy and suggests it came about later in the 1960s, perhaps as late as 1968, or that, without a common identifier like a patch, the gang existed but was not easily recognised by the police or media.* In addition, they were possibly too small and transient

* Without firm evidence to the contrary, and based on numerous conversations with those within and surrounding the group in the 1960s, this date is as likely as any for the genuine inception of the gang. Nevertheless, it remains a distinct possibility, perhaps likely, that the name was used in a loose way before that time.

to become a matter of anyone's particular focus. By the late 1960s, however, there were loose groups calling themselves Mongrels in Hawke's Bay and in the Wellington region: '[There were] different pockets – there was nothing united. There were different Mobs.'¹¹

In contrast to the growing number of outlaw motorcycle clubs with formal leadership and organisational structure, by the end of the 1960s the Mongrels were simply a loose-knit collection of rebellious youths and young men: 'When you look back on it nothing was planned, it just sort of happened . . . People drifted in and drifted out. It was like an unorganised family.'¹² In fact, it appears likely that different groups came and went in different places, but the name was kept alive by core members. One member of the gang in the late 1960s had previously been a member of a group called the Hastings Night Hawks in the middle of the decade, suggesting the name was not being used then or that there was a lull in the area for a short time.¹³

Despite their disorganised nature in the late 1960s, the Mongrels were nevertheless establishing many of the behaviours and rituals that became synonymous with the gang. Makalio may be correct to argue that the Mongrel Mob's 'Fatherland' label should be shifted to the Wellington region, but it was in Hawke's Bay that the gang early forged its reputation for violence, and it was to the standard of the Hawke's Bay Mongrels that other groups of Mongrels would aspire. As Gary Gerbes explained it:

We would fight them [people wanting to join the gang] ourselves and see what they could do, or else we would send them in against terrible odds, wait a while, and then go in and smash them [the opposition]. It was all about muscle. We hated bikers and the only other gangs were the Hells Angels, no Niggers [Black Power], no nothing. We just developed utter strength. We built strength. Our other hate was boat people [seamen], overseas ships. And we specialised in going out and wiping pubs out. About eight of us. Tough cunts. And we established such a strong name. If anyone said anything wrong about the Mongrels I would just smash them.¹⁴

But the word 'mongrel' did not just offer the group of youths a name; it began to be used to actively define them. In what can be seen as a classic case of labelling, the gang started a process of secondary deviation by embarking on 'mongrel' behaviour.¹⁵ The label that had been given and subsequently adopted due to petty acts of misbehaviour began to define the self-image and actions of

its members, which became more extreme. One story Gerbes related involved him and another member of the gang drinking at the Provincial Hotel in Napier, when a female associate made a snide insult about the group. In retaliation, Gerbes grabbed her by the legs and held her up by her ankles, ripping her underwear off with his teeth. After discovering she was menstruating, he pulled her tampon out with his mouth and shook his head smearing blood over his face. The other Mongrel then licked the blood off his face and they both tore at the tampon and ate it.¹⁶

With a certain degree of self-consciousness from a man who at the time of interview was approaching sixty years of age, Gerbes said such acts were a way to

justify our standing. Class acts. Most people would go . . . like it was yuck . . . But those are the sort of stunts we used to pull. The sort of things we used to do because we were Mongrels. It was just a thing of class. Our law was our law. It was bad law, it was dumb law – ah – not bad law; it wasn't bad then. But it was just a law all of its own.

Without the impediment of adult supervision, the young men were unknowingly forging enduring subcultural elements. The 'law' Gerbes described would eventually be termed 'mongrelism' by the gang. The concept is somewhat difficult to define, but is basically any outrageous behaviour that distinguishes a Mongrel Mob member's actions from those that are socially acceptable. This creed became embedded in the gang's collective consciousness. Outlaw motorcycle clubs like the Hells Angels were also engaging in defiant antisocial activities, but the Mongrel Mob's undertakings appear more extreme. Indeed, the gang would later commit some of the most notorious crimes of physical and sexual violence in modern New Zealand history, and much of this behaviour is linked to the ideals fostered within the Mongrel Mob during this time.

In recent times, Bruno Isaac, a former Mongrel Mob member, described the gang's attitude in the 1980s:

If it was considered evil, bad and lawless we embraced it as good; everything was backward or ironic. The "mystery" of the gang was that we were right even if we were wrong; we were good even if we were bad. We embraced a living contradiction. The Mob psyche may have made no sense to outsiders but everything made perfect sense to us. Being a Mongrel meant being able to do anything your mind

could conceive; any form of fantasy or debauchery you were able to dream up was acceptable.¹⁷

For Gerbes, the gang's antisocial outlook was an outcome of the treatment that many of the youths had received while in state care:

A lot of those guys [early Mongrels] went through the same place – Levin Training Centre and Epuni Boys' Home . . . It was pretty sad and pretty demoralising – there was sexual abuse by the people that ran the place [and] absolutely shocking violence. I was just a kid and I ran away once. I was made to stand on a square at strict attention and talk to myself. If I stopped saying “legs, legs why did you run away” I would be beaten and thrown in a shed – locked in a shed . . . Those places destroyed our fuckin' heads, man. [So we said] fuck the system. If that was the way they were going to treat us, then we will treat them the same way. We were going to give them what they gave us – and [via the Mongrel Mob] they got it all right.¹⁸

While violent and antisocial acts became core elements within the Mongrels, the gang was also establishing powerful symbols. One media account from Hastings in 1966 reported that painted swastikas appeared around the town during the Blossom Festival of that year.¹⁹ Although it was not known who was responsible for the vandalism, the Mongrels, like the early Hells Angels at that time, claimed the swastika for their gang, not to demonstrate any racist attitudes, but in symbolic defiance of social norms. To mainstream New Zealand, the swastika represented something terrible and despicable; thus, the Mongrels saw it as a perfect example of mongrelism. The Nazi cry of 'Sieg heil' also became an enduring and important part of the gang's lexicon.

The Mongrel Mob salute developed in the late 1960s too. Members extend the thumb and little finger of one hand while clenching the remaining three digits. The salute is now given with the back of the hand pointing away from the body and looks like the 'shaka' sign commonly used within surfer culture (and indeed by many people as a friendly acknowledgement or greeting). But old photos show that initially the signal was given with the palm of the hand facing outward. The exact origin of the Mob salute is unclear, but many within the gang suggest that the extended thumb and finger look like the ears of a dog, and thus the salute was intended to mimic the bulldog that the gang adopted as a symbol in the late 1960s or early 1970s. Around the same point,

the gang adopted a guttural bark used variously in greeting, celebration, or anger.

Another story about the salute says that PD Steffert, in a display of loyalty to the gang, cut off the three middle digits of one hand so that he would always give the Mongrels' salute. However, according to Gerbes, Steffert lost his fingers in an industrial accident while working in a factory in Petone in the early 1960s. Whenever Steffert waved or gave a Nazi salute, only his little finger and thumb were visible on his misshapen hand, and it is possible that the salute derived from that circumstance.

In numerous ways, then, by means of visual representation, attitudes, symbolic representations, and language, the group was creating more than just a gang. To become a Mongrel was to join a subculture with a collective way of defining its existence. The Mongrel label was embraced by members in a somewhat literal sense as well – mongrels being dogs of mixed breed – and gang members began to pride themselves on accepting anybody who could show true mongrelism, regardless of their ethnicity. While Pakeha youths had originally formed the group's core, by the end of the 1960s the gang had transformed to include a significant number of Maori members:

To me that [ethnic background] doesn't mean jackshit. A Mongrel is just a Mongrel whether he's Maori, Chinese, Russian or Bob Turk down the fuckin' road. He's a mongrel.²⁰

There was all sorts, mate, Maoris, Coconuts [Polynesians] – anyone that was sort of that way, off the beaten track – they were always with us. We had all fuckin' sorts with us.²¹

The gang's willingness to accept members from a range of ethnicities proved significant as immigration from the Pacific and Maori internal migration grew rapidly in the 1960s. These processes transformed not just the Mongrels, but the entire New Zealand gang scene.