

An aerial photograph of a landscape, likely a river valley, with a green overlay and a white border. The text "Aboriginal Women's Heritage: Nepean" is centered over the green area.

# Aboriginal Women's Heritage: Nepean



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Aboriginal readers are warned that this publication contains the names and images of Aboriginal people who have since passed away.

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# Aboriginal Women's Heritage: Nepean

## Acknowledgments

A big thank you to the seven Aboriginal women who shared their stories for this publication. Your stories will help educate people and give them an understanding of what it was like growing up as Aboriginal women. It will also be beneficial for today's younger generation in that it shows the changes that have occurred over the years and the change of peoples' attitudes towards Aboriginal culture. I really want to thank you all for making my job easy and pleasurable.

A special thank you to Kath Schilling, Aboriginal Women's Heritage Coordinator and Sabine Partl for helping me bring the stories to publication, Vanessa Kendall and Sharon Riley for help with some of the interviews.

A special thank you too, for the Sydney Catchment Authority and their support through this project.

**Mark Simon**

*Aboriginal Heritage Conservation Officer,  
Special Areas Nattai Reserves,  
Central Aboriginal Heritage Region*

# Introduction

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Seven Aboriginal women from areas surrounding the Nepean River in Sydney's south west, contributed to this publication and took part in a project instigated by the Department of Environment and Conservation, NSW in an effort to raise the profile of Aboriginal women in New South Wales.

The seven Aboriginal women in *Aboriginal Women's Heritage: Nepean*, tell their own life stories. They tell about the changes they have seen over the years. They recall stories about the chores they had to do when they were young and what they liked and disliked about those chores. Things like fetching the household water from the river by bucket as there was no water to their houses in the early days; collecting and boiling water for bathing, collecting wood to boil the copper for the family's washing and collecting wood for the fires were part of the day to day work. They tell of the daily routines, like milking cows and getting meals for their younger brothers and sisters while their parents were out working. The women tell how the family would use an ice chest to keep their food chilled and fresh. Stories about fruit picking, fishing and trapping rabbits. They tell about growing their own fruit and vegetables and eating whatever they grew or caught to supplement the family's diet. One of the women talks about the *Stolen Generations*<sup>1</sup> and how she was never to see her father again, how at the age of seven she was separated from her brothers and sisters. The women grew up in an era when they were not encouraged to talk about their Aboriginality. One lady recalls getting into trouble from her mother when she asked about her father's heritage. Some of the women tell how they were raised in political times, during a time when the first Aboriginal Tent Embassy<sup>2</sup> was being established and during the fight to get the Yes Vote during the 1967 Referendum<sup>3</sup>. They talk about the education they received; some good, some not so good and leaving school to work at a young age. One woman tells of her first four

years of work and how she gave her unopened pay packet to her mother and how all she wanted from her pay packet was her weekly train ticket to get to and from work. Most of the Aboriginal women in the story had to work from a very young age to earn money to add to the family income and household, whether it was work in an office, in a factory or at cleaning.

The common link between the women's stories is their desire to teach and encourage young people to learn about Aboriginal culture and to make the public aware of what it was like to be an Aboriginal woman in the nineteen forties and fifties. The stories the Aboriginal women tell are told in the hope that they can educate future generations.

This book is the tenth in a series of publications focused on Aboriginal women's heritage across the state of New South Wales<sup>4</sup>.

- 1 Stolen Generations, removalist policies practised by the Aborigine's Protection Board and Aboriginal Welfare Board, see: <http://www.humanrights.gov.au>
- 2 The Tent Embassy is directly in front of Old Parliament House Canberra. It was established in 1972, and although it has been pulled down and rebuilt over the years, it is currently standing.
- 3 the Referendum was held on 27 May 1967 and more than 90% of Australians voted to remove clauses in the Australian Constitution which discriminated against Indigenous people.
- 4 Nambucca, Nowra, Brungle & Tumut, Wollongong, Port Stephens and Bourke, Walgett and Collarenebri, Men's Heritage, Women's heritage and Wagga Wagga.





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# Jenny Alcock

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*When we were kids we only had an old wood stove to cook on.  
And I remember we used to have to collect water from the river with a bucket.*

My name is Jenny Mackay; I was born in Bourke on the 6th February 1953. My mum, Norma Mackay, was our sole parent. My grandmother (mum's mother) was Aboriginal, and my grandfather (mum's dad) was Scottish. Their names were Annie James and John Mackay. We were four children, my brothers Terry and John and my younger sister Margaret. I was the second child born. John lives in Katherine in the Northern Territory and Margaret lives in Sydney. Sadly our brother Terry passed away in 2003. He was a well respected man in Bourke.

## Our house

Our house in Bourke was just a basic fibro house in town. We didn't live on the mission. The house had two rooms and a kitchen. There was one big bedroom, the other room was a lounge room, but we used it as another bedroom. We used to get in trouble all the time for sitting on the beds because once the beds were made, our mum said we were not allowed to sit on them. I remember one of the rooms had a dirt floor with just some lino on top, the other room had a bare cement floor, and the third room had cement and lino on top. When I was young I used to dream of one day getting married

*Opposite: Norma Mackay (Jenny's mum) with baby Dennis Mackay  
Previous Page: Nepean Dam*

and living in a house with carpet. Our kitchen served for everything. It was kitchen and lounge room in one. It was all just one big dwelling, and our shower was outside under a tree. When it rained, we would run around looking for bags to put up at the windows to stop the rain from getting in.

## No electricity

We didn't have electricity until I was sixteen years old. I remember my oldest brother how he said to mum, he would give her his pay so she could get electricity for the house. But she didn't want it. She was used to living without it and that's how she wanted it. When my eldest daughter was about two years old, she said to her nan (my mum), "Nan, why don't you have a television?" Mum said that it was because there was no power outlet to plug it into. My daughter, being only two then, said we could plug the TV cord in one of the trees in the backyard. That was quite funny.

## Growing up in Bourke

I grew up in Green Street in Bourke. My best friend Judy Bye lived right next door. Her married name is Harland'. When we grew up we didn't have any money. But we always found things to do, we made

our own fun. The tip was close by, so we often just went there and looked for useful stuff. And I can remember how my brothers would go fishing in the Darling River all the time, they loved it. We never did anything that would get us into trouble. I feel that in my childhood people were too busy working and making sure that the family had enough food on the table. We weren't bored either. I remember how my mum would say, "Just make sure that you don't get into trouble. And if you do, don't come home!"

## School in Bourke

My best friend Judy and I went to school together. We went to Bourke Primary School and afterwards to Bourke High School. I spent a lot of time absent from school because I had to care for mum when she became ill. I left high school when I was about fifteen, must have been year eight. I remember Alma Jean Sullivan went to school with us as well. And there was Doris Turner<sup>2</sup>. She used to play the accordion and sing a lot. I think she still does.

## Mum worked hard

My mum was born on Clover Creek Station on the Louth Road. She had five brothers. Three of them served in World War II. Her brother, Paddy Mackay, was killed in the Pacific Islands in 1942.

Mum always worked hard. She never got any help from any of the family and I never ever met my grandparents. Although she worked hard and was a sole parent, mum made sure that she brought us up well. She would go out picking oranges and mandarins when the fruit season was on. She also did all the washing and ironing for a boarding house which was managed by Grace Williams, who was Judy's mother. Grace and mum were good friends. Mum liked going over to the park in the centre of Bourke, where she'd sit down and have a yarn with other Aboriginal people for hours. Mum always told us kids to be proud of our Aboriginality. And that's what I tell my kids and grandkids today.



## We would get the water from the river

Mum would do all of the cooking. We only had an old wood stove to cook on. Mum would cook lots of different things. I remember we used to have to bring the water up to the house from the river, we collected it in a bucket. There was nothing flash in those days.

## I married young

When I was about sixteen I left Bourke and moved to Sydney. I got married there and had three children. Semone is the eldest, she is thirty four now and lives at Minto. Rebecka is thirty two and lives in Campsie. They both have good government jobs. My son Aaron is twenty four and works as a dancer on cruise ships all over the world. I also reared three step children.

## My first job

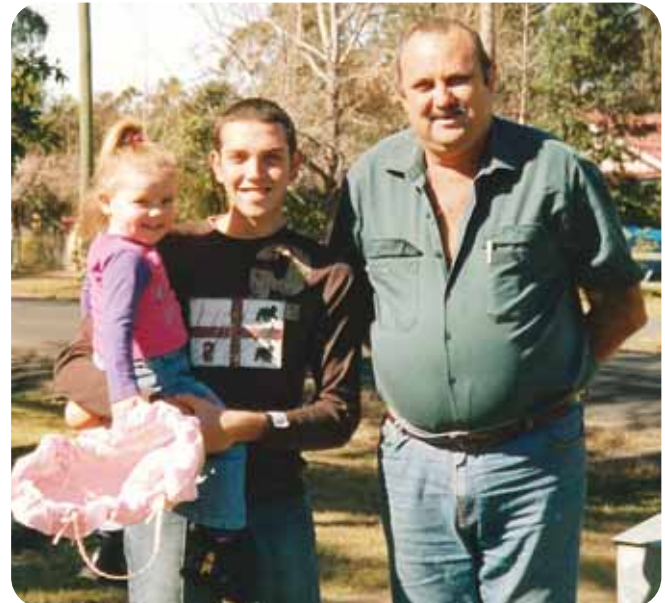
My first job was in an IXL factory at Petersham (Sydney). It produced jams, as well as canned peaches and apricots. I was involved in the production line that put the jams into jars. I started with the fruit and then eventually I packed cans. It didn't really put me off jams even though I was working with them and making them all the time. I still love apricot jam today.

## Bourke and Minto

I stayed in Sydney for about three or four years. I moved back to Bourke when my partner was working there for a while. Eventually I moved back to Sydney and lived in Marrickville for a while. I moved to Minto about twenty six years ago and have lived here ever since.

I work for the Tharawal Aboriginal Land Council here at Thirlmere. I am the secretary of this organisation and Co-ordinator of the 'meals-on-wheels' program.

*Opposite: Jenny with her brother John and little sister Margaret in the front. Taken in Bourke in the 1960s.  
Right: Jenny's son Aaron (holding his niece Kirrily) with Jenny's younger brother John.  
Top right: Jenny's daughter Semone (on the right) with her daughter Melissa.*



## My grand children

I have four grand children, Melissa, Jake, Hamish and Kirrily. They are all proud of their Aboriginal heritage. Sometimes I take them to work with me. At the Land Council office they meet other Aboriginal people, play around with Aboriginal kids, and they get to feel the sense of community we have here. My grandkids used to (and still do) identify my work by looking and pointing at the Aboriginal flag when we drive past. Hamish is in Year 3 at Harrington Park Public School. His teacher is very interested in Aboriginal culture which is good. Together with this teacher, Hamish and his class are preparing for a big celebration during NAIDOC Week each year.

I want my grandkids to always recognise and acknowledge who they are and where their heritage comes from. I keep saying to them, "hold your head up and be proud of who you are!"







*Above: From left to right: Jenny, Joe Mackay, and brother and sister John (Muso) and Margaret.  
Opposite, clockwise from top: Grandchildren: Hamish, Jake and Kirrily.*

1 Judy and her sisters Cecily and Caroline have contributed their own stories in the book *Aboriginal Women's Heritage: Bourke*.

2 Alma Jean Sullivan and Doris Turner are also featured in *Aboriginal Women's Heritage: Bourke*.





## Glenda Chalker

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*There are just so many questions that need to be answered but no one left to answer them.*

My birth name was Glenda Barrett and I was born on 15th December 1950. I'm the eldest of five children. I have three sisters and a brother who is eighteen months younger than me. I was born in the *Sunshine Hospital* in Camden. The hospital no longer exists. You know I was delivered at the hospital there and it scarred me for life, because during the birth, they took a chunk out of my head and I still don't have any hair there!

### Family and attachment to country

This is my country, the borderline here at Thirlmere Lakes. It's Gundungurra and Tharawal tribal country. I was born in Camden as was my father Ken, my grandfather Alfred James, my great grandfather James and my great great grandmother Mary Barrett. Even my great great great grandmother was born here. Nanny's tribal name was Giribungei. And that's as far back as we can go with actual documents. I have three children, Rebecca, Tammie and Daniel and I have ten grandchildren.



*Right: Glenda's grandparents, Alfred and Clara Barrett.*

*Opposite: Glenda with six of her ten grandchildren, Kirsty-Lee holding Nyimarlli and (left to right) Kiahni, Dwana, Ebony and Mundarra.*



*Above: From left to right: Glenda's grandfather, Alfred James and his sisters Thelma Irene and Alice Barrett.*

*Opposite: Glenda's grandfather, Alfred James Barrett (left) with his brother-in-law Michael Clout.*



## Aboriginality

I didn't really discover my own Aboriginality until I was an older person. I had never really recognised my own grandfather as a traditional man. He was just grandfather to me. He was very dark and I never even noticed that as being any different to anyone else. Today I can see the rewarding things in my own Aboriginal spirituality. I've had some things happen to me that have just changed my whole perception on everything and that's been through that spirituality.

## Aboriginality was on my father's side

My traditional links are through my dad's father around Camden, in the Macarthur area. My grandfather died when I was twenty three years old. My grandmother was a white woman, she died when my father was only seventeen, so I never got to know her and I never knew my great grandparents at all. My great grandfather was born in 1862 and he died in 1933, well before I was born. He hadn't married until he was in his forties, so his youngest child was only nine years old when he died.

## I spent a lot of time with my grandfather

My grandfather would take my brother and me fishing, rabbiting and foxing all around Camden Park. There was never an issue as far as access to land and fishing on the Nepean River was concerned in those days. We went anywhere from the Menangle area right up to Douglas Park, all along the river there. My brother and I spent a lot of time with my grandfather, especially in school holidays and weekends. I remember we'd ride our bikes from Camden to Menangle, which is where he lived. Sometimes we'd get a flat tyre and someone would pick us up from the side of the road. Everyone in Camden Park knew who we were, so they'd just pick us up and take us to wherever we needed to go. We had a pretty good time from about eight or nine years old right up until our teens because we had a pretty free rein. Unfortunately kids don't get this today.



## My grandfather loved fishing

I guess rabbit and fish was the staple part of our diet in my childhood. Sometimes we'd catch so many rabbits that we'd sell the ones we didn't need for ourselves to the butchers. My grandfather would dry out the skins and let us sell them for our pocket money. So he was a big influence in our lives. He loved fishing. After work he'd be down there at the river and if he wasn't fishing that day, he'd be setting up for the next day. I remember we'd go on holidays up to South West Rocks up on the North Coast. Grandfather was able to sit there all day, crouched down on his haunches, just sitting there fishing for black fish. That was his favourite fish. When we were up there, fishing on the Nepean River, it was mullet, perch or catfish we'd catch. Unfortunately, I haven't been fishing like that for a long time.

## My brother and I went rabbiting

If my brother and I weren't at our grandfather's during school holidays we'd be out rabbiting by ourselves. If we didn't have a ferret to go rabbiting with we'd dig the burrows out with our hands. My father said to me, "one day, you're going to grab hold of a bloody big snake," and sure enough, one day we were out ferreting and a snake did come out of a rabbit hole! I never put my hand down a rabbit hole ever again! I dropped the bag of rabbits and I took off for my life. But Camden is quite different today. All the paddocks where we once roamed around as kids now have houses on them.

## We lost access to the land and the river

My grandfather died in 1973 and about the time of his death Camden Park was sold, so access to all that land wasn't available any more. Access to the river wasn't available any more either. Originally it was sold for development. But part of it now belongs to the Government's *Elizabeth Macarthur Agriculture Institute* and some of the land is privately owned. So now, I don't think my father's been fishing on the Nepean River for the past thirty years. He's seventy-five, so he'll probably never ever do that again.

## There is a lot of family around the Camden area

My great grandfather was born in 1862, his mother's name was Mary Barrett. When he was about six years old she married a man named James English and then went on to have ten or twelve more children with him. There's a lot of people around the Camden area who maintain the Barrett name, that's my grandfather's name. Then there's a lot of other people with the name English.

## The last of the local Aborigines

Suzanne Sophaline, Mary's eldest sister, is buried and recorded as the *last of the local Aborigines*. She died in 1915 and she was the

eldest of five children. She never married. One of my great aunts, I can vaguely remember her; she's passed on now too. They used to call her *Black Suzanne*. That's how they recorded things back in those days. Now we can tell the truth of our history and fix the inaccuracies of the past.

## Dharawal language

I really think we need to start recording our heritage again and continue it on. There's a group of people bringing back the Dharawal language and I think that's important. People presume that because I say I'm from this area, I should know things. They think I should know the meaning of a tree, and other cultural things like that. They think that I should know what it means in the Aboriginal language and I don't. People assume that you should know things and I don't know if they're to blame for that or if we as Aboriginal people are to blame. I guess they just assume things when you're an Aboriginal person.

## School

I went to school at St Paul's Primary School here in Camden (it's a Catholic school) and then I went to Camden High School. I actually did my School Certificate. The class I was in was the first with Aboriginal students who did the School Certificate. That was in 1966. I met my future husband, Ken at that school. At first I didn't know him, but we were actually in the same year back in 1966.

## I was offered a job

After school I went to TAFE for six months and I was offered a job. You don't hear of that happening these days. You see, the local pharmacist had gone to the Principal at Camden High School to ask if he could recommend someone for a position. He recommended me! So I started work at the pharmacy when I was sixteen and I did that job up until after I was married.





*Above: Nepean River*

## I remember mum and dad's first house

Dad started working when he was only about fourteen or fifteen years old. Mum and he got married when they were both in their twenties and the first house they bought was here in Camden. It was a three-bedroom fibro place that cost them eighteen hundred pounds, equivalent to about three thousand five hundred dollars in today's money. That was back in the early 1950s. Dad told me that he had been saving all the way through his school years.

## There were always ample amounts of fruit

We always had enough to eat when I was a child because on Camden Park there were dairies and orchards everywhere. My grandfather's brother Charlie managed an orchard so we were always given ample fruit to eat. And things like milk and cream were in abundance too. We used to take our billy<sup>1</sup> or our bucket down the road to the dairy. I remember my grandfather would fill the cans up and we just had so much milk and cream all the time. So, I guess we were lucky in a lot of ways. We sort of grew up in a different situation to most people. The only thing Camden Park didn't supply was meat. If you lived on Camden Park you had to buy meat and bread and that sort of thing, but milk and fruit, were always available.

## Copper boiler

I remember the fuel stove we had in the house when I was a child and I can remember having to light up the copper boiler for my mother so that she could boil up the washing. Not that I can remember ever doing the washing myself, but I can remember having to light the chip heater to get hot water for a bath. And if the fuel stove wasn't going in a morning when I wanted breakfast, we'd have to light up the old primus, the old kerosene primus<sup>2</sup> to boil our porridge on. We didn't have an electric stove. I can also remember a kerosene fridge, it was a green contraption.



## First television

When I was about eight or nine years old, the first television came out. I think we got one when I was about ten or eleven, before that we used to go up to my grandfather's house to watch because he already had one.

## Chores

Everyone hated doing chores. I was the eldest of five children so anyone who's the eldest knows what it's like. My mother went back to work when I was about ten or eleven you see, so I was the one who always had all the little ones to care for. My youngest sister is eight years younger than me. So she was still virtually a baby when Mum went back to work. My mother used to work at the Camden Valley Inn, in Camden, which meant she was away from probably early afternoon through to probably late at night. So there were always meals to get and always kids to bath.

*Above: Aerial photo of Camden Park.*

*Opposite Right: Glenda with her uncle Charlie at South West Rocks.*

## My father worked at the same place all his life

My father worked at a place called *Southwell Engineering* in Camden, which is where he started his apprenticeship and where he retired from. He worked there for fifty years before he retired.

## South West Rocks

South West Rocks is where we went for holidays. My mother and father started going up there when I was five and they still go up there now and we still go up there to this very day. I'm fifty-five this year. We always went up in the May school holidays, only once a year. Two of my grandchildren have a connection to that country now, because their father is Thunghutti. That's two of my daughter Rebecca's children. They've got their own little bit of connection to that place now. It's just a beautiful place.



## We did it pretty hard for a while

When my husband and I moved out to Pheasants Nest, I actually used to breed rabbits. You don't get them now. We did it pretty hard for a while. We had three kids and a big mortgage and Ken sort of moved from one job to another. There were a lot of problems back in those days and there wasn't a lot of money partly because of the strikes. That was back in the times when we all had to fight for decent wages and conditions. Luckily we were able to live off our land. We had our own cow, grew our own vegetables and we had our own rabbits. I remember we used to make our own butter out of the milk and cream and we had our own chooks too. So we didn't have to worry so much about buying the food during the strikes at least.

## There is a big gap to fill

I'm only sorry now that I didn't ask my grandfather things. Because even at the age of twenty-three, that's how old I was when he died, my heritage still didn't mean anything to me. I'm sorry now that I didn't know to ask. Even though he taught us a lot about the bush and getting around in the bush, there's more that I would have liked to know now, today. I would have particularly liked to know about his father and his grandmother. I know heritage wasn't talked about back then and today I probably know more than my father knows! You see I don't think my grandfather even told my father either. He never told his own son anything. If I knew back then what I know now, things would have been different. Now I have so many questions and there is no one to answer them. We need the continuity, because our history has been broken, there are gaps that need to be filled.

## Chairperson of the local Native Title group

Nowadays I'm the Chairperson of Cubbitch Barta Native Title Group, which is made up of family members. I'm also a member of Tharawal Local Aboriginal Land Council.

<sup>1</sup> colloquialism for a bucket. A bucket was called a billy can.

<sup>2</sup> A primus was a single hot plate over a kerosene flame.





JOYCE HERBERT, 14, who stayed in Sydney when 18 other half-caste children were transferred to South Australia last Monday. She was photographed yesterday pasting stamps in her album at the home where she is hiding. Story, page 5.

## Joyce Dukes

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*They are just little things I grab, joining up my kinship. I meet relatives everywhere. Every time I go back to Groote Eylandt, I am getting a cultural education there on kinship.*

### Born at Roper River Mission

I was born on the Roper River Mission, East Arnhem Land, in the Northern Territory, in 1934. My full name is Joyce Margarite Dukes and my maiden name was Herbert. My parents were Priscilla and Edward Herbert and they too were raised on the Roper River Mission.

### My parents

My mother was born at Alexandria Downs<sup>1</sup>. She kind of lost her history because in her day back when she was born, the Territory wasn't safe. Her parents took her from Alexandria Downs to the Roper River Mission<sup>2</sup>. She always talked about Alexandria Downs and Lake Nash<sup>3</sup>.

My dad was born at Borroloola<sup>4</sup>. His parents took him to the Roper River Mission too. It was safe at Roper River Mission you see. I used to correspond with my dad. He left Roper after the war to go and work. Then they established Umbakumba. It is now an Aboriginal community. So I have got my roots back there as well.

### My siblings

I am the second eldest child in the family. My eldest brother Alfie, died in 2001. The Church Missionary Society fostered my brother out when we were young. He went to a very good foster family up at Wyong. My mother conceded to that because she knew the foster parents and she knew that they were good people. She had to work you see and she didn't have time to raise the both of us kids. I only found out when I was a lot older that there were other children after my brother Alfie and myself. There were Laurel, Wendy, Bruce, Barry, Billy, Richard and Betty. So there were nine of us.

In later years when my brothers and sisters from Groote Eylandt<sup>5</sup> knew that Jack (my partner) and I were in Darwin, they organised a reunion. It was only after I got married that I found out that I even had two half sisters. I met them at the reunion, one lives in Palmerston in Darwin and the other one lives in Alice Springs. I came home this one day and the other relatives came and it was the first time that we had been together, all of us, except Alfie because he was down here in Sydney. It was a good time.

*Opposite: An article of Joyce in the Daily Telegraph, 29th January 1949.*



## Growing up at Roper

I can remember eating crocodile meat when I was little up there on the Roper River. My uncle and dad used to go out in their canoe to catch the crocodiles for their skin. They would use the crocodile skins for handbags, shoes and those sorts of things and the missionaries used to sell the pelts too. And we'd have the young crocodiles cooked on the coals, for food. I did eat bush tucker up there, real bush tucker. I can remember our auntie used to take the kids out in the bush and show us all the different sorts of bush tucker.

Aunty Margaret used to be the one to tell us all the Dreamtime stories too. I can remember when I was little, at Roper, how they used to take us into the bush to teach us all bush craft. It was difficult for Aboriginal people to keep up their traditional language. I've got a recording of aunty Margaret telling a group that the missionaries would not let them talk to their tribal relatives (they lived on the outskirts). But they used to sneak out and talk with them and that's how mum, aunty Margaret and aunty Mari kept their language, which was good, and they were really good times.

## Moving to Mulgoa

I was seven when I left the Roper River Settlement. I can remember my dad handing me over and putting me on a boat. We travelled from Roper to Roper Bar<sup>6</sup> in a boat. That was the last time I saw him, back when I was seven. I never ever thought that I might be one of the stolen generation kids but my sister pointed it out. We moved away from Roper River when the bombing of Darwin started and there was a fear that the Japanese would invade The Top End<sup>7</sup>. They thought it would be safer for us to be away from the area. So all the missions established by the different churches moved their residents down to Alice Springs, then down to Sydney. I was with the Anglican Church, the Church Missionary Society, and they established a mission at Mulgoa<sup>8</sup>. We were there for seven years.



## The girls had a big dormitory

We lived in a two-storey place there at Mulgoa. It was a rectory. It was the historic home of the Cox family<sup>9</sup> and it was a mansion. The little boys stayed in the basement underneath the main house and the girls had a big dormitory, which had about six rooms in it. We used to have our showers with buckets. We used to boil water in these copper things, we would fill our buckets and put this little shower thing underneath and that was our shower.

I remember the can toilets. When it was your turn you had to dig this trench and empty the contents of the can in the trench. Then we would wash up and cut lunches for all the kids. It wasn't that hygienic when you look back at it.

## Free time on the weekends

The weekends were good times. It was our free time and often we'd go rabbiting. They were good times and we had a lot of fun. We

used to go swimming in creeks and rivers and we would walk from Mulgoa to Wallacia and that was a long way, about seven miles. In the summer time we would just about do that every weekend. There was a little creek or something at the back and we called it *Wallacia River*.

## Piano lessons

At Mulgoa everyone had to do their fair share of work even though we were young. I used to get out of a lot of work because they taught me how to play the piano, so I practiced on the piano. There was this one time I remember I was playing and I could hear voices saying "Isn't Joyce just great practicing piano". The other kids used to say, "Oh shut up"! You know I only did it because I didn't like the work the other girls did and so I used to make the most of piano practice.

## My grandmother was good with horses

When I was a teenager my mum was the housekeeper for my friend Cassie's<sup>10</sup> aunty, at Pymble. I used to have a good time there. Cassie had horses and they used to include me in all their activities and we even played polo cross together. My mum always told me I was a good horse rider just like her mother had been. Her mother was a tribal woman from Alexandria Downs; it was a big cattle station in the Territory. She said, "You ride horses good, just like your grandmother, she used to break in horses", I never believed her. I never ever believed that tribal women used to break in horses. But when we went to the *Stockmen's Hall of Fame* in Longreach<sup>11</sup>, there was this big section on the Aboriginal women who opened the exhibition. There were these Aboriginal Tribal women dressed in their stock gear and who were carrying saddles and everything else, that was when I finally believed that what my mum said was true.

*Opposite: Winbourne Guesthouse as it is today. This is where Joyce's mother used to live.*

*Above right: This is a cartoonist's impression of the events that occurred when Joyce ran away.*





That highlighted the way about how Aboriginal people did not have a say in their lives. My mother had her little certificate<sup>12</sup> and she was entitled to have me but originally they hadn't wanted to let me stay.

## Penrith High School

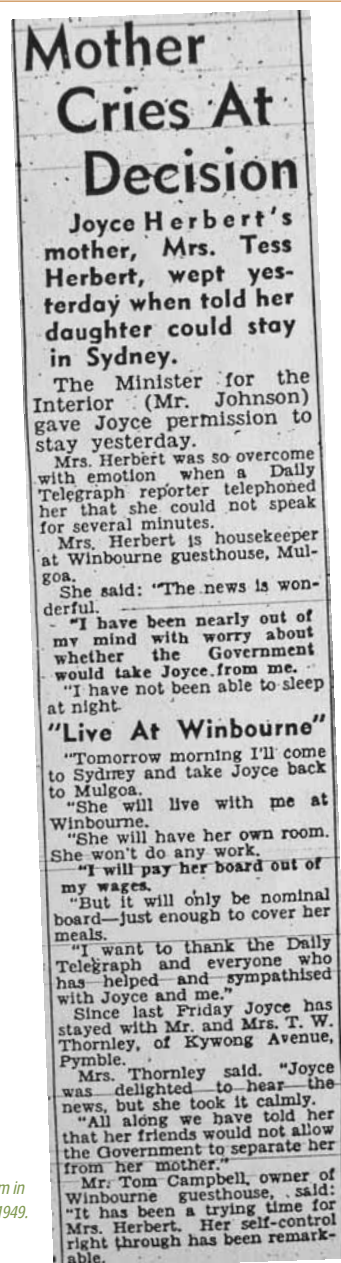
I loved school. I went to Penrith High School. I was achieving well in my studies and I was good at sports, I loved sports. I won the under 16 state 100 yards, I have an old school magazine with that in it. I loved to study. My favourite subjects were history, geography and english. I hated maths and science. I liked social studies because when I got older there was a bit of a conflict about being an Aboriginal person in Australia. You see Aboriginal history was never in the front of the book, it was always in the back. I didn't strike any racism at school.

## We got a good education

So I lived around Mulgoa and Penrith. I finished my third year at high school at Penrith, and then I did two extra years down at Willoughby Home Science High School. Then I tried to get into nursing and when I fronted up for an interview at one of the big training hospitals, I was turned away because I was an Aboriginal woman. But a very good friend of mine got me into training at the War Memorial Hospital at Waverley and I stayed there for three years. I got married and the courses back then were for four years so I never went back to complete my certificate. But I continued nursing at Penrith hospital after I got married.

## Working with Koori kids

My husband and I divorced after twenty-five years. After the divorce I thought I'd better get myself into some meaningful employment because I still had my three youngest children to look after. So I went to Milperra campus at the University of Western Sydney, Macarthur, and did an Associate Diploma course in Social Welfare in



*Right: An article about Joyce's mum in the Daily Telegraph, 29th January 1949. Opposite: Joyce and her mother, Priscilla Herbert, in 1948.*





1988-89. Then I worked in the Mt Druitt<sup>13</sup> area for five years. I was running an information centre there called *Pittuma Arts and Craft Centre*. I ran classes there for Kooris in literacy and numeracy, computers and art and all those sorts of things. It took off very well and in between I used to do some lecturing in the local schools, in the primary and high schools and at the universities. One job I had was to coordinate the local Catholic Ministry and during a lot of that time I was lecturing to academics. It was Catholic education, with a lot of other Koori input, I think they had the best Aboriginal policy out. I gave my input into the education policy in the state schools and then I retired.

## The Mulgoa Mission Reunion

We had a reunion<sup>14</sup> and I spent a week down there at Mulgoa. The old mission has been pulled down now, but the old parish residence was in really good condition. The Penrith Council was just wonderful with their support. In that year, 2001, they had the Federation of Australia Celebrations<sup>15</sup>, so all those groups were organising activities. They asked me if they could join in. Paula Baker (Battman) one of the girls we went to primary school with, got all the white kids that used to go to Mulgoa Primary school together and they were there at the reunion too. It was just wonderful. I have photos



galore. Mulgoa has certainly grown. I was able to get funding from different charities and Catholic organisations. The Catholics were great. The Central Coast Reconciliation Group bought some Koori flags. Howard Thomas's<sup>16</sup> mother was in the home with us at the mission and I asked him to autograph a few flags to give to the different support groups, to Penrith Council and to Mulgoa Primary School and he said, "it will be my honour because I live in my mother's memory".

## Going back to Roper

The first time I went back to Roper (traditional people call it Ngukurr) was in 1990. I had not been there since 1942, since I was moved away. It was very emotional. I wondered why I got this pull to go back to Roper. An opportunity came when this Earth Watch program intended to do a documentary on the Wardaman people from Katherine. So my girlfriend Cassie and I went. They were going



*Above: Joyce (second from right in first row) and family.  
Opposite: Photo of Joyce's classmates at Mulgoa School, 1947.*



to document the entire escarpment in this very remote area around Katherine<sup>17</sup>. We were there for a fortnight and at the same time we went back to Ngukurr. It was so emotional with all these old people saying, “we knew you would come, we knew you would come”, I was introduced to this old man and he said to me, “I am your grandfather.” I said, “how are you my grandfather?” He said, “I am your mother’s mother’s brother.” So he was my great uncle. He was leading me around the community and everyone was crying, he was saying, “this is Joyce my grand daughter.” Another old lady said, “I am your grandmother.” I said, “but my grand-mother is dead. How come you’re my grandmother?” She said, “I am your father’s mother’s sister.” My grandmother’s sister and she is still alive! I saw her in Katherine in the hospital there. I heard that she had moved from Ngukurr to Katherine, oh the old darling, she must be in her nineties. And she remembered me.

*Above: Satellite photo of Ngukurr. (Source: Google Earth)*

*Opposite: This bible in the Creole language, was given to Joyce by her brother.*

## Kinship

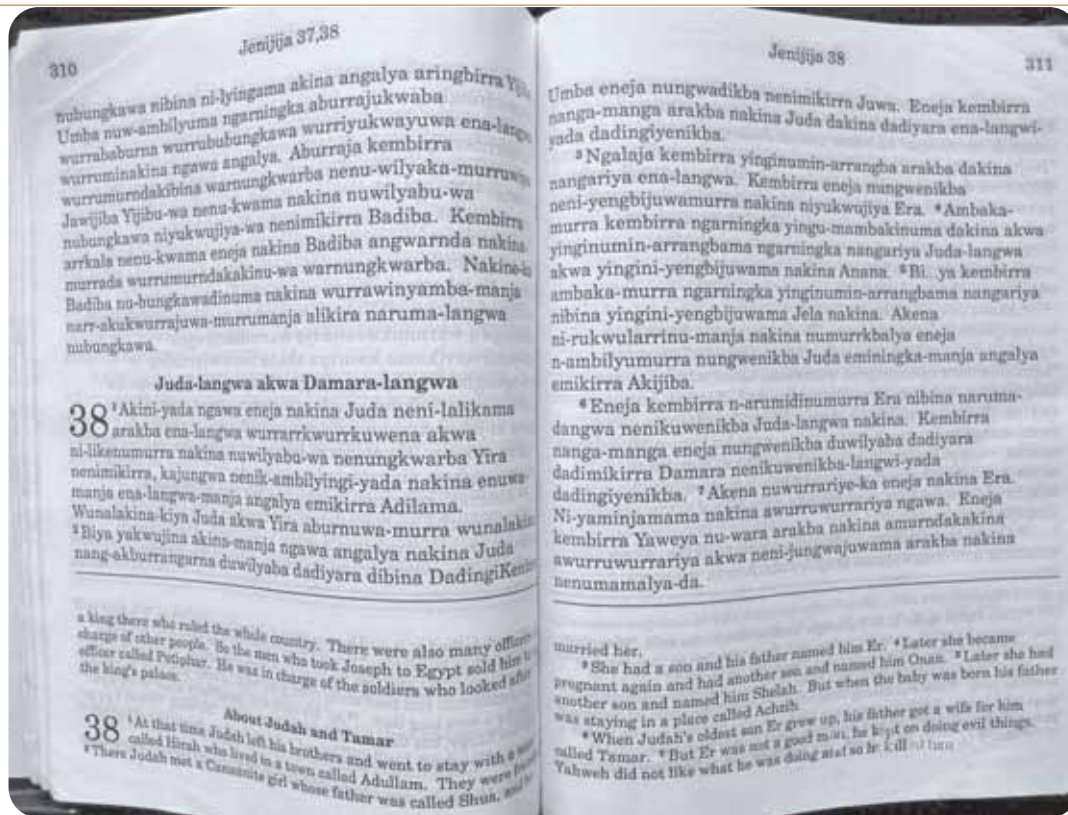
They were just little things I grabbed, joining up my kinship. I meet relatives everywhere. Every time I go back to Groote, I am getting a cultural education there on kinship. I found the best way to learn kinship was with the little kids, they are really good. The last time we went back was in 2000. I am just linking up the family all the time. It is so different and they introduce you to your relatives and you have got to think how all these kinships are connected. My Tribal group in Roper is *Mara* and on Groote Eylandt it is *Mamarika*. You have to remember that each time you go back. They all speak five tribal languages and I just know a smattering of this and that. It makes me sad that I have lost that. They used to call me a myall because I couldn’t pronounce the words properly.

## Language

It was Creole and we got to know it very well and I can speak Creole to anyone who can speak it to me. And you fall into it very well if you go up north, it is like speaking English. I have got a bible here that my brother gave me, it is in Creole and I read through it from time to time.

## Finding Spirituality

I used to teach the Scriptures at school and I used to play the organ at church and I used to go to church religiously, more than once a week. I found spirituality and I found that you don’t need to be in a church to do any of that. I became a Catholic when I got married and I suppose when I found spirituality I stopped going to church. I read a few books about people in churches, and come one Easter the priest said to me “I did not see you at church today Joyce”. I said, “why do I need to go to you when I can say it straight to him?”



1 A cattle station in the Northern Territory.

2 Roper River Mission is located about 170km east of Katherine in the Northern Territory.

3 Lake Nash is located near the Queensland border, east of Tennant Creek.

4 Borrooloola was gazetted a township in 1885. The town was a pretty lawless outpost in those days where most people carried guns and illegal activities like smuggling and grog running was a way of life.

5 Groote Eylandt is an Aboriginal community established on the East Coast of the Northern Territory.

6 Roper Bar was only accessible by boat from Roper River Mission in the wet season, which could range from December to May.

7 Darwin regions are often referred to as The Top End.

8 Mulgoa is on the outskirts of Penrith, towards Warragamba.

9 William Cox made the Cox family famous. William Cox was responsible for the construction of a lot of the houses in Mulgoa. In 1814 William Cox was appointed by Gov. Lachlan Macquarie to construct a road across the Blue Mountains to Bathurst Plains. He commenced the road with convict labour 18th July 1814 and completed the carriageway of 102 miles by 21st January 1815. Numerous places were named in his honour including Cox's River and Cox's Pass in the Blue Mountains.

10 Cassie Thornley was my friend for many years and still is today.

11 Australian Stockman's Hall of Fame and Outback Heritage Centre was founded in 1974 by artist Hugh Sawrey. On April 29 1988, it was officially opened by Her Majesty the Queen. There are five major display galleries – discovery; pioneers; outback properties; life in the outback; and stock workers. The Heritage Centre is a tribute to the men and women who pioneered the outback.

12 An Exemption Certificate, which entitled Aboriginal people to work and live in main stream society but restricted them from mixing with other Aboriginal people.

13 Mt Druitt is in the Western Suburbs of Sydney and at the time had the biggest Aboriginal population in Australia residing there.

14 In 2001, I organised a reunion at the Mulgoa Mission.

15 Federation Celebrations took place across Australia in 2001 to celebrate the 100-year anniversary of Federation.

16 Harold Thomas designed the Koori flag

17 We were asked to accompany the Earth Watch team.





## Wendy Lewis

25



*For the first four years of my working life, I gave my unopened pay packet to my mother; all I took was my train fare.*

My full name is Wendy Ann Lewis. My maiden name is Booth and I was born at King George V Hospital, on 27 March 1947 at Camperdown. My father's name was Wally Booth, and my mother's was Cathlyn Booth (nee Stringer). I have four sisters. One of them is my twin sister Robyn.

### We can trace our family way back

During our childhood our parents had a close relationship with both sets of our grandparents. They were all the best of friends, so they were all involved in our lives. Our Scottish grandmother was very much into the clan structure! the same as our Aboriginal grandparents, and our Irish grandfather. Our grandparent's names on my father's side were Madge Green, Blackie Booth (Boot Lace), and on my mother's side Elsie McGregor Dearie and Jack Samuel Stringer. Elsie was Aboriginal and Jack Samuel was Scottish. Luckily we have an old photo of Peggy and Jimmy Lambert. They were my great great great grandparents. People called them King and Queen of Dabee at Raulston. Their daughter Rose Lambert married John Green. Their son was George Lambert Green; he was my great grandfather.

*Opposite: Rose (daughter of Peggy and Jimmy Lambert), approximately 84 with John Green, taken at their place in Kandos. It has been said that Rose Lambert died at age 16, this photo is proof that this claim is wrong.*

### We lived in an old fibro weatherboard house

When we were kids we lived in a little old fibro and weatherboard house, there at St Johns Park at Moorebank. I remember we had bare floorboards in our old house and I soon learnt how cold bare floorboards can be. About thirty years ago when I moved out here to Pheasants Nest, just me with my own kids, we had a corrugated iron house that had a dirt floor. Well my kids weren't too impressed or happy but at least it was warmer than the bare floor boards that I grew up with.

### We grew and produced our own foods

When we were kids living at that old place, it was really like living on a farm. My parents didn't have much money. It was all about what we could produce ourselves. Whatever we had as produce, that's what we ate. Sometimes we swapped food for other things. That sort of lifestyle was on both sides of the family, on the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal side. And it was the same for my adopted family. You see when my mother divorced our father Wally Booth, my step-father Don Syme, was also into farming, but it was just small area farming, vegies, chickens, ducks and other poultry.



*Above left: Jimmy Lambert.  
Above right: Peggy Lambert.  
Opposite: Echidna.*



## Struggle for variety of food

We might have had eggs and milk, but we wouldn't have any meat for weeks and if you did get meat because they killed a cow or pig or something, we had pork and beef and no eggs and no milk! We just never had a lot of everything at the same time. It was really a struggle for variety. And we only had chicken at Easter and at Christmas times.

## Echidna was my favourite bush food

I like echidna, it would be my favourite. And it tastes a bit like duck or maybe a bit like pork. I've now worked out a way to cook it; I don't cook it traditionally any more. I steam it now, that gets the quills out. Traditionally they cooked the quills off it over the fire. Steaming it lets me also use the quills for craftwork.

## Life was hard work

Working on the farm was always hard. But it was also hard to work for political things. We were involved in the political movements of the day. Our grandmother, Madge Green was very involved in the fight for women's rights, way back in her day. Especially their right to vote. She was very involved in that and in the 'Vote Yes' campaign during the 1967 Referendum<sup>2</sup>.

## The first Tent Embassy

We were involved in the establishment of the first Tent Embassy there in Canberra way back in 1972<sup>3</sup>. You see, in the late 1960's Aboriginal people became more and more frustrated by the Federal government's failure to live up to the spirit of the 1967 Referendum. This was a generation where more young Aboriginal people were educated and politically aware. We wanted to fight for



equal rights as was happening in other countries like South Africa and the United States. You know, I was arrested on the way to Canberra and got my car de-registered on the way back from the rally. The car was full of black fellas heading home from the Tent Embassy demonstrations. The police pulled us up and just went all over the car. Back then you had to go into Rosebery, there in Sydney over at the back of Mascot to pick your car up after it had gone over the pits<sup>4</sup>. Now the thing is, when I picked up my car in Rosebery (coming all the way from Liverpool where I used to live), I was told that my car was in perfect condition and that there was no reason for it to be de-registered.

My four grandparents, both my parents, my step father and myself are all members of the Communist Party, so we get involved with a lot of political issues. Grandmother Madge Green for example was involved in the suffragette movement, fighting for women's rights.

## It's a struggle to keep the Heritage going

Well now that I'm older I think it's rewarding being an Aboriginal person because it's given me a base to keep the struggle going. To keep the heritage going. I valued my heritage as a young person but I value it more now that I am older. When I go out into country, like for a visit with our Native Title Group, we remember the information we've been given by aunties, uncles, grandparents and parents. We were told about places and we go straight to them and find them because we were told where things were by our own elders and that's been rewarding. When you remember those stories, in your mind it is as if you've been there before. What's very difficult today is that we still don't want to tell too many people the information, as it might get into the wrong hands.

## Sites being destroyed

About fifteen years ago there was damage to some artwork out there at one of our sites, at *Dumo Swamp*. The artwork used to be on

a full wall. I went out there one day and all these blokes had had fires up there under the art work! The same thing happened at *Black Fellas Hands*, that's where people have been abseiling down the wall.

## With rights comes responsibility

There are some memories about growing up that stick in my mind. Like the sharing and dealing with the problems by getting everyone involved in solving them. We also learnt from our Elders that with the right of knowing something comes the responsibility of looking after it. Well we know that in our family, there is Robyn, our grandmother, our father, our great grandmother, our great grand father and myself. You know our great grand father George Lambert Green was the first foreman at the Kandos Cement Works. Can you believe that an Aboriginal man back in those days being in charge of all the workers? He fought for his rights. But he showed how he handled his responsibility and I believe every member of our family has done that ever since. My uncles, Charlie (Thuggumulli) Booth, Denzil (Bully) Booth and Mickel Cowie are tradesmen as was my father, Wally. They all have been good working men.

## I left school the day I turned fifteen

I went to school at St John's Public School, Chipping Norton Public School, Parramatta and Liverpool Girls High. I left Liverpool Girls High the day I turned fifteen and went to work as a Clerk / Bookkeeper and I started at *Monier* at Leightonfield, which is near Villawood, halfway between Liverpool and Sydney so I used to go into the city everyday delivering tenders and picking up plans.

## I gave my mother my unopened pay packet

When I left *Monier* I went and worked for a couple of political newspapers, *The Tribune* and the *Aboriginal Press*, I worked at a place called *Newsletter Printery* which was in Ross Street there in Forest Lodge, in Sydney, it was where we printed all the Union newspapers



too. Working at this job gave me a wage increase, I can't remember what my first pay was, but I know the increase was two pound fifteen shillings and three pence a week. During the first four years of my working life, I gave my unopened pay packet to my mother; all I took was my train fare.

## I got to know a lot of people through my work

I got to know lots of people in the Union movement in those days. The Unions assisted Aboriginal people with our struggle and assisted Aboriginal people in the workplace too. It was all the Waterside Workers Union, the Seniors Union, the Metal Trade Union and all the Racing papers of the day. You see we printed both political and racing papers in the factory I worked in.

## I never worried about money

I didn't spend or need a lot of money back then. We went to the beach and to the Nepean river for entertainment. You didn't have to have money to do what you wanted to do. I had a pony of my own and when I wanted to ride a horse, I'd just go and ask for work at the local stables. They'd let me clean the stables and I'd be able to ride their horses. In those days you could hitch hike and you had your weekly train ticket which got you anywhere you wanted to go on the weekends.

## Being an Aboriginal person has its rewards

My daughter Donna has five children, Kelli, Toni, Abbi, Jack and Sam. Apart from Donna I have six step children. What's rewarding about being an Aboriginal person is knowing that we've been on this planet and in this country for so much longer than anyone else. I'm not sure if I'd change the way things have happened, I would always want to be a Political Activist. But I would have made better changes; I've always wanted to work for a better community.



*Above: Wendy's grandmother's sister, Sarah Annie.*

1 Clan structures are family connections

2 The 1967 Referendum was about a 'Vote yes' campaign that would allow Aboriginal people to be counted in the Commonwealth census.

3 The first 'Aboriginal Tent Embassy', also known as the 'tent embassy', was established on the lawns of what is now Old Parliament House, on Australia Day, 26 January, 1972. It was called the 'embassy' in order to symbolise the feeling of many Indigenous people that they were essentially foreigners in their own country. The Aboriginal Flag was flown over the 'tent embassy' (<http://www.dreamtime.net.au/indigenous/land.cfm>)

4 The pits are sections of the RTA where cars are tested for their road worthiness.



## Jeanie Lord

31



*In my first job I worked for three hours and got paid five shillings. It was a lot of money.*

My name is Jeanie Joyce Lord. My maiden name is Ferguson. I was born at Parramatta on the 5 April 1932. I'm the youngest of twelve children. There were seven boys and five girls in the family. Six of us are still living. The eldest brother is in a nursing home in Hay. I have sisters on the Gold Coast. There are twins, the twin brother lives at Collarenebri and the twin sister lives out at Foster. One other brother lives down in Hayworth near Fitzroy.

### My parents come from Darlington Point

My mum's name is Margarite Mathieson Gowans and dad's name was Bill (William) Ferguson. They both came from Darlington Point<sup>1</sup>; we kids only ever visited there. We'd go down when we had to go to a funeral. My brothers are still down that way. They used to come home and see us sometimes. But since we've all got old, we've lost contact with each other. We've all separated now; we all went our own different ways in life. Even now we live miles away from each other. I couldn't visit my brothers today; they are all too far away.

*Opposite: Warragamba map*

### Dad was involved in political movements

My father was part of the Aboriginal Progressive Association and the first Aboriginal person to be asked to sit on the newly found Welfare Board in the 1940s. Some of his children or grandchildren went into political movements of one sort or another. He was also involved with the Day of Mourning Protest<sup>2</sup> in the 1930s and he and Pearl Gibbs went across NSW visiting stations and reserves and meeting people outside the station boundaries to find out about conditions on the stations and reserves. My father is immortalised in the book *Ferguson for Freedom*, written by Jack Horner.

### Dubbo was our home

I was eighteen months old when we moved to Dubbo. We were in Melbourne and mum took us from there to Dubbo. The twins (they were about three) and all the other kids were there in Dubbo at the time. Mum had the public tenancy house<sup>3</sup> down there in Melbourne and we shifted to Dubbo and got a house in town, it was the first one we ever owned. I can remember when we first got the electricity put on. It was a Sunday and I can remember, I'd stand on a



chair and switch the light on and off. Before that we had the lanterns and we'd light the lantern with the newspaper. We also had a little dingo in Dubbo. I'll always remember him fondly.

*Opposite: An old cane pram (Courtesy of Gundagai Museum).*

*Below: Charlie Boy and Steven Riley at Emily Burn's house, which was a typical Warragamba dwelling.*

## I used to walk to school everyday

I used to walk to school every morning, rain, hail or thunderstorm. We weren't allowed to stay home from school. The school was probably a couple of miles away. I didn't like going to Scripture





classes though, I'd have a bit of a headache on Scripture days. I have forgotten all I learnt at school now. We used to pack our lunch in the morning, jam sandwiches wrapped in newspaper. Sometimes we came home for lunch, come all the way home and go all the way back again. Of course there were no computers in those days. You used to have to write with ink from an inkwell.

## You weren't allowed to talk about Koori stuff

The Koori<sup>4</sup> stuff wasn't out as much as it is now. But this one time, I can remember I came home from school one day and said, "Mum, is it true that dad is the King of blacks and you're the Queen?" I got into big trouble. I didn't even think about that. Our heritage wasn't spoken of in our house in those days. We just never heard much about Aboriginal people and their traditional things.

## We got around on a pushbike

We had push bikes back then, for the older ones at least; they'd go down the street on their bikes. They'd ride their bikes to work everyday. Then when my brothers or nephews got bikes for Christmas we all shared them.

## We used to get a penny to go to the shop

I can remember when the family went out working at Cobar in the mines out there. We used to get a penny to go to the shop. We weren't game to ask for anything more. If we were asked to go to the shop, we'd just go to the shop. I'd buy a bag of lollies with my penny. I wouldn't save it up. The penny would burn a hole in my pocket. Sometimes we'd buy one of these little things of ice cream. We used to get six pence to go to the pictures but we never used to worry about things to eat there, because we used to have our lunch before we went.



## Never wasted any food

Mum could cook a meal out of anything. She would cook the meals out of anything that was left over too. There was never any waste. She'd make a stew. Or put all the vegetables in a baking dish, bake it and make a gravy.

## Mum washed our clothes in the copper

Mum would boil up the copper<sup>5</sup> and wash our clothes in it on wash days. She'd put the wood under it the night before, set the fire ready for an early start the next morning. She had a bucket to load the water in. There was no running water. Two of her sisters lived in the street at the back of our house and they used to come around to do their washing too. They'd bring their clothes around in a pram. Then all the clothes would be put out on the lines. Mum never asked us to put the clothes on the line.

## We played with our other nieces and nephews

We always had to wash up before we went to school and make sure the front room was swept up and dusted every morning. That was our main job to do for the week. During the weekends we didn't worry about going outside to play with the other children, we used to just play with our nieces and nephews, we used to play around the yard all the time, hopscotch was a favourite.

## My first job was as a cleaner

In my first job I worked as a cleaner for three hours a day and I got paid five shillings a week. It was a lot of money. I was a cleaner at the Health Centre for ten years. I was still at school when I started, so I would leave school about three in the afternoon. I cleaned on Mondays, Thursdays and Sundays. I gave my first pay to my mother, five shillings. That was a lot of money in those days.

## Two Pounds a month for endowment

I used to get endowment after I had my son, Jim Boy. It was two pounds a month and you had to line up at the post office to get it. Then I'd go and do the groceries and give my mother half of what I brought.

## Moved to Warragamba in 1953

My husband Jim Lord and I moved to Warragamba in 1953. We bought an ordinary place here. We paid fifteen hundred pounds for it, and we've lived here for fifty two years. So I basically lived here all my life from the age of seventeen. My husband worked on the Water Board, he was a dogman<sup>6</sup>. He helped build the dam, doing transport work with the trucks and as a signalman for the cranes and other plant machinery.

## No discrimination at Warragamba

There was no discrimination at Warragamba in my day, my husband played football and cricket up there but mind you there wasn't many Aboriginal people up here at that stage. Not people who identified as Aboriginal people anyway. My sister Emily Burns she lived up there and so did my husband's sister Georgette Scott.

## I miss my family

There are a lot of things I miss; there are a lot of things I don't miss too. I miss my family. When I was young I knew they were around, now we are all too far away from each other. When we lived in Dubbo in the early days, people came from Brewarrina to visit. My brother came from out there, his wife and family, they used to come home every Christmas. The brother from Brewarrina has passed away now. He used to come home and see us every now and then.

## We have little family reunions

I don't drink, I don't smoke, so I can spend my money on the phone bill. That is how I keep in touch with my family. We speak to each other but we can't get to each other. We speak on Sunday nights. My eldest sister was the first Aboriginal Matron at Caloundra Private Hospital there in Queensland. We have little reunions every few years. The first one we had was at Dubbo. We had a lovely time up there.



*Above: Jeannie (second from the right) with family and friends at Warramba Dam*

*Left: Jeannie (left) with her sister Emily Burns at Warramba Dam*



- 1 Darlington Point is just outside the Riverina, seventeen miles from Griffith. It has the site of the old Warangesda Aboriginal mission / station, with some buildings still standing, only four miles from the town of Darlington Point.
- 2 In 1937 in preparation for an event to mark the 150th Anniversary of the British arrival in Australia, Bill Ferguson, William Cooper (leader of Victoria's Australian Aboriginal League) and Margaret Tucker organised 'A Day of Mourning and Protest' and a conference for January 26, 1938. This event was held in the Australian Hall at 150 Elizabeth Street Sydney after the group were refused the use of Sydney Town Hall. The meeting was the first Aboriginal civil rights gathering and was a major step towards redressing the wrongs of history against Aboriginal people. The protest attracted some one thousand Aboriginal men and women and was the culmination of ten years of action by Aboriginal people against the policies of the NSW Aborigines Protection Board.
- 3 Public tenancy is public housing
- 4 Koori is a term used by Aboriginal people in some areas of NSW.
- 5 A copper was a big boiler. You made a fire under it to heat the water and you prodded the clothes with a big stick until they were boiled up and cleaned. Then you lifted the clothes out with the stick.
- 6 A dog man worked as a crane handler for the construction crew and trucks.





## Colleen Mitchell

37



*We had freedom as children. Freedom to go and do things.  
We used to go and get a bucket and pick mangoes straight off the trees in the morning  
then we'd walk down to the river in the afternoon and pick them again.*

My name is Colleen Mitchell and my maiden name is Jones. I was born in Rockhampton, Queensland on 10 January 1954. My parents' names are Darcy and Beryl Jones.

### Family and Aboriginal connection

I'm the middle child, and I have one brother and three sisters. We moved around a lot in the old days when we lived in Queensland and I can remember our houses were all really small. We lived in mining towns, mostly in central Queensland. But I do recall that the houses were just like shacks and one place we lived in was actually a converted stable. My dad was a stockman<sup>1</sup> and sometimes he worked as a miner. Our dad wouldn't have been earning real big money back then. Mum and I were just talking about it the other day and it was probably something like two pound a week that he brought in. My nanna's name was Violet. She was an Aboriginal person, she taught me a lot. Nan Violet died in Rockhampton in 1963 when I was nine years old. I sort of feel and know stuff now, and it is just the things that she taught me when I was young and they are things that have just stayed with me.

*Opposite: Nepean River from the lookout in the Blue Mountains National Park near Mulgoa.*

### We ate what was available

We mainly ate meat and vegies and that sort of thing back in those days, a lot of our food came from whatever we killed. If there was a sheep killed, we'd eat sheep for a week, if it was beef, then it was that for a week. A lot of our food depended on where we were living at the time. If we were living on the stations<sup>2</sup>, well then it would depend on what was given to the stockmen. Other times it was what was killed and shared. Mum always cooked her own bread, biscuits and cakes and she grew her own vegetables whenever she could.

### Milking the cows was just one of my chores

I used to hate getting the cows in for milking and that was a major chore. I also had the chore of watering the vegies. That was done after the washing up, you'd have to take the washing up water out and water the vegies with that. Then I had to help bath my sister. I always seemed to have one of my younger sisters on my hip most of the time. My day would start with going out to milk the cows in the morning and then I'd come back and get breakfast for one of my sisters. But then I liked looking after both my younger sisters

really. But it was all really just to help my mum out. That's how life was in Queensland. When I was a kid mum used to do her washing in a copper in the paddock, whereas now you just go and chuck it in a washing machine. We used to get our water from a tank or from the river, we'd bucket it into the copper to do the wash.

Our life changed a lot when we moved to Sydney. Everything was bought from a store and we lived on a small block of land after living for so many years with so much space around us. And we didn't have television until we moved to Sydney. And because television was a novelty it became the centre of our lives and really it destroyed a lot of the communicating we used to have in the family.

## School

Because we moved around a lot back in those days and I think I went to about nine different schools just when I was in my primary school years. Looking back now, I remember what I disliked most about school was the way the teachers were, how they treated you, sort of inhuman really. It wasn't a nurturing learning environment at all. It was pretty scary really. I went to school because I had to and that was that. Mind you moving around as we did, it made it difficult to make new friends and although we would still play with the kids at school my siblings and I mainly played together.

## Growing up

The way our family was, living in the country like that and moving around when we were young, and really just having each other to rely on, we learnt that we had to stick together. We were in such remote areas sometimes that we only had each other to play with and to depend on. We'd mix with other kids at school and we used to get up to heaps, but really we played together ourselves. We'd go out and build things or put things together, like we used to make

stick grass that we'd float down the river, things like that. We had freedom as children. Freedom to go and do things. We used to go and get a bucket and pick mangoes straight off the trees in the morning then we'd walk down to the river in the afternoon and pick them again. We'd go for a swim, they were special times. We used to get up in the mornings and mum would make this ginger beer that we'd pack with a few sandwiches and then we'd be gone for the day. Just exploring and having a look around, collecting bird's eggs and just doing things that children do.

## I was twelve when I moved to Sydney

We moved to Sydney when I was about twelve years old. We moved to Thirlmere and I've been living out here for about thirty years now. I lived here when I first got married. My house was made of fibro and wood in those days, it was really only a one-bedroom shack but we built a brick house a couple of years after we were married and I still live in it today. I got married in 1974.

## My first job

I left school when I was fifteen. I finished school on a Friday and started work on the following Monday. My first job was packing meat in a supermarket. I can't remember what the wage was, but after a few months I left and started working in an office. I was getting twenty dollars a week. I was really good with money and I used to budget every week. I would just spend money on my train ticket. I caught the train from Rockdale to Sydenham. I'd pay board to my mother and I used to read a lot so I'd buy a couple of books each week. I saved my money up so that I could buy a sewing machine. I'd watch my mother sew and that's how I learned to sew, just by watching mum. We used to make our own clothes and we made clothes for other people too.

## The closeness of our family was rewarding

We grew up in an era when a lot of racism was hidden. Aboriginality was hidden. You didn't tell too many people about your heritage, you just didn't. So maybe that's why I found the closeness of our family to be really rewarding. When I was growing up there was always a caring community about, everyone would be looking out for each other. In those days there were so many different influences about, it formed our life so much.

And that's one thing I miss about the old days, its the freedom we once had. The freedom of being able to go and sit in the bush, to walk around and do things like that. I miss not being in touch with nature.

<sup>1</sup> A stockman is employed on a station to look after the stock (cattle, horses). An apprentice or trainee stockman / station hand is called a jackaroo.

<sup>2</sup> Dad was a stockman so he would go where the work was on different cattle stations.





## Robyn Williams

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*The thing I remember most about being a kid was how the winter was always cold, and how you could feel it in your bones. All the kids would get into the one bed to keep warm and to share their body heat.*

My name is Robyn Flora Williams and my maiden name is Booth. I was born at Camperdown Hospital in Sydney, on the 27 March 1947. My father's name was Wally Booth, and my mother's name was Cathlyn Booth (nee Stringer). There were five children, in the family, my sister Wendy and I in the Booth family and later there was another three children in my mother's second family, the Syme's family. Mum did not know until two weeks before giving birth that she was expecting twins, Wendy and myself.

### Our house

We lived at St Johns Park when I was born. Our house was a very old one and it was always very cold. The house only had old floorboards you see, there was no lino or carpet. I recall it had this old fuel stove in the kitchen where we cooked and huddled around for warmth. There was no electricity at all. We used lanterns in those days. Hurricane lamps they called them. And we'd get our water from a creek that ran down at the back of our house. We kids carried the water all the way from the creek to the house. We'd carry it on a yolk<sup>1</sup> that you put across your shoulders with a bucket that hangs

*Opposite: Nepean River.*

down on either side. Very hard work. Eventually we got the water on, in the house, but that was when we were much older. When we were kids, carrying the water to the house was one of our main chores.

### Getting up at four in the morning for the chores

When I was a kid, one of my chores was milking the cows. Can you believe that I had to be up at four o'clock in the morning! I hated that! And I can remember that because I am sure I milked more cows than anyone else! So that was the one chore that I particularly disliked. The one chore that I loved and liked to do was feeding our horse. That was good.

We didn't have refrigeration. We used to keep a 'meat safe'<sup>2</sup> in those days; it was a tin box with air holes and you put your meat in it. We didn't have a fridge but when we were a bit older we had an *ice-chest*<sup>3</sup>, you'd put a block of ice in that and the ice would last a fair few days. It kept your meat much fresher than the meat safe. We needed a cool place for our meat because of the wallabies we'd catch back then.



*Above: Left to Right: Ice chest; meat safe; rabbit traps (Courtesy of Gundagai Museum).*

## Not much variety with food

There was always food to share around, when I was young. It'd be eggs or it'd be milk. I like anything with eggs in it to this very day. We always had food but there was never a great variety. There was tripe, we loved tripe. You can't buy it now, it was terribly expensive, not cheap at all. Of course there was rabbit, we'd trap rabbits, we still trap rabbits, it's illegal now, but we still have a rabbit trap. As I said there was always plenty of food to eat, we didn't go hungry. When there were tomatoes, that's what we had, tomatoes. When there were eggs, that's what we had, eggs. When there was milk, that's what we had, milk.

## Keeping warm in winter

The thing I remember most about being a kid, was the winter, it was always so cold. You could feel it in your bones. All us kids would get into the one bed. There'd be three of us in the bed together. We'd get in just to keep warm and share our body heat and we'd put three blankets on the bed and it would still be cold.

## We lived with Nan and Pop

When we were real little mum and dad divorced. We still lived with our mum but moved in with our nan and pop. Mum eventually remarried but we stayed with nan and pop for about twelve months after she remarried. Then we went to live with mum and her new husband. It was good because we still had contact with both sets of our grandparents. We had lived with mum's parents but we still saw our other grandmother fairly regularly. They were always great; it was just a very unconditional love from all of them.

## Going to school

When I was old enough to go to school, I went to St John's Park School. When we moved to Chipping Norton I went to Parramatta School. That's when we travelled to school by steam train. I did that for four years. I went on to Macarthur Girls High after awhile and then I went to Liverpool Girls High. I loved doing history but hated maths.

## My first job

I left school when I was fifteen and got a job as a clerk. That meant that I had to travel to the city every day by steam train. My income wasn't very much back then about four-pound, nineteen shillings, equivalent to about eight dollars and ninety nine cents a week. It cost a quid<sup>4</sup> for the weekly train ticket back then and we had to pay mum a quid for our board. And we paid about the same for our lunches for the week. In those days we would pay a few bob<sup>5</sup> to pay off clothing. We used to do a *lay-by* for our clothes. It was cold in winter and that's the only way you had enough money to buy things. You had to pay things off. I think we had about six shillings left to go out on the weekend with and we'd usually go to the city window-shopping. We'd catch the train in on our weekly train ticket.

## Chocolate was my favourite treat

There was a chocolate factory behind where I worked back then and you could buy a quarter of a pound of chocolate for about three bob, which is about thirty cents, I got about four brandy prunes for that and that was my payday treat.

## People didn't believe that we were an Aboriginal family

People didn't believe we were an Aboriginal family in those days, they used to say, "That girl has a wonderful imagination", because they thought that people who were Aborigines were all black. They just stereotyped. But we always said we were an Aboriginal family.

## No employment benefits - We had to work to get money

There was no such thing as unemployment benefits back then; there was no Social Security. Even when I grew up and got married there was none of that, I had to go out and work. I changed jobs

actually. I found out that I could earn more money doing builder's labouring with hours that suited childcare better than working in an office, so I've never been afraid of hard work.

## Working for community

For me it's rewarding being an Aboriginal person and I believe it is important what you make of it. I think that if you do things that help the community and if you have a healthy mentality and attitude about you, your heritage will live on. Our grandparents always worked hard, we've always worked hard too. There was no welfare in my day and everybody worked hard, all the Kooris worked on the roads in those days, they'd go along and work on the main roads for the Local Council, everybody worked.

## Aboriginality and connection to Country

I always talk with my children about their Aboriginality and where their traditional country<sup>6</sup> is in relationship to the land.

I remember how we used to go to places like Bents Basin, near Warragamba in the old days. We used to take the kids there because it was cheap in those days. We camped out there before it became a National Park. We used to go to Warragamba Dam and camp there with our grandmother. Our grandmother's name was Madge Green. She used to take us to the dam when we were kids. We know the stories associated with that land out there, our grandmother told us all those things and that's my connection to the country there.

## Our grandmother taught us well

Our grandmother taught us how to conduct ourselves when we were in other people's country too. She taught us the proper way, that's the simple way. When you're in someone else's country you have to conduct yourself properly. In my traditional country I

introduce people to the lakes and to the fishing protocol, but it's not being handed down any more. My grandmother also taught us how to live from the bush. She taught us how to make broom sticks from weeds, all those sorts of things. *Lilly Pilly* was my favourite bush food back then. There's a great tree out there near Wallacia Lake and we'd always go out and pick them.

## Aboriginal people fought hard and won

To me heritage is about people understanding. A lot of people had put their bodies on the line to get land rights and better health services and all those sorts of things and they won, they won the struggle. But today if you're not going to be prepared to fight for things or accept the fact that people had fought hard to get you these things and then to expect that it be given to you just because you're an Aboriginal person, well that is just not the Aboriginal way. We had to work hard and we had to fight hard for the things that we've won.

## Earning respect

I believe that you're not entitled to anything until you've earned it, that is the Aboriginal way. You're not entitled to stories until you've earned the right to hear them. I won't tell stories to the kids at school until I know how their parents have brought them up, not until I know if they've been brought up in the right way. I can only share those stories with them if they know to respect those stories our way. Some kids I know are ready for them, I know they'll respect them, other kids are still getting that information and are not ready to accept the responsibility for them. So that's why in some places things were lost. People have to live up to Aboriginal expectations of how they should conduct themselves and how they should pass on information and earn the right to have the information. They have to have the respect for themselves as Aboriginal people. Respect for themselves and for everybody else.




*Above: Lilly-Pilly*

*Opposite: Nepean River (Courtesy of Sabine Partl).*

- 1 A yolk is a long stick, or pole that sits across the shoulders. The stick, or pole can balance a weight on either end. In this case, buckets of water were balanced on each end of the pole and carried to the house.
- 2 A meat safe usually had a wet hessian bag hanging in front of its opening. A breeze would pass through the wet bag and keep whatever was inside, cool.
- 3 An ice-chest is similar to a freezer compartment in a modern day fridge. Back in those days an ice-man would deliver great blocks of ice and place them in this type of freezer compartment.
- 4 A quid is a pound, which is equivalent to two dollars.
- 5 A bob is equivalent to ten cents.
- 6 When people talk about their traditional country they are referring to where their family is from.





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