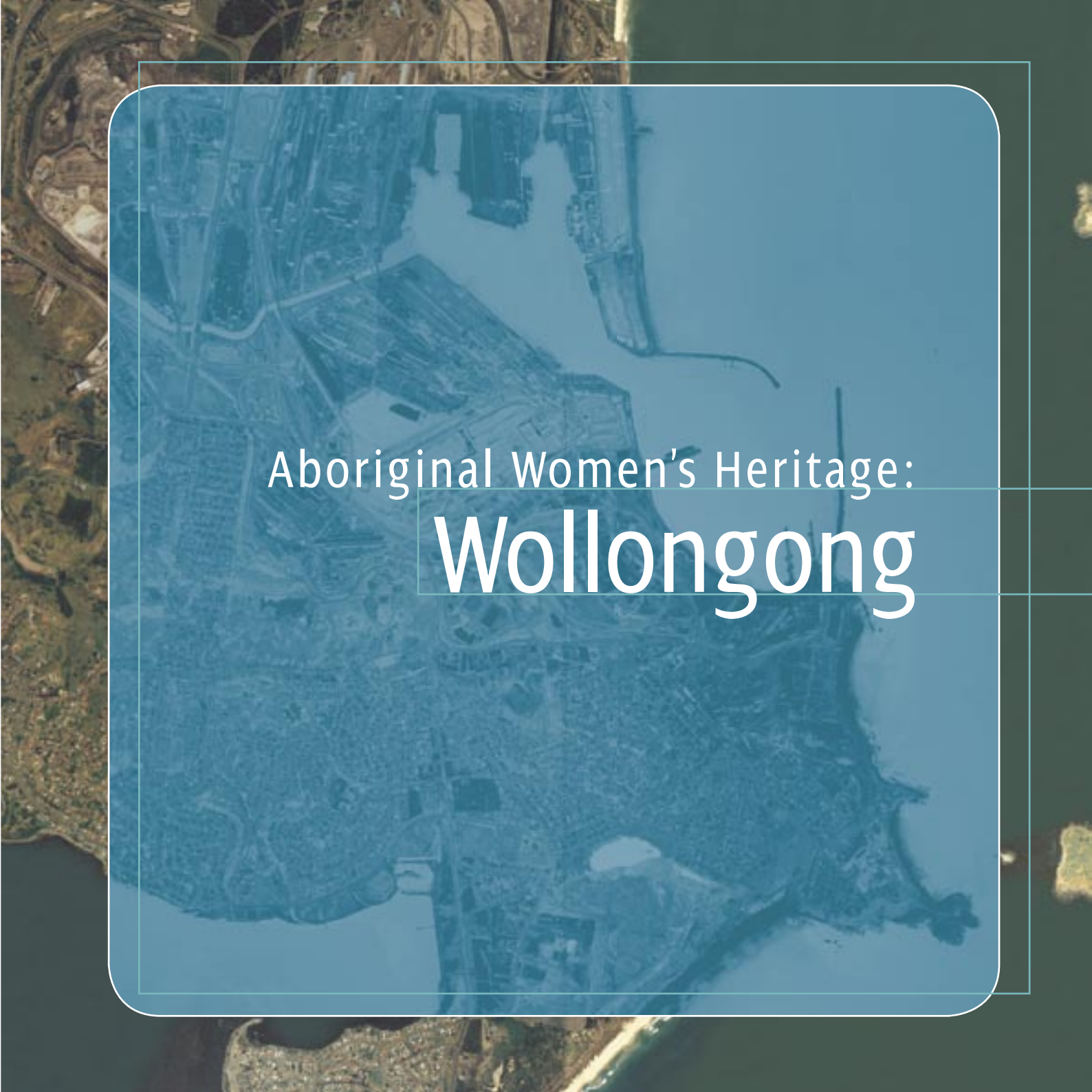

Aboriginal Women's Heritage:
Wollongong

Department of
Environment and Conservation (NSW)

Department of Environment and Conservation, NSW
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The National Parks and Wildlife Service is part of the Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC).

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Introduction

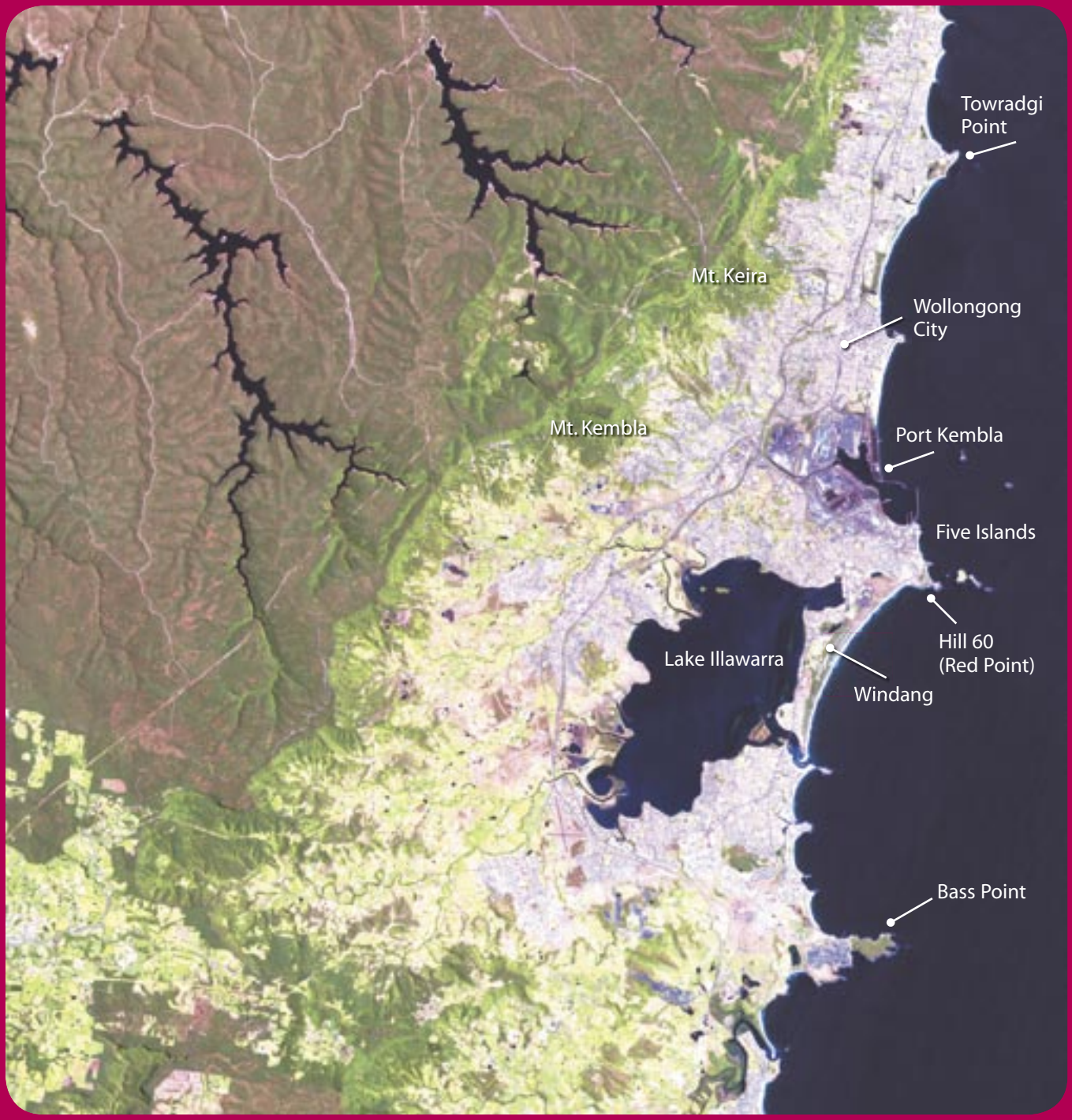
Nine Aboriginal women from the South Coast region of New South Wales contributed to this booklet, taking part in a Department of Environment and Conservation project designed to raise the profile of the historical experience of Aboriginal women along the coast of NSW.

The women in this publication recount their working lives and memories across the South coast landscape. Their stories centre on Wollongong, as each has a link or special connection there. Their stories focus on every day life at Hill 60, Port Kembla, before they were forced to evacuate in response to the Japanese bombing of Sydney. These accounts describe many aspects of life at Hill 60 and later at the Official Camps in Port Kembla. Other stories describe their journeys as young women often involving several moves during childhood and employment in domestic service and the factories of Sydney. There are stories about seasonal work picking peas, beans and fruit, sometimes travelling as far as Port Augusta in South Australia and Bairnsdale in Victoria. Several of the women recall spending time as children at the Bomaderry Children's Home, sharing meals and activities with the resident children but unaware until much later that those children had been forcibly removed from their families. One woman explains how her brothers and sisters and eventually herself were taken by Welfare Board authorities and of her father's prolonged struggle to reunite the family in Wollongong[1]. The women in this book share their memories of work which included domestic service and factory work to farmhand and brickie's labourer. Many of the women made strong connections with women in Wollongong from non-English speaking backgrounds through the shared experiences of life.

The once magnificent sanddunes of Port Kembla Beach.

Together the women tell of the support and sense of connection that united the Wollongong community. They describe their favourite places, where they played as children, where they fished, collected seafoods and bush tucker to help supplement the family's diet. What stands out is their strong connection to the area, to the places where they feel the presence of the people they have known and of their own loved ones, whose lives are forever held in memory.

1 The Aboriginies Protection Board was established in 1883. It was renamed the Aboriginies Welfare Board in 1940.


Towradgi Point
Mt. Keira
Wollongong City
Mt. Kembla
Port Kembla
Five Islands
Hill 60 (Red Point)
Lake Illawarra
Windang
Bass Point

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Muriel Davis

I have a fond memory of when I was ten years old and my mother used to get me to sing with her. My mother had a beautiful singing voice. She used to tell me to harmonise with her. She taught me how to harmonise and so we'd sing this song 'Forever and Ever'.

My name is Muriel Grace Davis. My maiden name was Bell. My father's name was Denzil James Bell and my mother's name was Mary Kathleen Amatto. I have four brothers and five sisters and I am fourth eldest in the family. I was born in Crown Street Women's Hospital in Sydney and I was born in 1937. My mother and father came from here and they always told me and my sister that we are Wodi Wodi and my grandmother also told me the same thing.

Hill 60

We first lived on Hill 60 in the early days, on top of Hill 60 where that lookout is now. We lived at Hill 60 until the Second World War broke out and the Army moved us off in a big Army truck. They moved us to a farm outside Berry which was known as Bundiwalla.

After the war finished we moved to a place called the Official Camps which is now called Coomaditchie.[1] It was not a mission and we also lived amongst white people.

I went to school at Port Kembla primary school which is situated on Military Road, Port Kembla. There were other Koori kids that went to that school. Some of them were Thelma Brown, Rita Timbery, Elaine Dixon, Phoebe Carne, Joan Carne, they were all in my class. Margaret Brown was in my sister's class. I remember starting at the school, at the Port Kembla Public School which was about 15 minutes walking distance from our home on the Official Camps. The Official Camps was never zoned as an Aboriginal Mission and every family paid a weekly rent even though they built their own tin

Opposite left: *Hill 60 houses and boats drawn up on Fisherman's Beach, pre 1942 evacuation.*
Right: *Muriel and classmates, Port Kembla Primary, 1948.*

and timber dwellings. My mother would send me over to Port Kembla every Saturday morning to pay our weekly rent of two shillings to a man who worked for the local government, I think. When we were living at the Official Camps our home was down at the bottom of the camp, near where Auntie Lamby lived. Her real name was Lena Sutton and she was married to Uncle Jacky Anderson. Eventually we had to move from there because the strong winds would blow the sand onto our house because the big sand hills were right behind our house. So we moved where the Official Camps were situated, there were a lot of trees and bushes there. Dad and mum moved our house close to the bush for shelter from those strong westerly winds. Our house was made from tin with wooden floorboards. Although we lived in a tin home mum would always make sure that the house was kept clean and we were always dressed nice.

Our main source of heating

The main source of heat for cooking in the Official Camp dwellings was from a wood burning combustion stove which were then subsidised by coal when it was available. We used to get our firewood in the bush, because it was plentiful. But with the coal, they used to leave it, dump it off and we'd have to pay for it. The main heating for the home was from kerosene drums or from the old sanitary tins. Wood or coal could be burned in those old drums and they served their purpose because they could be used outside the home too. So when the tin was outside and the coal burnt down to a blue flame we would carry the kerosene tin into the house and sit it on some bricks. This was our heater in winter. Our first home on the camps was situated on the north east of the Official Camps closer to where the sand hills were. The sand hills were there at that time, unlike today. But when the north easterly winds were blowing, our home would be almost covered on the one side by the winds and sands off the crest of the sand hills, so we had to move.

The Koori families I remember living at the Official Camps were the Timberys, the Browns, the Andersons, the Tattersalls, the Burns, the Dixons, the Cummins', the Ryans, the Simpsons and the Edwards. Not only Kooris lived on the Official Camps, non-Kooris, new Australians of a number of nationalities also lived there.

We never went hungry

We never went hungry. Our weekends would always consist of at least one walk to the beach and to the rocks to gather pipis and muttonfish, which is also known as abalone. We gather conks, periwinkles, crabs and any other small shellfish which could be used for bait.

Sometimes I would take a sheet of tin to the beach when digging for pipis and I would light a fire on the beach, put the tin on the fire and cook the pipis straight out of the sand. The older men

would often dive for lobsters and they would walk or get a ride for many miles to prevent the continuous diving into one area which interferes with breeding and jeopardises future food gathering.

Dad and my eldest brother would go and fish for groper or whatever they could get. And we used to go and get the pipis from Port Kembla Beach. Mum used to give me a sugar bag and I'd take my sister Alma with me and a few of the other kids that lived on the camps. And when we got to the beach we had to crawl through the barbed wire where the soldiers had put it right along the Port Kembla beach, because of the threat that the Japanese were going to invade Hill 60.

But I remember when I was a kid I used to go playing on the sand hills just down the back from where we lived. There were air raid shelters all along there. Mum used to say, "Don't you play in those air raid shelters!" Because she said they were sand bagged and they could fall in on you and smother and kill you.

My mother had a beautiful voice

I have a fond memory of when I was ten years old and my mother used to get me to sing with her. My mother had a beautiful singing voice. She used to tell me to harmonise with her. She taught me how to harmonise and so we'd sing this song 'Forever and Ever'.

Forever and Ever

Forever and ever
My heart will be true
Sweethearts for ever
I'll wait for you
We both made a promise
That we'd never part
Let's seal it with a kiss forever
My sweetheart

Let bygones be bygones forever
We'll fall in love once again
So let's tell the world
Of a new love divine
Forever and forever you'll be mine

I can remember back when we'd go with the Elders, blackberrying. Of a Sunday, that was a special day to us because mum would make blackberry pies, custard, rice puddings, bread puddings and jelly and a lovely big baked dinner. And after that in the evening mum used to make dampers and scones. And she'd make a heap of dampers because people used to come there and mum would always give them a feed.

Opposite left: *Muriel as a girl.*
Opposite right: *Shellfish from Port Kembla Beach.*
Above: *Muriel's mother, Mary Kathleen Bell (nee Amatto).*

I can remember the Nobles

I remember the old people calling into the Official Camps on their way up or down the coast and there would always be a meal or bed for them. I especially remember two old tribal men who would call in to see my father and mother and others on the camp. They had tribal scars on their chests and stomach. Their names were Weeny One Noble, Chock Noble and a brother who was named Hugo Noble. As a young girl I found Weeny One deceased on a bed in Olga Booth's home not far from our home and was upset when I noticed his tribal scars, as it was the first time I had encountered anything like this. They were the last tribal full bloods I have seen on the south coast.

The hard times hit hard

It was when dad was working on the wharves that the hard times came. He was stood down. Mum would always try to make sure that she had bags of flour and sugar for when the hard times were there. And that was the main reason that we had to get the pipis and the seafood. We'd go and collect the blackberries because that's how we were taught to get our food. You know a lot of the Kooris worked on the waterfront, in the hotels, they drove trucks and they fished. There was never any racial discrimination perceived in Port Kembla back in those days. But I do remember my father talking about a police sergeant who was transferred from Goodooga to Port Kembla. He was racist, when he saw a lot of the Kooris in the hotels, he'd kicked them out and he'd warn the publicans never to serve them. But the quick retaliation by the combined unions saw that racial decision overturned and that particular police sergeant transferred away from Port Kembla.

The unions prevented a lot of the discrimination

We used to go to the Whiteway Picture Theatre[2] at Port Kembla and there was no discrimination at that theatre. We could sit anywhere and we chose to sit down the back. But from Nowra south down to Bega Kooris weren't allowed in pubs and they had to sit up the front at the picture theatre. So things were different in the Illawarra because of the protection from wharfies and the coal miners who would strike through the unions to look after their fellow workers. Kooris on the camps were respected by the white people and we were always dressed nice when we went into town shopping. Wentworth Street, Port Kembla was the busiest little street then, that was on Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays, you'd be bumping into people. We had lots of big stores including Woolworths. We had clothing stores, cafes, a chemist, bank and post office.

I used to sing with the Salvos

And of a Sunday the Salvation Army used to come, every Sunday, and play hymns and I used to go and they'd give me a tambourine and I'd be there with them and singing to the top of my voice!

And I can remember the holidays when the old people including my father would put a number of tents on the camps and people would come from La Perouse and down the coast to enjoy fishing, yarning up and all those self-made festivities. Guitars, harmonicas and accordions were the main instruments played, and we'd all accompany them with dancing and laughter, with us children also enjoying ourselves.

The swamp at Official Camp

Where we lived at the Official Camps there was a swamp. And there was all different kinds of bird life there. It was a sanctuary for birds and there were frogs, there were tadpoles, you name it, it was a sanctuary for all of them. And the bird life! There were swans and wild ducks, just so many wild ducks and swans! In the water, the turtles used that used to come up where we lived on the hill or near the sandy beaches and dig holes to lay their eggs. They laid a lot of eggs and we used to get them when we were kids, take them home and cook them.

I can remember the old people talking language

William Walker, who is my father's grandfather, was buried in the traditional way at Salt Water Creek, Minnamurra. My mother and grandfather, Jack Amatto would sit and talk the traditional language and I was told not to be there while they were speaking it. I don't think they wanted us kids to know the traditional language because they feared that we would be taken away. You see at that time Koori kids were being taken away from their parents. That is why we had the Stolen Generations. But I still do know a few words of the Wodi Wodi language, but I cannot speak it fluently.

We pass things down to our children

My children know how to live off the land because my husband and me taught them. And what my children have learned they have handed down to their children.
My mother used to practice traditional medicines. If we had a boil, mum would boil the inkweed and use the juice of the weed to bathe the area and then put the inkweed leaf on the boil and it would draw the muck out.

My people lived all over the Illawarra, right down to Shoalhaven and right up to La Perouse. They are also tied into Orient Point and Wreck Bay. Hill 60 and the Official Camps are a significant place to me and to my sister Alma. This is where we learned about our history and our culture. This was taught to us by my parents and elders.

1 Just after midnight on 8 June 1942, a Japanese submarine travelled at periscope depth of about 9 miles south west of the Maquarie light near Sydney. As it travelled north west towards the coast, 10 shells were fired within 4 minutes which were found at Bellevue Hill, Rose Bay, Bondi, Vaucluse and Woollahra (home.st.net.au/-dunn/japsubs/japsshell01.htm).

2 The Whiteway (also spelled White Way) Theatre began as Port Kembla's first theatre the Empire Hall. Later it was named the Amusua Theatre and then the Whiteway from 1928. It was used as a theatre until 1965 and then the building fell into disrepair and was destroyed by fire in 1992 (Gauffered Velour: a history of motion picture exhibition and picture theatres in the Illawarra district of New South Wales, 1897-1994. Parkinson, Robert. Australian Theatre Historical Society, Campbelltown, NSW, 1995).

Opposite left: *Denzil James Bell, Muriel's Father.*
Above left: *Muriel's Grandfather, Jack Amatto.*
Above right: *Muriel's Grandmother, Florence Amatto (nee Burn).*

Alma Maskell-Bell

Hill 60 means a lot.
My grandparents were from there and my Dad and my great-grandparents.

Hill 60 Spring

When we lived at the Official Camps there was a tap there. We had to fight to get that tap. There was a freshwater spring at Hill 60. Mum used to pull a rock aside and give us a drink of spring water. It was just over at the Nun's Hole. The site is still there today; lovely water, real fresh. She always put the rock back (over the mouth of the spring).

We got prawns, mussells and bimblers at Lake Illawarra

We had all the rainforest plants in the bush at Hill 60 too; lily pilly, and blackberries. Mum used to make blackberry pie.

There were no radios when we were living on Hill 60

We had to have a car battery for the wireless. We used to have to wheel the pram with the battery down to the local garage[1] to get it recharged. If there was no money, there was no wireless. We listened to Smoky Dawson, *Blue Hills* and *Yes Sir No Sir*. The country music we listened to was real country music. If the needle on the

record player got blunt, we'd go down to the rocks to sharpen it up and then put it back in.

Mum used to tell us to go up the sandhills, down to the beach and get a feed of pippis. We just had to get home before dark. She told us to put a stick in the sand so that we would know what time it was

Opposite left: *Alma and son Daryl on the way to Canberra.*
Above: *Alma and Muriel's brother James Bell with Goowah Holmes.*

from the movement of the tide. When the tide went out the old people went out and would just tip the dry sand and all the pippis would fall out.

In the kitchen we had a big iron kettle with a tap on

At night our parents would warm up bricks and rocks and wrap them in a rag to keep us warm in bed at night. They used to put a handle on the condensed milk tin for a cup. We had nothing much but we were happy. Dad got the coal for everyone in the area.

Dad spoke for all the Kooris

Our dad, Denzil Bell, was very well educated. When they took us back to the Official Camps, Daddy named it the Official Camps, because we were allowed to stay there officially. Mum was only young when she died. Dad was in his 40s when he died over there. Bomber Brown was the last elder to leave Hill 60. Hill 60 means a lot. My grandparents were from there and my Dad and my great-grandparents.

1 Motor car service station.

Opposite left: *Kim (Muriel's daughter), Rita, Muriel (Alma's sister), Alma and Louise (Muriel's daughter)*
Above left: *Alma aged 18.*
Above right: *The Hill 60 Spring.*

Lorraine Brown

The youth of today are the ones who can break racism down if they're not brainwashed by people who have racist and biased attitudes.

I was born in Bega

I was born in Bega in 1956. I was nearly born in a bean paddock while my mother, Rene, was doing seasonal work! My father is Samuel Thomas from Lake Tyers and my mother is a Jerrinja woman from Nowra. I thank them for my excellent childhood. We lived (most of the year) in Falls Creek at first, then we moved into a housing commission home in Bomaderry in 1966, that was while mum was in hospital having my sister Narelle. I went from Falls Creek Infants and Primary School to Bomaderry Primary School then right through to Bomaderry High School. Then I met my husband Sonny (Brown). I first came to Wollongong when I was in about third form for a school excursion to the Steel Works. Other than that I don't think I'd been up to Wollongong even though I only lived in Nowra. We never came this way. We always went down the coast for our Christmas holidays to Eurobodalla, Bega, Moruya, or over to Bairnsdale for seasonal work during the holidays. I was a country bumpkin.

Seasonal work was fantastic

Doing seasonal work at Christmas was fantastic. We'd go down and meet all the seasonal workers. We all knew the other kids. We worked on different farms and met different kids and even though the work was hard, it was fun. We'd go swimming at the Eurobodalla River. The river runs right through the big valley down there. On Fridays, after a week of seasonal picking, we'd get our money, pick up our cheques, cash them in town, and head off down to Moruya or Narooma. It was a ball. Sometimes we'd go down to Narooma for the night carnival or whatever else was on.

We didn't realise, we didn't know

One of the projects we've been getting involved with recently is the Stolen Generations history with the Cootamundra Girl's' Home[1] and the Kinchela Boy's Home[2]. You know when we were kids we used go over to the Bomaderry Children's Homes and sit with table loads of kids over there. We used to go to *Girl's Life* and go to *Boy's Life,* my brothers, and me, that's like a Sunday school class held at the Homes by the missionaries. We used to sit at the table and eat with the kids but we never ever realised why they were there and we weren't told either. So we didn't know that those kids had been taken from their families. A lot of those kids, the ones that we know of, have got many

Opposite left: *Lorraine and grandson in front of one of Lorraine's murals at Coomaditchie Lagoon.*