

Thelma Brown-Henry

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I used to sit on Port Kembla Beach and watch the big ships coming into Port Kembla Harbour.

Born at Crown Street

I was born in 1937 at Crown Street (Women's Hospital, Sydney) and lived at Hill 60 and at the Official camps. My parents were Olga Stewart and 'Dick' William 'The Bomber' Brown. Rita Bennett's mother and my father are brother and sister.

There is only one sand hill left now

I think there's only one sand hill left in the area nowadays and that's at Primbee. The Official Camps site used to come up to a hill there. There was another old swamp (apart from Coomaditchie) at the bottom of the hill. That wouldn't be there now.

Everyone built their own homes on the Official Camps out of old wood and palings and some people had old tin houses. Some of them used to live in tents too at the old camps. We all grew up there together. There were twelve huts (on the hill) and they were all white families.

White families lived with us up on the hill

The white families were the Williams', Mathews, O'Briens, Mrs. Timothy, and the Faulkners. Then the Aboriginal families were the

Walkers, the Bonds (that was when Norma Brown moved into their house), Old Jimmy Dixon, the Bells, Browns and Timberys. Our house burnt down.

Then we got a house that was removed from Spoonerville and taken over to the Official Camps. The house cost two bob a week in rent. We paid that rent to old Mr. Wilson, an old fella who lived over that way when we were kids (in the 1940s). I think he lived in Military Road, Port Kembla.



We moved around

My father lived at the Official Camps until he moved out to Unanderra. That's when Tommy Brown and Amy moved into his old place. Uncle Jackie and Auntie Lambie they lived on that hill too. One of the old Uncles there had a wooden house. All in all I would have been there for about sixteen years. Then I moved to Barrack Heights and I've been here for twenty-four or twenty five years.

Opposite left: Modern day Hill 60

Above: Port Kembla depression housing, known as Spoonerville.



I watched the war ships come into Port Kembla Harbour

When I was about three years old and living at Hill 60 and the war was on, I used to sit on Port Kembla Beach and watch the big ships coming into Port Kembla Harbour. I didn't know what was going on around me just being a little baby. When the sirens went off everyone went into the bomb shelters.



I went to Port Kembla Infants School

I went to Port Kembla Infants School. We used to walk all the way from the Official Camps to Port Kembla Pool when we were in Infants (primary school). Gad's shop was a mixed grocery shop and a post office. We had (to use) coupons for the bread and the tea. Our parents used to keep our hands closed (over the money) and when we got to the shop (the shopkeeper) had to pull our fingers open to get the money.

We walked everywhere

We used to go and get all the bimbles (shellfish *Anadara trapezia*) and that, just down from where Harvey Norman is now – at Kanahooka Point. They used to walk all the way there to Windang Island. That was a long walk: walk it there and walk it back. There was a tree there we called 'One Tree' and that's where we used to get pipis. That's where there was a concrete pyramid with barbed wire right through it and we used to call it the Tank Trap. We still call it the Tank Trap today. Go down the Tank Trap and get a feed of pipis. There was a rubbish dump down further where the soccer field is. The Gala Picture Show

(cinema) today at Warrawong was never called that. It was called the Vaudeville. We used to go over there when we were kids and watch the performers on stage singing and dancing. And then it became the picture show called the Odeon. And now it's the Gala.

We usually listened to the women talking. We used to listen to their stories. Pink flower (was a remedy) for kidneys we'd hear them say. Our parents used to let it all dry up before they boiled it up. Flannel flower used to be all around. You don't see it now. Our mothers would boil up water in kerosene tins and do the washing and we'd listen to them talk. There used to be a swamp there where all the shops are at Warrawong - we used to get prawns there. Some of

our fathers were wharfies. The people in the Council were keen that we could keep ourselves. We were getting money from our fishing business. My mother used to work at the Steel Works Hotel. And there was no discrimination at the pictures. But we needed a 'Dog License' for drinking. The adults had to have a dog license, (an exemption certificate)¹.



¹ A Certificate of Exemption stated that is the opinion of the Aborigines Welfare Board that the bearer should be exempted from the provisions of the Aborigines Protection Act and Regulations. This gave Aborigines the legal right to drink in pubs and mix socially with non-aboriginal people.

Opposite left: Thelma with her daughter Tracey, c. 1970.

Left: Thelma at the Golden Grove Hotel, Maroubra.

Right: Thelma (Brown) aged 7-8 with Peter Sutton (cousin).





*Living down here, it's got into my blood
and I feel as if I'm part of this country now.*

From Bowraville to Wollongong

I'm from the Gumbaingirr Tribe situated on the mid north coast of NSW. I was born in Bellingen in 1948 and reared on a mission there at Bowraville. Dad's name was Robert George Campbell and he was born into Dainggati country. My mother's name was Rebecca (Dulcie) Brown and she was Gumbaingirr. There were 11 children in the family. I grew up with my grandmother, Jane Ballangarry –Brown and my grandfather Phillip Brown. My great-grandmother was Granny Florence Ballangarry.

My siblings were stolen children

It was there in 1966 that five of my young siblings were taken from the family, there where we lived at Bowraville. Stolen we call it. The police came with a woman from the Aborigines Protection Board and took them away to the Macksville Police Station. From there they had to go to court and the Prosecutor said to them, "Answer yes or no when we ask you questions." Can you imagine? Children from twelve-year's old down to six months old, answering yes or no to questions that they didn't understand.

Opposite left: Coral's Parents; Robert George Campbell and Rebecca Madeleine Campbell (nee Brown) probably at Burnt Bridge, Kempsey, c. 1940s.

So from there two of the boys were sent to Kinchela Boy's Home. I'm not sure if they were sent to Kinchela Boy's Home first because my younger brother was brought down here to Berry, to a Boy's Home¹ there. And my three younger sisters were sent to Bomaderry. I don't know how long they were there. From there they were fostered out. The foster parents would come of a night-time to pick them up. But the eldest girl, Louise, would gather her two little baby sisters up and would try to run away with them. It makes you think how strong the survival instinct of Aboriginal people is and still is today. Imagine an eight year old girl trying to save her baby sisters from the terror and torment that they would endure throughout the years with being gone from the family.

They broke my family's heart

My dad ended up in a mental institution because he had a nervous breakdown, through knowing that his five children were taken away while he was at work. And my poor mum just went within herself. But dad got better and started to look for his children. He had a hard time finding them too because the Aborigines Protection Board² tried to close every door as soon as it opened. And they tagged him a *trouble maker*. Dad came back in 1985 when I lived

over in Berkeley, he came over there. Unbeknownst to me he had signed himself out of a hospital in Kempsey. He got sick again here. But he gave me the job of getting all the kids together, all the family, to have the first Christmas together as a family, the first one together in over twenty years. And I did it.

My dad died just before Christmas

There were over 56 of us in the family. A lot of the kids had been billeted out but we tracked everyone down. A week or so before that Christmas dad got ill and was put in hospital, into Wollongong Hospital. Then they sent him over to Port Kembla Hospital because they suspected he had Legionnaire's Disease. We'd all go and visit him. He'd have intervals with all the children, all the kids, with mum and with the grandchildren. Four days before Christmas Day he passed away. But he knew all of his family was together and he told us to go ahead and have a wonderful Christmas.

It was a happy but a sad time for us. On Christmas day we had one chair there at the table, for dad. We knew he was there with us. So straight after Christmas dinner, we had to pack up and head up home to bury him at Bowraville. He'd wanted to have his favourite bush tucker before he passed away. *Giddi, cobra*, that's mangrove worm, he wanted it with damper, but the hospital staff wouldn't allow it. So we took him back home and buried him up at Bowraville. In my own heart I knew that was his last wish.

My sister has come home too

My sister Sylvia made the Illawarra her first home. She came back to the Aboriginal community down here when she was 20 years old. That was after being stolen from her family when she had only been eighteen months old.

After the kids had been taken away there at Macksville, I'd come down to Sydney with my parents and the remaining siblings and I lived there until I was around about twenty three or four years of

age. When I was that age I was asked to come down to Wollongong with a couple of my friends, Diane and Ellen Dungay. That was in the 1960s. Now I'd only really come down for the weekend, but what I didn't know at the time was that there was a heap of my family living down here!

I got to meet my family

I met an old fella by the name of Tommy Brown and his wife Amy. He turned out to be my Uncle! They lived out at Coomaditchie mission. I found out he was my mother's cousin! He said to me, "Oh, my girl, this is all your relatives down here." Then I got to meet my other relatives, Thelly May Henry and Dick Henry. It was so unreal to find out that my family had really originated from down this way.

See my great grandfather was born at Broulee and my grandfather was named Richard Campbell, he was born at Jervis Bay. Uncle Tom said to me, "Look my girl, are you coming back down again?" And I said, "Oh no, I don't think so, I don't like this place". He said, "Mark my words, you'll be back." Well do you know what, I came back in the 70s and I've been here ever since. Now that's going back quite a few years. So now I've lived most of my life down here around Coomaditchie, Port Kembla and Warrawong. And I've enjoyed every minute of it. So that's how I came to live down here in the Illawarra.

I went to a Catholic school in Sydney

But when we first came down to Sydney from Bowraville, I went to a Catholic school out at Maryong, that's out near Quakers Hill. It was called the *Sisters of Nazareth School*. They were all American nuns. The school was like an orphanage really. It was for orphan children from overseas like Polish children and Italians. But for us, the feared word at that time was the *Aborigines Protection Board*, they would monitor all the Aboriginal children in the area. Even my mum and dad were monitored.

I was in Parramatta Girl's Home for a while

I ended up in a home because I didn't like school and I ran away. It wasn't that I didn't like going to school, but being the only Aboriginal girl in a class with people from all over the world I felt all alone. From that school, I went to a Catholic school in Blacktown and from there I was put into a home, the Parramatta Girl's Home³. I spent just under a year there. It was very traumatic. After school I worked around Sydney, mostly in food factories like the *Smiths Chips* factory and the *Pick-me-up* sauce factory and even the IXL jam factory.

I met lots of Koori girls at Vaucluse

When I first left the home I worked over in Rushcutters Bay as a domestic. At Vaucluse, I worked for a doctor looking after his two children and cleaning the house. It was like a babysitter live-in job. It was from there that I used to meet up with all the other Aboriginal girls that worked around the Watsons Bay, Rose Bay and Vaucluse areas. All the elite areas. I'd meet up with girls from the Cootamundra Girl's Home⁴ and Koori girls from up where I came from too. We used to all meet on a Saturday or Sunday. We'd meet up on our day off. We'd meet at a place in Pitt Street called either *Playtime* or *Timezone*.

We did teenage things

Sometimes we'd meet up and go to play ten pin bowling and the pin ball machines or we'd go and enjoy a hamburger, milkshake and coca-cola somewhere. I can remember the first time I ever tasted coca-cola. And there was another place over at Redfern called *The Palms* milkbar, which was just down along Botany Road. All the Kooris used to love going there and listening to the records on the juke box. But you couldn't walk outside without the police stopping each one of us and asking us questions about where we came from.

We had lots of relatives in Redfern

We all had relatives living around Redfern. Especially the girls from Cootamundra. I could name a lot of them too. We had such a wonderful time together in our younger days. We'd go to La Perouse a lot and they'd have dances there on the weekend at the green/blue room and we'd meet young Aboriginal boys. The cafe on the hill there at La Pa is still the same.

I worked with Elsa Dixon

I remember this one time at the *Smiths Chips* factory there in Albion Street, Surry Hills. There were two Koori girls sitting there waiting to be interviewed for a job. And a lady in a white uniform came down the stairs. I can still see her. She winked at us and said, "Are you girls looking for a job?" Unbeknownst to us, this lady was Elsa Dixon, and she was the forelady there. Today we've got that *Elsa Dixon Grant* going on our people can apply for it to make jobs for Aboriginal people. And I remembered her. I worked there for quite a few years.

A group of us travelled around Australia

One Thursday after we got paid five of us girls from the factory decided to pool our money get a car and travel around Australia, working. Seasonal work. We'd stop at places like Renmark and pick the fruit. We'd work for a week or two then move onto the next place. Well we ended up in Darwin. Then we all split up and I wanted to come back down here to home. But I ended up staying up there for about a year or so. I got out just before Cyclone Tracey hit Darwin. Every time we had started to come home we'd only get as far as Mt Isa. We'd end up turning around and going back to Darwin. But eventually I did get home down to Port Kembla there. As soon as I saw that stack I knew I was home⁵. It gets into your blood.



I'm part of this country now

I met my husband down here up at the Commercial Hotel in Port Kembla. We lived there for years. So I've lived at Cringila, at North Warrawong, and then out at Port Kembla. And I feel at one with all the people here, all those people who have lived or have left Coomaditchie. Living down here it's got into my blood and I feel as if I'm part of this country now.



I work for the community as a volunteer

Nowadays I work on a volunteer basis, sometimes, and sometimes I get paid work with the Coomaditchie United Aboriginal Corporation (CUAC). These days I go to meetings for them and get funding for them. We apply for funding for jobs for our younger generation. At the moment I'm on the management committee for the Port Kembla Heritage Park and that's a partnership between three cultures; the Aboriginal people, the Army and the Maritime Board. It's great. I've been with them for the last three years now. I've been

having a great time really networking with the wider community. And now we've got jobs for our workers there to help protect our middens. The middens are thousands and thousands of years old.

My husband is Spanish

My husband, Pedro Pombo-Terrado is Spanish. He came from Oencia-Leon in Spain. We've been going backwards and forwards to Spain since 1974. Our son, Robert Pombo Campbell is the eldest child of my youngest sister. He was born in 1982 and we reared him. I was over there in Spain for about eight years and came back to Wollongong in



1997. I enrolled in a TAFE course when I came home in 97, at West Wollongong in the *Aboriginal Cultural Practices* course. I did a year there. Then enrolled in a hospitality class.

I've got a certificate in hospitality and now I'm a chef. And I do a lot in bush tucker. I cook it traditionally and also contemporary. I do a lot of talks in primary schools too. I've catered for Wollongong City Council, the South Coast Books Club, the Catholic schools, and the Newcastle and Maitland dioceses.

- 1 Bomaderry Children's Home, a home run by the United Aborigines Mission.
- 2 The Aborigines Protection Board was established in 1883. It was renamed the Aborigines Welfare Board in 1940.
- 3 Parramatta Girl's Home took in Girls who were deemed '*uncontrollable*' in that they would not go to school.
- 4 Cootamundra Girl's Home, established in 1911, was the first of the homes for Aboriginal children set up by the Aborigines Protection Board. Cootamundra Girl's Home took Aboriginal girls sent there by the Protection and Welfare Boards who were then trained as domestic servants and sent out to work for middle class white families.
- 5 Port Kembla Steelwork's smoke stack.

Opposite left: Fig Trees are a stand-out feature of the Illawarra landscape.

Above left: The extensive midden at MM Beach, Port Kembla.

Above right: Coral's husband Pedro Pombo-Torodo.





Where we lived at Hill 60 and the Official Camps was lovely and green, it was all bush and sand hills at Port Kembla beach used to be like mountains.

Born at Nurse Lovelock's Hospital

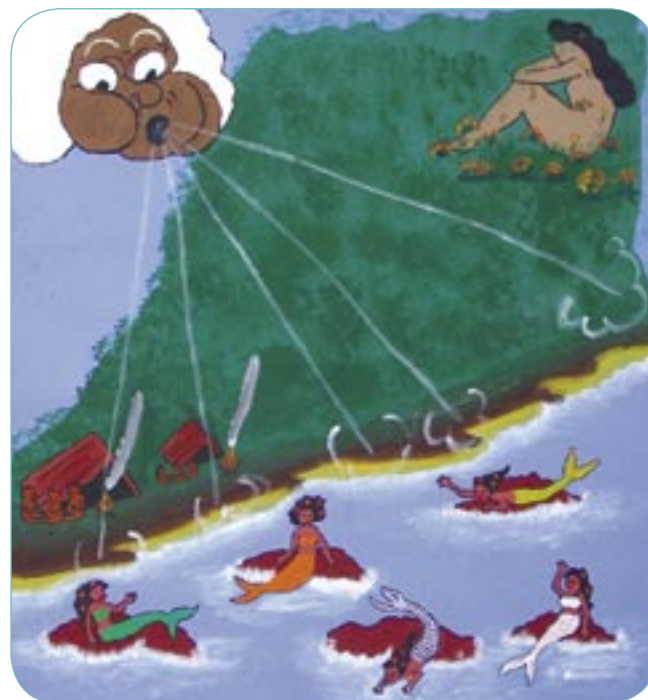


Three of us from here, Muriel Davis, Thelma Henry and myself, were all born in 1937. I was born at Nurse Lovelock's Hospital¹ and then went to live at Hill 60 with my elder sister Beryl (and my parents). I was at Hill 60 and later moved away to Nowra with my Uncle Sonny and Auntie Ruth Brown.

Auntie Mary and uncle Denzil (Bell) spoke Wodi Wodi fluently. Mum and dad spoke Wodi Wodi fluently.

We had a big family

We had a big family. My father was Charley Timbery and my mother was Madge Brown. The Timbery family lived all around Berkeley. In fact you could say that they owned Berkeley. My father was a fisherman and used to spot the fish from the top of Hill 60 with Uncle Dennie Bell. Great grandfather George 'Trimmer' Timbery rowed a government boat from Sydney to Port Kembla in seven



Opposite left: Rocky Islet (foremost), Booiroodong (Big Island) and Martins Islet (3 of the Five Islands off Port Kembla).

Above left: Cover from Talgarno Hospital leaflet.

Above right: Rita's painting illustrates the creation of Keira and the Five Islands.

hours with William Saddler in 1876, they had a commercial fishing operation and supplied both the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities with fish. Later they were supplied with more government boats. Our family was in the fishing business until the 1940s when we were moved off Hill 60.

Hill 60 has changed

Where we lived at Hill 60 and the Official Camps were all lovely and green, it was all bush and the sand hills at Port Kembla beach used to be like mountains². Us kids had to climb over them to get a feed of pipis. Now you can see all the sea from the Official Camps site but before (the sand mining) you couldn't. When we came home from school our parents would be sitting on the hill waiting for us and counting us.

Special memories from Hill 60

One memory from Hill 60 was that of Sapper Charles from the Army stationed here. He used to pass chocolates and biscuits through the fence to us. That was special because we never would have had those things otherwise. Another memory I have was of lying on the bottom of the Port Kembla swimming pool and Uncle Ernie Duren had to give me mouth-to-mouth resuscitation to revive me!

We lived on the southern (beach) side of the hill at Hill 60. Our fathers had good vegetable gardens where they grew onions, potatoes, tomatoes and other vegetables. They were excellent gardeners and also grew flowers. Sweet peas were dad's favourite. The houses couldn't be seen from the bottom of the hill and they couldn't be seen from the top (at the lookout site). When the war was on there were army huts where all the new houses are now. There was never a word of explanation given to us about the changes that happened in the 1950s and 1960s.

We went to live at the Official Camps which was a community made up of anybody who wanted to live there at Port Kembla between



Hill 60 and Coomaditchie. It wasn't governed like the other Welfare reserves. All around Hill 60 there were huts – it was all bush back then. All of this area was bush.

Craftwork - Our mother was creative

Our mothers used to get the muttonfish shell and make boomerang brooches. We used to have to glue the pin on the back and walk along and get shell grit, and all the little shells that weren't broken. They used to make little shoes, and the Harbour Bridge and the milk jug covers. Mum used to put the shells on the milk jug covers. People used to come from out of town to buy them. She would get a saucer, cut out two layers of the mosquito net, then she'd crochet a little pattern around the outside, and then they'd hang the shells from them. Mum used to do that. Mum used to make all our clothes and do all our knitting.



There were lots of food deliveries at the Official Camp

We had a lot of fresh deliveries. The iceman delivered the ice; the rabbit man delivered rabbits. We even had a man who used to deliver clothes lines, clothes props and disinfectant. They brought their cars right up on the Official Camps and sold things there.

We had to have coupons for food. Margarine and milk were kept in an icebox. The milkman used to come up to the Official Camps and he would use a long-handled ladle, like a soup ladle to dish out the milk. We collected what we needed in a billycan and that was kept in the icebox. The margarine was a whitish colour in those days and was horrible tasting. But margarine, sugar, tea, clothing, shoes, everything was rationed in those days.

And we used to iron our clothes with those old irons.

Sea food was a big part of our diet

Our fathers used to dive for lobsters, oysters, groper, mullet and leather jacket. I remember how our parents made fires around the middens. And we can remember how we swam in the Nun's Hole and Honeycomb (at the back of Hill 60). Aboriginal parents were very clever because they sent their kids out to work (harvesting seafood). You got oysters when the tide was right out there from Hill 60.

We were poor in those days

We used iron files to remove the mutton fish which we could get up on the rocks; (but we) never took the young ones. We were poor people then and we even ate the perriwinkle which you can't find now. Sometimes we'd make damper on the beach out of flour and water.



Opposite top left: Fishermans Beach where Rita would collect shells for her mothers shell art and milk jug covers.

Opposite bottom left: Sydney Harbour Bridge made from shells by Rose Timbery, c. 1950 (courtesy University of Wollongong Aboriginal Education Centre).

Above right: Rita with Grandma Timbery.



There was plenty of seafood

But there was plenty of seafood. Heaps of big conks (shellfish *Anadara trapezia*). Periwinkles (*Bembicium sp.*) and conks were harvested at Windang Island, Shellharbour and Bass Point. We'd boil the conks or put them in the hot ashes. We'd wriggle out the opening with a pin and eat the lot. Sometimes the pipis would just roll down the beach. We used to have the pipis curried too.

People shared what they caught

Big groppers were cut up into huge steaks and shared around to all the households. The cunjvoi³ was cut with a big knife and that was the bait for the groper. We cleaned the muttonfish down on the rocks. Sometimes we'd bash them, then wrap them up in a cloth. Mum used to slice them and fry them up with onions or cook vegetables. Sometimes she sliced up onion and tomato with potato and made soup. Sometimes she minced them (through an old-fashioned meat mincer) and made little rissoles. We (Aboriginal people) were the only ones who ever ate them, because they were too tough for the rest of the community. It wasn't until Asian people came to Australia and showed people how to cook abalone that they became popular resulting in the price of abalone going sky high.

Bimblers for diabetes

We used to get bimbler too. They are very good for people with diabetes. We used to jar them up ourselves. People mainly buy them for bait. You get bimbler in the lakes. We get a few now and then. We don't take them all away. We only ever took what we needed. We never over-fished. We just took enough to eat for that day.

Cooking and washing in kerosene tins

My sister Beryl would cook lobsters in an old kerosene tin on one of those old wood-burning stoves. We had one for boiling clothing



with this soap you get from one kind of wattle leaves and in another kerosene tin we'd be boiling up lobsters or crabs.

Bush tucker

Our parents used to take us collecting and we learnt from them. Us kids used to walk up to the base of the escarpment to get the bush lemons and collect honey from the tiny native bees. We got gum off the trees and ate it as chewing gum. Blackberries were prolific. We got cobs off the trees and dug for the roots of yum yums. We ate pigface as well and wild berries.

Cutting down and closing in

There weren't any roos (in my childhood) because by then Port Kembla was a built up area. By the time we were growing up (and in our teens) it was all gone. The bush was all cut down and they've put concrete pavements all over everything. This is our land here. Every time I go to Hill 60 and the Official Camps there is a big ache in my heart. I remember the blackberries and leaves of the inkweed were put on a boil on your leg. They were used for cuts as well.

Opposite left: Native Bee pollenating a Tea Tree (*Melaleuca*).

Above: Gum sap.



Kids get lots of cuts. And the wattle flowers indicated the schools of mullet were on the run. The white flower indicated the time to go diving when the lobsters are thick.

Racism at school

We walked to Port Kembla School (from the Official Camps). There was so much racism at the school that we fought every day. Often people took their kids to Sydney (with them) because they couldn't get jobs in Port Kembla.

Keira, Kembla and the travelling routes

The face, hair and beard of an old Aboriginal man can be seen on Mount Kembla. Mount Kembla was for the men. There was a track up Mount Keira for the women. It's not where the road goes now. The Elders came from over the escarpment from Bulli. There are trails all over the escarpment. People travelled from Nowra to Windang.

They got all their seafood (on the way). At Windang there are still Bimblers today (as well as in the middens). There are middens up and down the coast. The seafood in this area is so prolific. We used to go right up to Seven Mile Beach (at the mouth of the Shoalhaven River) to get pipis.



The birthing tree at Figtree

The big tree at Figtree was a birthing tree. We used to be taken over there; Muriel (Davis), Diddo (Alma Maskell-Bell) and myself. We were never allowed to climb up there. Queen Emma Timbery had lots and lots of children and quite a few of her children were born there. And quite a few of the children that came just before us (1937) were born there as well. No man would ever go there. The tree that was at Figtree, that's dead and gone now. There were several birthing trees. After the baby was born, sometimes the placenta was taken home and buried under a wattle tree and that became part of the person's dreaming. (Sometimes) the placenta was buried under the Fig Tree. That information was handed down to me.

¹ Nurse Lovelock was the nurse and Dr Luscombe was the doctor, at Talgarno Private Hospital, Port Kembla. Most of the Illawarra Aboriginal children during the 1930s and 1940s were born at this hospital and refer to Talgarno as Nurse Lovelock's Hospital. Mothers who did not have their babies at Talgarno had to travel to Crown Street Women's Hospital, Sydney, and then return straight away to the Illawarra, as there was no accommodation for them in Sydney.

² Before sand mining operations commenced in 1967.

³ The sea-squirt *Pyura stolonifera* which grows on rock platforms.

Opposite right: Port Kembla Beach pre 1967.

Above left: Rita with hand over face and Muriel with classmates, Port Kembla Infants, 1946.

Above right: The birthing tree which gave Fig Tree suburb its name and was over 500 years old when it was removed for public safety reasons in 1996.



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Compiled by: Sue Wesson and Kath Schilling

Edited by: Sabine Partl

Series design by: Jelly Design

Layout by: ID360, Sydney under licence to Jelly Design

Printed by: Penrith Art Printing Works

Photos are by Sabine Partl and Sue Wesson, from Port Kembla Primary School Archives, the Local Studies Collection, Wollongong City Library and the private collections of the women who participated in this book.

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