



Aboriginal Women's Heritage: Wollongong



**Department of
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Wollongong City Council Library who donated the images from their historic collection, Illawarra Images.

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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 Wollongong¹. 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

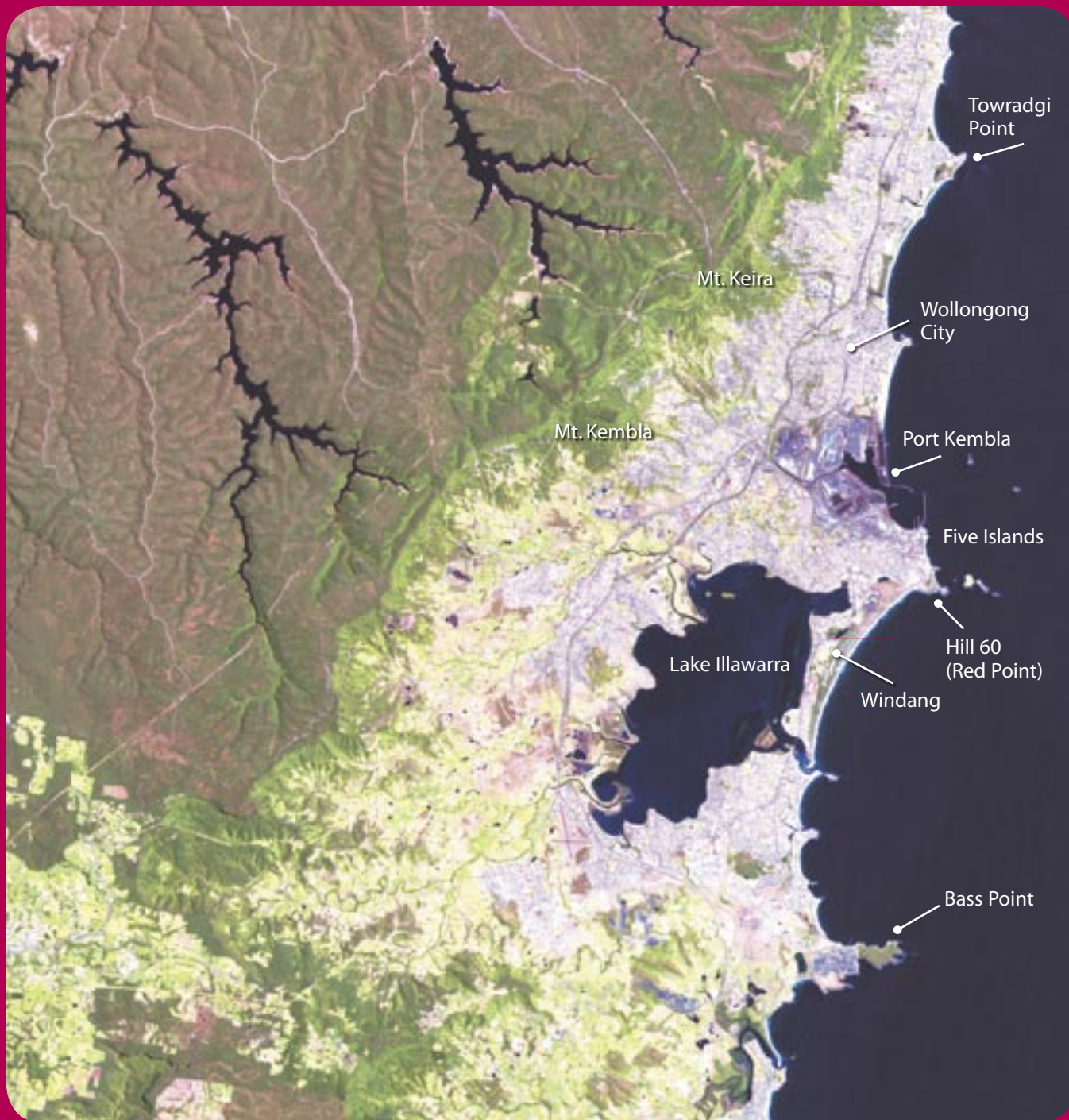


The once magnificent sanddunes of Port Kembla Beach.

strong connections with women in Wollongong from non-English speaking backgrounds through the shared experiences of life.

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 Aborigines Protection Board was established in 1883. It was renamed the Aborigines 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

1



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 Theatre² 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 Amusia 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).





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, mussels and bimbles at Lake Illawarra

We had all the rainforest plants in the bush at Hill 60 too; lily pilli, 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 garage¹ 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.







*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 Home¹ and the Kinchela Boy's Home². 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.

problems in present day. You can see the difference in them. One good thing for us was that our dad always had work, be it seasonal, or at the paper mill, or even working on the Avon Dam up here (on the Woronora Plateau) when it was first being constructed.

Dad was living away from home up in the Windang Caravan Park when he worked on the dam and mum was at Falls Creek (with us kids). Once in a blue moon she'd go up on the steam train to see him. I think we were very lucky not to have been taken when we were kids too because you see the pain and sorrow in all the ones that were. And working with them is very sad and hard.

I lost my father at seventeen

I wouldn't change a thing from my own childhood. I reckon I had a fantastic childhood, parents and family. Because dad never left us out, he always had time to take us places. Weekends were our time, and dad left that open for us. I lost my father when I was seventeen.

And that was when we also lost contact with the Thomas mob in Victoria (dad's mob). We were only young at the time and mum hadn't been over there that many times with dad. She never had a car and she couldn't drive you see. Mum was from Nowra and her family lived on an 80 acre property that my grandmother and grandfather owned. I remember this one time when we lived there with them, it was just before summer, we had to do these burn-off across all the top of the property because it was just total bush. My mother's brothers were timber cutters and they used to cut logs from the property. But I remember nan would be up there getting the witchetty grubs and throwing them on the coals. Another good thing about living up there was that we could run through the property. We knew what bush food to eat and it was always available in abundance up there. We had the sort of freedom that our kids today haven't got any more. And a lot of them don't know anything about their people either. We've even got a lot to learn ourselves.



Now I've got grandkids and an extended family

When I got out of fourth form at high school, I met my husband Sonny Brown, he was a Kempsey man. That's when I started coming up to the Wollongong area. I'm still living here now although I'd really like to be in the bush again! I've had to rear all my kids of course. I'd planned on having a big family, so I had five kids and now I've got fifteen grandkids. But then there were all our extra kids; our nieces and nephews and grandnieces and grandnephews, we're still all rearing them between us. That's why it's important to have extended family and kinship systems. And the respect for elders is so important. Our children all went to school here; Bomaderry, Koonawarra, Kemblawarra and Port Kembla (High School). I love all my family and I treasure every moment I have with them.

We all recycled and it was good

Since I've been at Coomaditchie I've learned to be a recycler³. And it's a good area and a good way for our kids to earn pocket money too. In my time we did a lot of seasonal work. But you can't do that here. So while my kids were growing up we used the household council tip and then the steel works tip to look for things to recycle. The recycling work came in handy because our kids were

earning their own pocket money. They grew to know every metal that was worth any money. They didn't have to steal or do anything else to get money because the tips were always there. For the first few years, and right up until nearly 1993, we were working odd jobs at Coomaditchie to keep it clean. We were doing all the recycle work at the tip, that's before it was covered in.

We used to be called all sorts of rough names over at there at the tip too. Other than that little problem, which we ignored, we were just mums or grandmas or aunts, trying to earn a little money and do the right thing. A lot of us women had never done much in the community and we weren't involved with the school at that stage, so cleaning up Coomaditchie was a positive thing.

Our school principal had vision and it made a difference

When a new principal, Mr. Peters, came to Kemblawarra School, he changed the whole outlook for Aboriginal kids and their mums. He actually walked over to Coomaditchie and said that he'd like to have a yarn to us. Him doing that meant a lot to us and opened the gates to us Kooris to be involved in the school. At the time he visited we were painting our fences at Coomaditchie. After seeing the murals, he said that he'd like us to design murals for a big wall over at the school. So we did the big mural over there at Kemblawarra School and after that our careers as artists really took off.

Mr. Peters has created a school that is an example for people who want to work with Aboriginal parents and Aboriginal kids. Now our kids have got three CDs out, they're getting up and singing. They're not just Koori kids singing they're kids from all different cultures. So our little school is a multi-cultural school and it's fantastic. We also had the best high school. The kids were really close to each other and I've never seen a high school like it since.



Our kids are learning to make it a better world

When we were going to school, it was just like black fellas-white fellas. To see all the different cultures at Port Kembla school has been really good. A lot of the kids had to fight their way (to acceptance) in there, but they've got there now. The kids got on fantastic and they're still friends today, out of school friends. It's really good for them to understand and respect each other's culture. And it is the youth of today, they are the ones who can break racism down, that's if they're not brainwashed by people who have racist and biased attitudes. Hopefully we'll get some more tolerant adults and we might have a better world.

Art gave us a new direction

Before we became an artists' group we had our off campus courses. Sue Edmonds, who was working on the book *Noogaleek*, helped us with our art. She was coming around to Koori communities and recording people's stories. Sue came back to our place and started working with us. She came out with paints and brushes because she wanted to know how she could start another kind of conversation with us; she wanted to be here to mix in with us.

Opposite left: Coomaditchie Lagoon.

Above: Lorraine next to one of her murals at Coomaditchie.



We regenerated our bush area around Coomaditchie

A friend of Sue's, Tina Bain, was a bush regeneration person who taught the off-campus horticulture course. We asked her about creating jobs for us because none of us were employed at the time. We wanted to create jobs and to keep our horticulture course going. We also wanted to restore the area around Coomaditchie lagoon because it was pretty neglected. We were concerned about a track near the lagoon that everyone, including the kids, used as a short cut, but it was pretty dangerous because you couldn't see snakes. We asked Tina to help us to landscape our own place around the lagoon. All of us Coomaditchie United Aboriginal Corporation (CUAC) women were involved in the design of the park; the cementing, the regeneration of the bush, and the artwork that's on the path. For our bush regeneration classes they took us for walks through the National Parks, to places like Minnamurra, Fitzroy Falls, and all around the Jervis Bay area. They took us on bus tours with TAFE, introduced us to all the different forms of art in Sydney and Aboriginal art in the galleries. These activities opened our eyes to different kinds of art works. We achieved our goals through having two very strong women who stood beside us. They opened our eyes to a lot of different things that we'd never been involved in or interested in before, put time and effort into us and helped us to create CUAC. So I thank them dearly.

We found support for our work

To create our work and receive grants for the jobs that we wanted to do around our lagoon, our organisation had to become registered. So that's how the Coomaditchie United Aboriginal Corporation came to be formed. After we became a registered organisation we hit all the government departments for funding and all the local businesses for in-kind services. BHP designed our mural cover, the

steps and the mural stand, which is really great. Cleary Brothers and Glennos Constructions donated all the cement between them and little buggies to clear the bush. Wollongong City Council has backed us. We became well known as an Aboriginal bush regeneration group, which introduced and connected us to a lot of different people from different parts of business. All that networking over the years has helped us to survive up until now because people have and looked at our work and backed our projects.

The Aboriginal Advancement League met here

The Port Kembla Heritage Park has involved Aboriginal people in the last few years which is good because a lot of Kooris worked on the wharves and a lot of the miners helped Aboriginal people get their rights. The CUAC hall is where the first South Coast Aboriginal Advancement League⁴ had their meetings and started fighting for Koori's rights in the Illawarra. People like Uncle Fred Moore from the Miners and Trades and Labour Unions, Auntie Mary Davis, Uncle Bobby (Brown) and Auntie Linda (Cruse) have all been fighting for the rights of Aboriginal people in this area.

It's been good living in Wollongong. It's been good for us as women. It's been good for us as parents. But for my older life I'd like to go back to the bush.

1 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 Girl's sent there by the Protection and Welfare Boards who were then trained as domestic servants and were sent out to work for middle class white families.

2 In 1924, the Aborigines Protection Board opened the Kinchela Boy's Home. At the home they had the 'official' purpose of providing training for Aboriginal Boy's between the ages of five and fifteen. Boy's were taken from their families by the State from all over New South Wales.

3 Coomaditchie is an area of Aboriginal owned housing situated at Kemblawarra.

4 The group fought for Aboriginal rights, rights against discriminatory unemployment relief system, the increases in APB powers and the appalling conditions on APB stations and reserves.

Opposite left: Coomaditchie Lagoon art poles.





I've had a long journey. I've toured all around New South Wales for the Health Department doing courses out to Darlington Point, Wagga Wagga and Dubbo.

I was born in Casino

The name on my birth certificate is Maryann Kathleen Drumbly. I was born in Casino in 1939. My dad's name was James McGrath and my mother's name was Emily Drumbly McGrath. There were four children in the family. I've been down here for 44 years now and I live out in Flinders, it's a new suburb of Shellharbour. You've got Aboriginal people living every where down here out at Dapto, Koonawarra and as far out as Bulli, Berkeley, Unanderra, Figtree, Barrack Heights and Warilla.

Starting out in Casino and Nambucca

Our family, mum and dad and my two brothers, moved to Nambucca Heads when I was very young. I can only remember being at Nambucca in those early years. I had a third brother in the Navy and we only lost him about four years ago (2000). We grew up and went to school at Stuart Island, at Nambucca Heads with our McGrath relatives and didn't know anywhere else. But it's like here in Wollongong, a lot of the Kooris living here lived like we did in Nambucca, we all lived on the riverbank and around the

surrounding waterside. In Nambucca Heads we lived under the cutting there, where they made the road into Stuart Island. Cars used to only come across on golf days, but before that there was no traffic. You could walk across the mouth of the Nambucca River at low tide or swim across from where we lived. Our house was built of recycled timber and corrugated iron. I went to school with the Marshalls, Mumblers, Davis', Smiths, Bryants, Lardners, Jarretts and Edwards'. We grew up with the Donovans but they went to the Catholic schools at Nambucca and Macksville.

Beautesert, Urunga and Cabbage Tree

When I was nine or ten my mother died and for a while I continued to live with my father. But later the Welfare Board made us kids Wards of the State and an Auntie took us to Beautesert (Qld) to live with our Drumbly aunts and grandfather on our mother's side. After that we lived with the Boney family at Urunga¹ for two years. When things got hectic at Urunga I went to live with and care for an elderly lady Granny Kapeen and went to school at Cabbage Tree Island². She got too old for me to be able to look after her so I then went to live with my auntie and uncle Gladys and Henry Kelly (see *Aboriginal Women's Heritage: Nambucca*). It was good living

on Cabbage Tree because the school was there and there was a women's softball team. I finished my schooling at Ballina High School. We would catch a boat across the Richmond River to get to the bus to go to school.

Housework, milking cows and looking after kids

I left school to go to work when I was just sixteen on a farm outside Casino doing housework, milking cows and looking after kids.

I worked for nothing. I never got paid for it. I went back to Cabbage Tree Island but the (mission) Manager said that there was another job for me at Kogarah (in Sydney). A group of us girls came down to Sydney together and we all worked in North Shore houses as domestic servants. I worked for nearly two years for these Jewish people and then went back to my Auntie's house at Alexandria. I met one of the girls I knew up the street who told me that her boss was looking for someone like me for a job, so I started work at Darling Point.

My brother was taken away to Kinchela Boy's Home after my mother died and then sent to work on a farm at Denman (near Muswellbrook). I hadn't seen him since he was taken away, but my family (dad, auntie and uncle) had found him again. My Auntie didn't say anything about my brother being at their house but she knew that I was coming out to visit for the day. We had an emotional reunion.

We lived in a car

When I came down to Wollongong I started living with my partner at the Official Camps³. My husband, my son and myself, we all lived in a car to begin with. That was how we lived. We were happy in those days. Everyone was happy because there was no money involved. Later we moved to Coomaditchie and then into the bigger houses. But even after you've left the old places, you still call the Official



Camps area your home. I had another two children after we left Coomaditchie. Three boys and two girls altogether. Four of my children were born in the Wollongong Hospital. One boy died and the

eldest girl now lives in Kyogle but the others are still in Wollongong.

Selling scraps from the Port Kembla stack

Before they built the stack out at Port Kembla⁴ there was an old quarry there. There where the Kemblawarra soccer field is today was a big tip in the old days. A lot of Koori men worked on the Port Kembla stack too. People used to go where the stack was being built, to the tip, to get the copper and brass scraps to sell. Some men also worked in the mines, with the Water Board, or as wharfies. Now many of those jobs have gone. The miners and the wharfies have all contributed to and helped the Aboriginal people in this area.

Fighting for our rights

My husband was a wharfie which got him involved with the Trades and Labour Council in Wollongong. The Trade Union did a lot for Aboriginal people especially through the Women's Auxiliary. Their involvement led to the formation of the South Coast Aboriginal Advancement League⁵. We did a lot of travelling to Canberra for rights: fishing rights, the right to walk into pubs, the right to even walk into shops, all of that.

Dorothy and Mary Noel used to babysit my son Wal when we went to Canberra. Kooris from all over Australia went there. Auntie Dolly (Elizabeth) Henry, Mary (Noel) and Dorothy's mother were living in a tent at the Official Camps and we lived in a car. There were also



the Browns, McGradys, and Roy Burns and Jack Tattersall living at the Official Camps, they all worked towards forming the Aborigines Advancement League.

We got the houses there at Coomaditchie

We did lots of agitating and won the right to put up the houses at Coomaditchie. Mr. Rex Connors was the Member for Wollongong and we worked with him. We also

worked with the Lord Mayor Tony Bevan. In the midst of it all we have dealt with five different Lord Mayors. The houses were built and some Aboriginal families were lucky enough to move in. Our family moved to Koonawarra into a bigger place.

Marching with the unions

We'd have a May Day march in Sydney (to celebrate the eight-hour working day). We'd march down the street with all the Unions here in Wollongong. Our placards used to say 'Land Rights', 'Better Education', 'Housing', 'Health' and 'Employment'. About fifty Aboriginal people used to march kids and all. There were all kinds of people marching with us, coal miners, seamen, all nationalities. We started from the Trades and Labour Council Building on Burelli Street, near Station Street, and then walked into Crown Street and (along Corrimal Street) to Stuart Park. Mary's sister Dorothy, her twin, was our May Day Queen.

Opposite left: Port Kembla featuring the Port Kembla stack middle left.

Above left: Auntie Mary before her trip to Russia.

Above right: Members of the south coast Aboriginies Advancement League in Canberra on the steps of Old Parliament House, Easter 1962. L to R: Fred Moore, Aunty Olga Booth, Jock Delaney, Aunty Elizabeth (Dolly) Henry, Aunty Mary and Uncle Bob Davis.



Debs in Canberra

Two of the Illawarra girls went to make their debut with Prime Minister Gorton⁶. Their photos were in the *Dawn* magazine. That was an Aborigines Welfare Board magazine that had photographers going about taking pictures of Aboriginal people in the early days.

The Illawarra Aboriginal Corporation

The Illawarra Aboriginal Corporation (IAC) has been going for 24 years now. It was started by a group of women who wanted to have somewhere to work and where we could help our people. We used to just meet in each other's homes before it was established. The department of Aboriginal Affairs came to the party with money to buy the premises. The building was started in March 2001 and I'm hoping it'll be here for another 100 years. Kooris like things that make it feel like home, so we told the decorators to go for Koori designs in the whole building.

1 Urunga is a northern NSW coastal town situated between Nambucca Heads and Coffs Harbour.

2 Cabbage Tree Island is an island in the Richmond River that was a Government Reserve (52180/81) and is now Aboriginal land.

3 A reserve at Port Kembla between Hill 60 and Coomaditchie.

4 BHP steel work's chimney stack.

5 Aboriginal Advancement League fought for Aboriginal rights in employment and wages and for improved conditions on Aboriginal stations and reserves.

6 Sir John Grey Gorton was the 19th Prime Minister of Australia serving from December 1967 to March 1971.





*From the age of five years I was harvesting the shellfish.
And I collected pippis, mussells, and oysters too.*

There was so much sea food around

I am the eldest of the five Davis girls. My father, Jim Davis, taught me to dive. I was about the age of eleven when Dad taught me how to get the abalone from around the rocks, out around Hill 60. He taught me to use a mask and snorkel.

Nowadays you have to go way out to get a feed

We used to get our pipis and mutton fish (abalone) from out at Hill 60 too.

There's hardly any mutton fish around here at all now. Now you have to go right out to sea. We also collected conks and periwinkles from around the shoreline.

From the age of five years I was harvesting the shellfish and I collected pipis, mussels, and oysters too.



We'd take a boat out to Koonawarra

I can remember we'd go out in the boat towards Koonawarra to get the bimbles. They're really big down there. You get heaps of bimbles along the shore. You can feel for them with your feet among the weeds. We had a lot of good times.

Opposite left: Back left clockwise; Kim, Louise, Karen, Sharmaine and Sheryl.
Right: Louise's Father, Jim Davis.





Nowadays there are restrictions

You have to go further away now to get a good feed and to get to your special harvesting spot. And there are also restrictions. You're only allowed thirty pipis per person per day. When we were young we'd only ever take as much as we needed for that night's feed or as a feed for the next day.

My eldest two kids are really good divers now days. So I've passed that knowledge on to them.

Opposite left: Rock Platform at Hill 60, one of the places where Louise's family harvested seafood.

Above left: Muriel, Jim holding Louise, Terry Bell and Margaret Wilson holding Kim.

Above right: Louise and her sister Kim.





*I love Wollongong and I love the sea. When I was really little I didn't play with dolls,
I pushed live lobsters around in a doll's pram.*

My grandmother was Violet Carriage

I was born in Wollongong Hospital in 1958. The address on my birth certificate is 14 Official Camps, Port Kembla.

On my grandmother Olga's side of the family there is a tradition of Aboriginal customs passed down through the generations to the eldest daughter of the family. My grandmother, Violet Carriage was a Queen and she passed that down to Olga Stewart, from there it went to Thelma Brown and hopefully it'll be passed down to me, Susan Henry.

Nan Dolly Campbell

I was told that all dad's sisters were wagging school, in the bean paddocks and at the seasonal camps. But my young uncle dobbed them all in to the truancy officer. Apparently the kids hid under mattresses and got kapok stuck all over their faces. When the truancy officer came looking for them my nan, Dolly Campbell, fired a shotgun into the air. From then on everyone went to school but at the time everyone just ran.

Opposite left: Baby Sue at Official Camps, c. 1959.

Right: Lake Illawarra at Kemblawarra, looking accross at Primbee.



Grandfather Brown

I was told that my Grandfather Brown would walk all the way from Nowra to Windang at low tide. That's Windang, where the Commonwealth Development Employment program is today. That was a traditional meeting place in traditional times. Before Windang Bridge was built, the men used to watch the sharks come in the channel at the entrance (of Lake Illawarra) and they'd time the sharks so that they could swim across and no-one would get eaten. My grandfather used to do a lot of seafood fishing. Windang used to be crystal clear back then. You could see the sand and everything.



Dad was a worker

Dad used to go out cutting trees. One time a whole heap of logs rolled down the hill and he was pinned under one. There was a big tiger snake next to him and he held that in one hand. He must have passed out and when he woke up again the snake was still in his hand. It never bit him. He ended up having plates put into his ribs. That happened down the coast somewhere.

Seasonal work

My grandmother Dolly Henry (nee Campbell) was the leader. If she was moving to go to a place to do seasonal work then the whole lot followed. It's the way it was for years. The family all travelled together. My parents used to go after seasonal work because it was hard for them to get jobs in those days. Our families had a big camp oven and we used to cook everything in the camp oven on the open fire. They cooked up meals for everybody. The women all took it in turns to do the cooking for the lot in one hit. We mainly headed down to Bega pea picking and bean picking. I think they went over to Port Augusta (South Australia) and did some picking over there too.

I was puzzled on how Santa found us

I've been all over the place. As kids we slept in the back of an old ute and I'd wake up every morning at a different town. It was always a surprise. When we were travelling we used to play with our dolls. You used to push a button on the doll and it would bend over. They didn't have clothes when you got them and so my nan used to make little dresses for them on an old pedal sewing machine. She used to make our clothes with that sewing machine too. I can remember waking up one morning early when we were on the road and found that I had a Christmas stocking full of lollies. It really puzzled me that Santa could have known that we were camped there on the side of the road.

I was taught to swim in the Bega River. It was ankle deep and they threw me in to swim or drown. I could have stood up. All that panicking over nothing! At Bega we were camped all the time in the bush. We ate little red berries no bigger than your thumbnail that come out in October and went right through to December. They are the most beautiful fruit I ever tried. I did see some at them in the back of Shellharbour hospital. A couple of trees grow there and I'm waiting on them to see if they get fruit.

Official Camps

My grandmother Olga was born at Durras Lake. She was on the old camps at Kemblawarra and had a really nice old place near the lagoon. We loved taking peaches from her peach tree and she would be continually hunting us away from it with a straw broom. Her address is stated on my birth certificate, 14 Official Camps, Port Kembla.

I pushed lobsters around in my little pram

When I was very young I didn't play with dolls. I pushed live lobsters around in a pram. Dad used to walk behind me and say that he had to bath them now. I remember the big sand hills at Coomaditchie. We used to get old car bonnets and fly down the hills there.



They were like big slippery dips. I used to sit for hours with dad up there. I used to help him knit the fishing nets too. He taught me all of that.

I used to have to go to Mrs. Carlin's store, which used to be the old Post Office at Kemblawarra. I went up with a coupon book and got it stamped for the sugar, the bread and the milk and half a pound of dripping so our parents could make candles because we had no electricity then. I went to the corner shop when the five and twenty cent pieces came in and they were changing money over; pennies

for one-cent pieces and I didn't want to part with mine¹. I thought she was ripping me off! I remember when *David Jones* was built and they had the fountain at the back. We used to go over on weekends and swim in it. People used it as a wishing well so we always had plenty of pocket money! We used to put faces on the old dolly pegs² and wrap a little bit of material round them. Mum would be asking where all her pegs were and we'd have them all made into little dolls! And we had the best bonfires

on Cracker Night³. Everyone would put in food and fireworks and all the Aboriginal people would get together for one big fire.



We had a natural spring at Coomaditchie

One of the lagoons around Coomaditchie has a natural spring and that's where we got all our fresh water from. To reach the island, we used to make canoes out of an old sheet of tin, just folded up at the sides and the holes filled in with soap. We'd row there and back with a bit of wood real quick before it sunk! I was brought up on rabbit, but I won't eat it today! And kangaroo is a bit too rich for

Opposite left: Sue's Parents, Herbert 'Dickie' and Thelma Henry.

Above left: Sue with her cousin Allen Gowan and Father Christmas, first Official Camps Christmas Party.

Above right: Sue's Grandfather William Brown at Barrack Heights.

me too. We had damper all the time, cooked in the ashes, which is the best way to have it. I love it with treacle. We used to have that running down our faces all the time. We were forever into the condensed milk, sucking on the can. And I was brought up on seafood. I've never grown out of loving to eat seafood. I still love it. My favourite is pipis.

My childhood years were pretty full

I used to always go over to the Moore's house at Dapto. I attached myself to them and they used to treat me like their daughter. They would pick me up from Coomaditchie and take me to their house. They got everything running and put on Christmas parties for the kids at Coomaditchie. When we were kids we used to want to be singers. I can remember standing on the old cars up the hill at the back of Coomaditchie with tin drums. We probably sounded like a bunch of cats crying. I spent most of my time at Port Kembla pool. We were there from the time we got out of bed until nearly dark. We didn't have to pay back then. The manager was really good to all the Koori kids. He'd even bring us some food during the day if we had nothing to eat. The health nurse, Old Mrs. Davis used to come around to Coomaditchie and she'd have us all lined up for our medicines and worming tablets. We used to see the car coming and we'd run for the hills because we knew what was coming.

My grandmother did shell work

Grandmother Elizabeth (Henry) was always into the shell work. She made some beautiful stuff out of shells; little shoes, maps of Australia and a big Sydney Harbour Bridge. We learned to sew from her. My other grandmother Olga (Brown) taught us how to cook; pineapple pies and fruit salad pies. I've just recently given the recipe to my sister and to my son, passing it down in the family. Mum's father's mother was Lena Hoskins and she lived down the track a bit further from Nanna Olga. I remember her from when I was a little girl. I've never seen a photo of her but there's a picture of her face still in my memories.



I went to three different primary schools

I went to three different primary schools; Bega public school, Eden public school and Kemblawarra from first year right up to when I went to Port Kembla High when mum and dad settled on Coomaditchie. We were there right up until I turned 16. There was a lot of racism in school.

The facts of life

Mum never told us about the facts of life. The only thing she ever said was, "Stay away from boys, they do bad things." So I used to dress like a boy, in jeans and big jumpers so you couldn't see my breasts, and with a beanie over my head. I was really scruffy and I used to be always playing cricket, doing boys things for that reason. She had us so terrified of them.

Employment

My first job was in the glove factory at Port Kembla. I went from there to Crystals clothes factory in Wollongong. Then to Mitfords in Berkeley, which is a Bingo hall now. From there I went to the Bonds factory down at Warilla. After that I did brickie's labouring. I helped

at the Keiraville Women's Refuge for six months too. The last job I had was nursing at Mayflower Nursing Home. I was there for four years.

Going bush

My father was really good friends with tribal people from way out west. They attended his funeral service and played the didgeridoo and gave him a proper traditional funeral when he died. They put head beads on top of his coffin and said something in language that I couldn't understand. When they lowered the coffin two black crows came out screaming at each other. To me that was my father leaving because he always said he'd come back as a bird. You always go away from your own place but there's something about it that draws you back. I love Wollongong and I love the sea. When I lost my father, I had to get away to grieve and the only way I could do my grieving was in the bush. We lived at Tanja for four years in an old tin humpy on 205 acres. I was washing by hand in the creek. It was great. You're better off in the bush. I didn't want to come back but my illness brought me back. I got Ross River fever while I was in Bega, and after I came back home I got lupus (a month ago). I've also had a pituitary gland operation but that's all fine now. But now I'm on the Koori medicine and I feel one hundred percent better.

My dream now is to live on a farm. I've got seven dogs. When I was living in the bush I found a sugar glider that was no bigger than my thumb, so I took it to the vet and they told me that it was too small to survive because there was no teat small enough to feed it. But I raised it until it had its last look at us and left. He ate nothing but Nutrigrain breakfast cereal for the whole time we raised him and not the no-name brand either, it was the expensive one! I'd love to work for WIRES⁴ with animals.



1 Decimal currency was introduced to Australia on 14 February 1966 to simplify monetary calculations, dollars and cents replacing pounds, shillings and pence.

2 Old fashioned wooden clothes pegs having two prongs and no spring.

3 5th November, Guy Fawkes Night in memory of Guy Fawkes attempt to blow up the British Houses of Parliament in 1605.

4 WIRES stands for the NSW Wildlife Information and Rescue Service and provides a network of volunteers to rescue and rehabilitate native animals when they are injured or orphaned.

Opposite left: Sue's Grandmother Olga Brown (nee Stuart).

Above: Sue and sister Tracey at Barrack Heights.



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 Gumbainggir. 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

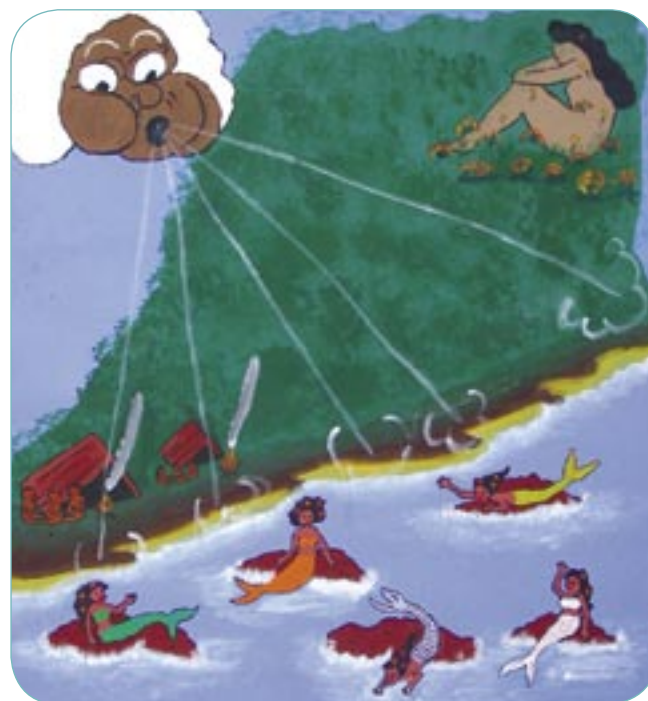


Three of us from here, Muriel Davis, Thelma Henry and myself, were all born in 1937. I was born at Nurse Lovelock's Hospital¹ and then went to live at Hill 60 with my elder sister Beryl (and my parents). I was at Hill 60 and later moved away to Nowra with my Uncle Sonny and Auntie Ruth Brown.

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), Booirodong (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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