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Aboriginal Women's Heritage: Brungle & Tumut



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43 Bridge Street Hurstville NSW 2220

Ph 02 9585 6444

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Aboriginal Women's Heritage: **Brungle & Tumut**

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Thank you to the women of Brungle and Tumut, who generously shared their stories. Their efforts will live on as a legacy for their families. Many thanks to Gary Currey, Manager, Southern Aboriginal Heritage Unit, Department of Environment and Conservation. Gary's commitment to and enthusiasm for creating opportunities for Aboriginal women's voices to be heard is appreciated. A special thank you to Dean Freeman, Aboriginal Heritage and Conservation Officer, Southern Aboriginal Heritage Unit, Department of Environment and Conservation. Dean saw this project as something positive for the Brungle, Tumut community and as a major step in preserving Aboriginal history and culture. Dean feels that young people will learn and appreciate the experiences of their elders through reading about their lives. He believes the book will create awareness and respect for the struggle Aboriginal women endured so that young people could have a better life in present day. A heart felt thank you to Kath Schilling, Aboriginal Women's Heritage Coordinator and Sabine Partl, Publications Coordinator, for their enormous efforts and help with the publication. And thank you to Rob McMillian, Tumut Council, and Jan and Colin Locke, Tumut Festival Committee.

Fiona Hamilton,
DEC, Aboriginal Heritage Planning Officer, Southern Aboriginal Heritage Unit

Introduction

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Nine Aboriginal Women from the Brungle and Tumut valleys gave contributions for this booklet and took part in a project instigated by the Department of Environment and Conservation, in an effort to help raise the profile of the unique historical experience of Aboriginal women in NSW.

In this publication the women elders tell of their lives on Brungle Mission Station¹. The station was established in 1888 by the Aborigines Protection Board ². Brungle sits at the foothills of the Snowy Mountains, 20 km from the town of Tumut and 15 km from the town of Gundagai. These women's stories tell us what life was like growing up on Brungle Mission. How their mothers made the best of their little tin shacks, lining the walls with newspaper and colour magazines to keep out the draft. How their mothers swept the dirt floors until they were as hard and as shiny as marble. They tell about going with their mothers to the river, collecting water to boil up their clothes and washing using a kerosene tin over an open fire by the river. How they would spread the clothes out on the grass and trees to dry. The women talk about how they enjoyed this washing time because it was a time to play and swim in the river. Some of the women tell about trapping rabbits and cooking them in every imaginable way. How they used to cook using camp ovens. How the children had to collect wood every day for the fire.

They tell how they had to collect water from the river, as another one of their chores and how wonderful they thought it was when the family finally got a rain water tank. Some of the women talk about travelling and living in many places as their fathers moved the family around looking for work. Their stories tell of a close community, one that supported each other, sharing what ever was available and helping out when people were without. They also mention bunyips and ghostly dogs and headless horseman, stories that kept them safe and away from dangerous areas and made them come in to safety at night. All the women have strong feelings for the river and for the mountains surrounding the spectacular Brungle valley. They speak of their hopes for their young ones and how they would like the publication to make a difference to their understanding so they themselves take advantage of the opportunities that are there for them today. Opportunities that hadn't been there in the old days.

This book is the third in a series of publications focused on Aboriginal Women's Heritage across the state of New South Wales.

¹ Although it is commonly called Brungle Mission by the interviewees, Brungle was never a mission. It had been established as a station. 'Station' referred to all properties set aside for Aboriginal people, regardless of who controlled them. In the early 20th century the term 'reserve' replaced 'station' as all stations were on government reserved land.

² The Aborigines Protection Board was established in 1883. It was renamed the Aborigines Welfare Board in 1940.



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Margaret Berg



1

*I always think that from a young age I've had someone there who looks after me.
And I've felt someone there at the times I've been down.*

There was lots of family around

I was born in Gundagai, NSW in 1939. There were six children in the family and I'm the eldest. My family lived at Brungle in the old days, on the old mission. That was where I grew up.

There was a lot of family around back then. We lived in a tin shack that had hessian bags for the side walls and pieces of tin for its roof. When the roof got a hole in it, my father would buy a tin of tar and tar up the holes. We used to have to paper the walls and when we came across something in the paper we'd read it while we were putting it up there. We'd try to match some pretty big pictures to put them in a spot to make it look a bit decent. We used to use the Women's Weekly and that sort of thing. We'd make a paper paste with flour and water, and that would stop the draft from coming through the tin. I suppose you'd call it wallpaper.

We made the best of what we had

My father used to make beds out of sticks with wire on the top. He'd get a big piece of calico and make a big bag and then put the straw in it. That was our mattress. He'd even use sheepskin rugs and kangaroo skins sewn up to make doona covers. You know even



though they were tough times, I think it helped us in a way and it made us tougher for later on in life. I think a lot of young ones have got it too easy these days because they don't realise and understand or value certain things any more. Whereas we had to learn to sharpen an axe, we had to know how to sharpen knives, learn how to kill a sheep.

Left: Margaret, her mum and brother Buddy
Above: Margaret and her siblings (early 1950s)



They'd bring a sheep in and hang it up on a tree and we had to get out and help. We had to help gut it, clean it and wash it ready to cook. And we used to eat a lot of things out of the sheep that people wouldn't eat these days. We even had to clean the tripe bag and cook up the head. Then my father would sort of press the meat with onions and things and make a brawn. He'd put bricks on the top of it to make it press down and set hard.

Above: Margaret and her siblings (late 1940s)

Right: Gum leaves

We had a meat safe

In those days I can remember we had a sort of a cooler. It had a big tray that sat on the ground with hessian bags all around it. The tray was filled with water so the hessian bags soaked the water up and they stayed wet up the sides. This was our meat safe, for butter or whatever little things we wanted to keep fresh. And in a way it served its purpose. It was really good. We'd make a billy can of tea out of tank water, when we had a tank. We'd sweetened it up and put it in the cooler. That was really a refreshing drink when the weather was hot.

We ate pretty well really

We really ate whatever we could get. Rabbits were pretty much the basis of everyone's diet from out around this region. Well, we loved our curry rabbit cooked in a camp oven with dumplings on the top, which was really filling. It fed the whole lot of the family.

Dumplings were just flour and water with baking powder. They just swell up in your stew and make a crust on the top. Even dumplings cooked separately we'd have with syrup or treacle as a dessert, which was really good. And we'd have syrup or treacle on rice as a sweet. My mother would make bread and butter pudding if there was any bread, or she'd make baked rice puddings. We'd get fruit from the people that grew it and make up different sorts of things for sweets, apricots, plums, or cherries, things like that.

All the kids had chores to do

All the kids had chores to do, like we had to go and get the morning wood from up on the hill. Then we had to go to the spring for buckets of water and we'd carry the water back on a stick slung across our shoulders, with the full buckets of water carried with hooks on either side. In some ways we were lucky, because my father had a horse and we could hitch a fork behind the horse and get a 44-gallon drum of water from down at the creek.

Other days we'd do our washing, we'd spent the whole day down at the river. We'd wheel the clothes down in an old cane pram with the tubs and the buckets. We'd make a fire and boil up the clothes in the buckets. We used to swim while we were down there too. The water would be cold but it didn't worry us.

Dad taught us to manage

My father used to take us out, well me and my brother. We were taught how to get witchetty grubs, how to rob the wild bee hives for honey, how to catch things like porcupine¹, goanna, and of course rabbits. We'd take the rabbits home and skin them. Then we sold them. We used to go around to some of the properties and get the dead sheep, for the wool. We'd bring the wool back and hang it with a piece of wire strung out between sticks, flat like a table, and clean the fleece. And then we'd sell that too. The money we made went to the family. Sometimes we could buy something for ourselves, a dress or whatever. In those days you could take empty glass bottles back to the shop for a refund. I think it was less than thruppence. But at Christmas they'd make Christmas puddings, and they'd put the thruppences in that. That was fun, getting stuck into that pudding because that was a bit of pocket money too. Even though there were chores we didn't really realise it at the time, you know?

School was never the main thing

I didn't go to school on the mission itself. I've moved around because we lived in different places, so there were lots of different schools, Leeton, Cowra, Cobar and even Melbourne. You see my father was a drover, or he'd get work wherever he could doing seasonal work, like fruit picking. This is what Aboriginal people had to do in those days. School was never the main thing, at that time it was more or less getting food on the table. I left school when I was about 12. There weren't opportunities to get some sort of degree, as I say today the kids are that lucky they have got a chance.



Getting the Cod Liver Oil treatment

If we were sick we got treated with cod liver oil². I can remember the bottle; it had this man with the fish on his back. Another home remedy was 'old man weed'. We'd bathe in it, we drank it, used it for sores, things like that. Another one was soap and fat. You put that on boils. You put it on a rag and use it as a poultice.

Everything was cooked in camp ovens

We all cooked with camp ovens, roast dinners and everything came in camp ovens, dampers, things like that. In those days we used to have to buy the real big bags of flour and baking powder because it was really hard to get back and forth to town and we'd have to hitch hike it.

They started a dairy up there on the mission I remember my son used to go up there and spend time with Mr Quilty. He'd bring home a can of milk in a big billy can. Mr Quilty was a dairy farmer up there. He leased some of the mission land in those days, but everyone shared back then. They shared what they had with other people. Now, today its different, things have changed.

All the kids were good swimmers

All the kids were good swimmers. Well, being brought up on the river, we used to spend all day down there, it was really good. We had our favourite spots in the river but mostly it was just as you come in the gate, down on the common. That was where everyone did their washing. They'd hang it out on the grass, or on a tree branch. The kids would climb up the trees and jump in while the adults were doing the washing. Sometimes they had a swing there and we'd swing off into the water. That's the Tumut River, it goes through down to Jugiong.

My father wouldn't let him go

I can vaguely remember seeing my grandmother, but I can remember my great grandfather, Baboo. I can always remember him sitting there with his army coat on, a pipe in his mouth, a balaclava around his head. He used to walk around the mission and go up to sit under the pine tree and even fall asleep there. I always remember him, old Baboo. He was my father's grandfather. I can remember my Auntie Dulcie. She died years ago, she was a lovely person but

very, very strict and I mean strict. There was Enid, Nonnie and Max and Zilla (Auntie Dulcie's kids) they've sort of been like brothers and sisters instead of cousins. Uncle Tiger was like a second father to us kids. Auntie Hilda was another one.

My mother had taken another boy into the family. We fostered him when he was just a week old. He was my mother's sister's son. He even took the name of Freeman. Once his parents came to take him back but my father wouldn't let him go.

We travelled around a lot when I was a kid

We had a house over in Cowra, when Dad did a lot of droving and other work over there. He worked down as far as Balranald with my uncle, and they used to cut wood then and we lived on the mallee right out in the bush. But my mother lived here most of the time, while dad was working. I was in Melbourne for a while when I was young. I lived with my grandfather and step grandmother down there. Then I came home, then went back again when I was about 18 and I spent 32 years down there. I suppose I'm the only one in my family that's been away. My mother was still alive when I came back in 1988.



My first job was on a station

My first job was on a station property. I was a domestic and I looked after the family's children. I didn't really get wages. They only gave me money when they felt like it. I can remember when the Queen came out here to Wagga in 1954, they were going but they never took me. Some friends of theirs who owned another property further up the Hume Highway, they took me in their vehicle to see her. I was 13 at the time. My father was working out the back of their property and they had a camp down on the river, my mother and brother and sisters. I was allowed to go down and see the family, but they had strict rulings. The lady at the station was the daughter of a judge in Sydney and you had to do what she said or she'd threaten you, "My father's a judge and I can do this or do that" if you stepped out of line.

They had a very nasty little daughter, she used to go and tell on all the workmen and everything and if you didn't do what she wanted she used to have a little whip and she'd hit you as she rode right past you on the horse.

It must have been hard for mum

It must have been hard for mum because my father wasn't around a lot of the time. And she always had to stay one step ahead of the Welfare. I think one time she threatened this Welfare fella with a tomahawk, she chased him off and told him, "You come here again and I'll hit you with this! You're not taking my kids". But I also remember how the RSL built a home for her on the mission because dad was a returned servicemen. That got her out of the humpy

we lived in and the Tumut people rallied around and donated the building material for the house. This was when dad was in the army.

Tilly Lamps

I can remember mum this one time at Gobarralong, my father brought home a new Tilly lamp and an iron. I had to learn to light them, because my mother was too afraid of anything like that, she'd run outside saying, "Don't light it yet". That's when we had to use metho or kerosene to use the Tilly lights. No, mum didn't want anything like that and she stayed that way right up to the time she passed away. She didn't even like gas, when we started using that. If you lit something that had gas she'd go into the other room to get away from it.

Brungle is home

Brungle is home because there was always a lot of family around. I can remember Uncle Tich Ingram, he could play just about any instrument and he'd put on concerts at the Brungle Hall. We used to have dances and concerts. Those boys would pick up their guitars and we'd sit around a fire in the night time singing. It was really good.

I own the old Brungle store

There was a shop in Brungle, the Murphy's ran it back in the mission days. They were really good people and we'd all go down and buy our groceries from them. They had a petrol bowser out the front and a public telephone booth too. It was a post office. They'd give us a penny of biscuits, broken biscuits. Good memories. And today, even though it's old, I own that shop! Well, what used to be the shop. I didn't ever imagine that owning this shop would happen, not when I was young. The shop part is pulled down now and the petrol bowzers are gone, but it's mine.

Opposite page: Name sign in Margaret's backyard
This page: Newspaper article about the building of Minnie Freeman's house.



We respected everyone

When I was brought up we respected everyone even if they weren't related to us. We had to do what we were told. We had to do the right thing because if we didn't, we knew that when we got home our parents would find out about it and we'd cop it. We had to respect our elders. But our parents were good as long as we let them know where we were. And as long as we did the right thing, we wouldn't get into trouble.

I'd like the kids today to respect their culture. I can't tell them what to do because they'll be men and women and they've got to make up their own mind about what is right and wrong. But I do worry about the way the world's going, and what sort of world there's going to be in their day. Like my mother said, she noticed that seasons have changed and how things have changed altogether from back in her days. And like her, I too see how things have changed and I think about the next generation and what sort of life they're going to have. I hope the children remember who they are and be proud of it. I'd like to see them get an education and make something of themselves.

¹ Aboriginal people rather use the term porcupine than echidna.

² By the early 20th century the medicinal value of cod liver oil was known as a natural source of vitamins A and D.

Sue Bulger



I have a bit of a philosophy about life and it's probably "Just don't make excuses"! That's what I try to tell myself. Don't make excuses, because if you make excuses you're telling yourself not to do it and you probably can

I was born at Gundagai

My full name is Suzanne Bulger, no middle name. I was born in Gundagai, on the 7 February 1954 at the Gundagai Hospital. We lived on Brungle Mission.

Our house

There were four houses on the mission at the time I was growing up and a lot of little huts. The four houses were built by the Protection Board¹, I think. We lived in the one that was closest to the paddock and closer to the school. We used to climb through the fence and just walk over the hill to school.

I remember the house had a separate kitchen, it was a big room with an open fireplace. The fireplace was so big we could sit in there when we were cold. The rest of the house had bedrooms and a lounge room. It didn't have a bathroom. We used to have a bath in a really big tub beside the fire. The toilet was outside.

Above: Williams family; back row: Irene (grandmother), Celia, Peter (grandfather), Winnie (great grandmother), Robyn (auntie) front row: Margaret (auntie), Winnie (auntie), Marjorie (mum), George (uncle)



A big family

There were eleven kids in the family. Most of them still live in this area, one sister lives in Gundagai, one sister lives in Batlow, a brother lives in Canberra and another one in Temora and the rest are at home. Mum's name is Marjorie Edith Bulger, nee Williams. Her mother's name was Irene Philips. I remember she was always sewing ripped clothes or ironing, or washing, or cooking. The things

that mums do all the time. Sometimes she would sit down with her sisters and they'd tell us kids to go away because they were talking. My dad was born in Yass and his mother, brothers and sisters lived on Hollywood Mission for a little while until they had to move from there. His name is Vincent Bulger. Dad's mother's name was Violet Josephine Freeman Bulger.

I have great memories

I can remember Gramps, that's mum's dad. He always wore a belt called Toby². If we mucked up he'd say, "I'll get Toby on to you" and we'd run away because we were scared of getting a smack. He used to come and visit us when we moved. Probably the fondest memory I have of my grandfather is of him sitting in a chair on the mission there at Brungle. He would be asleep in his chair with a book over his face. He'd always sit and read and he'd just fall asleep wherever he was and the book would be over his face.

My first impression of Brungle was of this huge area with lots of families. Everyone seemed to talk and be happy. They may have had fights, I can even remember a few but generally it was a big happy community. Now, it seems to be getting back to that because the houses are being built, but there's been that big gap where people just moved away from there, moved into town, moved to another mission or moved to another town. But people are back there now. Some people have been there all the time but not living in very good conditions.

We moved from Brungle in the early 1960's to live at Gilmore because dad was working on the railway then. We moved into a railway house.

We must have been pretty poor

I think it was hard for mum and dad to provide things for so many kids, but we had lots of aunts. We'd get the dresses from aunts that didn't fit them anymore and I suppose it was the same for the



boys from the uncles. But I can remember when we first went to this little school in Tumut my sister and I had a little pair of brown shoes. The shoes had this little tongue that flapped over with a little fringe on them, but underneath they had the biggest holes. We used to put cardboard in there. So we must have been pretty poor because I can remember those shoes with the holes in them! I can remember people used to give us things. That was ok, they saw the need and that was fine.

***This page:** Marjorie Bulger (mum) and her friend Valerie Freeman
Opposite page: Sue and Peter at their wedding*



There was a lot of sharing. If you've got lots of family who come and visit and they don't have food either, you have to share. Food doesn't stretch from payday to payday and sometimes if we didn't have any food, we'd just have some bread and fat or pancakes made from flour. When I think back, I wonder if mum hadn't been hungry. I think now, that there was not enough to go around. I really appreciate the sacrifices made by mum and dad for their family. I think back and realise that maybe mum didn't eat every night because there wasn't enough to go around.

Food from scratch

We sometimes had fish, sometimes rabbit. Brungle Mission had a little store, where we'd get bread and devon and things like that. My favourite food as a child was probably hot dogs or fish. Mum used to always make a Christmas pudding and it had dates in it. We'd have that with custard. She also made caramel tarts in this tiny little kitchen at Gilmore. I had a look at the kitchen when we moved into town, and it's only a tiny little kitchen. She used to make caramel tarts and apple pies from scratch and I think now, "How could you bother?"

Something I really liked when I was growing up was Quilty's Dairy. It was up the back of the mission and we used to take a little billy can and get the fresh milk. We'd drink half of that on the way home. Then another favourite food was bread and milk with some sugar. Just warm milk with bread in it and sugar.

We were treated with castor oil every day when we were kids. We had to have the dose of castor oil or paraffin oil or Scots emulsion or milk emulsion. It was horrible! We only went to the doctor if we were really sick.



Top right: Nimbo River

I was the eldest girl

I was the eldest girl in the family so I looked after the younger ones. My sister was probably 18 months younger than me and also looked after them. We used to go to the Nimbo Creek to do our washing. We'd go with mum with all the washing wrapped in a big sheet. We'd carry that down to the river and wash. We'd have a swim there and come back home when the washing was dry. We'd lay the clothes out on the grass, or in the trees to dry.

Aunties and Uncles

We had to go by the rules. We had to be home by dark. We had to have a jumper on if it was cold. We couldn't answer back or we'd be in trouble. I suppose Gramps was always around with Toby and there'd be aunties and uncles there if you did the wrong thing, and they'd tell you off. He'd come and stay with us when we moved over to Gilmore. He was very old. I remember we used to go walking around the hills because we lived right near a hill.

Dad told us stories all the way to Canberra

Dad always tells us stories. We'd go to Canberra to visit my brother and whenever we went over there, he had a story to tell us. He can tell you lots of stories because when he lived in Yass he had to travel in a horse and sulky. Nanna would stop along the way at different places and that's where they'd camp. So all the way to Canberra dad would say, "That's where I used to go working". The whole drive would be dad telling us stories about the countryside. My brothers and sisters have children and now they are telling their children stories about when we used to live at Gilmore and what we used to do. Only my sister and I and my two older brothers lived at Brungle, the rest of the children lived at Gilmore.

I loved school

I started school at Brungle in kindergarten, then we moved to Gilmore in 1960. I was in Year 1 or 2 when we left Brungle. I started at the little school here in Tumut Infants School in Year 1.

I loved school at Brungle. There used to be a fence beside our house and this track over the hill to the school and everyone walked over there unless you had a bike and you rode around the road. And there were those little ring lock fences; we used to squeeze through those little squares in the fence and I can't think that

I would ever be small enough when you see them now to fit through those. So we used to squeeze through those and then take off and run. If it was winter we'd run through the little creek that was there. If it was hot we'd take our shoes off and we'd go to school without shoes on in our case.

Rounders

We used to play rounders with a broom handle and a tennis ball. Rounders is a game a bit like softball. You hit the ball and run to bases. We used to use kerosene tins for bases. If you were hit or branded with the ball while you were running to get to a base, you were out. All ages of kids played rounders with us and sometimes the adults would join in too. I feel that this is where my love of sport came from. I still play in Masters Games playing Softball. Sport was a great way to meet people and get along with people. Sport was really important to us.

Special Places

Our favourite place was on the Nimbo Creek. We used to go there for swimming or washing or just for walks. Dad was always paranoid about us kids drowning or about not being able to swim. I know this one time a group of young people went to Mudjarn, up on the mountain and I wasn't allowed to go. Mum would start at Brungle and walk to Namyuns Gully and keep going over Mudjarn.

The grownups told us things to keep us safe or aware like the Djirri Djirri, the willy wagtail; a bad messenger. Or an owl. We still believe that if we hear an owl we'll hear of some older person dying.

A life of work

Dad started working for the Yass Tribune newspaper, in Yass when he was about 14. We used to get a complimentary Yass Tribune newspaper for about 40 years after that. Then he started work at