An aerial photograph of a coastal region, likely Port Stephens, Australia. The image shows a mix of green land, dark water, and a prominent white sandy beach. A large, semi-transparent purple rectangle is overlaid on the center of the image, containing the title text.

Aboriginal Women's Heritage:

# Port Stephens



Department of  
**Environment and Conservation (NSW)**

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43 Bridge Street Hurstville NSW 2220  
Ph 02 9585 6444  
[www.environment.nsw.gov.au](http://www.environment.nsw.gov.au)

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Aboriginal Women's Heritage:

Port Stephens

## Acknowledgement

Thank you to all the women who shared their stories and photographs. Their generosity will help broaden our awareness of the heritage found in the Port Stephens area.

A very special thank you to Warren Mayers, Aboriginal Heritage Conservation Officer, Hunter Region, who encouraged the women to participate in this publication.

# Introduction

Six Aboriginal women from the Port Stephens 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.

In this publication each woman talks about her life and growing up around Port Stephens. Their stories centre on Karuah and Soldiers Point near Nelson Bay. They describe living an idyllic existence where fishing, swimming and playing in the bush were everyday occurrences. They recount how their parents protected them from the realities of the outside world, keeping them safe during a time when the Aborigines Welfare Board<sup>1</sup> was a constant threat to Aboriginal families. They describe their parent's and community's achievements in boat building, furniture making, fishing, oystering, net making and timber getting. They recount the chores they had to do as children, from sawing wood and collecting firewood for the home fires, to cooking, cleaning and learning the craft of fishing. From a very young age they learnt how to gather sea food and played shop with jellyfish and crustaceans. They learnt how to dye and repair fishing nets as part of their community's enterprise. To these women working and doing chores in their home was just

part of a natural process adding to the family's well being and was never thought of as a trial. We learn about their favourite recipe for cooking pipis, smoking fish and how their grandmothers treated kangaroo. Through their words we find out about the wonders of Port Stephens and how they worked with the sea and the land to survive. In this book the women also remember the household equipment of the day. The old irons, stoves and kerosene fridges that were common place in early times. Their lives were structured by rules of behaviour, strict codes of conduct and the expectation that they would be obeyed. Perhaps the most powerful theme that connects all the women's stories is a sense of pride in their heritage and a love for their area. Each of the women tell of their achievements in life, their respect and love for their parents and their desire to raise awareness and respect for their heritage.

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

<sup>1</sup> Aborigines Welfare Board had a policy of removing Aboriginal children of mixed heritage, in order to force them into assimilation by training them as domestic servants and farm labourers, in the hope that they would assimilate and reject their Aboriginal heritage.





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# Viola Brown

1



*Teaching culture is our role. And that's what we do - teach the young ones their Aboriginality.*

## Born at Pindimer

My name is Viola Brown – I'm one of the Ridgeways from this area. I've lived here all my life. I was born over in Pindima, which is just across from where I was raised here at Soldier's Point.

## We were isolated here at the Point

In the early days it was very quiet around here because we were more or less isolated, there were no roads into Soldiers Point in those days. In fact there was no road in here until I was 14 years old, so we had to be pretty well self-sufficient in so many ways.

The only way we could get our groceries or anything like that was when this big boat came around the Port. It came around quite a few times a week and we brought all the things we needed from the boat. I think it came around from the *Ingles*<sup>1</sup> grocery company, but I wouldn't swear to it. It used to pull into a big wharf just off the end of Soldiers Point. We did have a milkman and a baker here but everything else, we had to get off the boat.

## You needed a boat to get anywhere

Everywhere we went here, we went by boat. There was no other way. If we went over to the bay – we went in a boat.

It was idyllic in so many ways, if we wanted fish, we just went down to the beach and threw our line in, and we had fish. If we wanted oysters, there were oysters, we just went and collected them from the rocks. If we wanted crab, we'd put our crab traps down and we had crabs.

We had everything there. My dad even had a big garden up at the back of our house, so we had fruit and vegetables. Now, even though it was ideal in a lot of ways, it was still really hard going, because we didn't have electricity or anything like that.

## Kerosene lights and fridges

You see most people around here, back then, were really poor. Everyone used kerosene lights and candles. My family had a kerosene fridge. But before that came in, we had what you call a meat safe<sup>2</sup>. We'd put our meat or fish in it to keep it cool.

*Opposite page: From left to right: Carol Ridgeway Bissett (Viola's sister), Charlotte Ridgeway (mum) and Louisa Ridgeway (grandmother)*



The safe had bowls of water on the floor around it so that the water soaked up into the hessian bags to keep them damp. So you set your butter or whatever on a tray inside the safe, to keep it cool. It didn't melt or go bad because you kept the safe in a cool place.

## Dad built the house

My dad and grandfather built the house we lived in – it was quite a good house too, it had a really big kitchen in it and a really huge table for all us kids to sit around. There were nine of us kids plus mum and dad and my grandmother. My grandfather had passed away at that stage.

## My grandfather did every job around here

My father's name was George and my grandfather's name was Jim. Jim was the brother of *King Billy of Port Stephens*<sup>3</sup> and there is quite a bit written about him. My Pop, Jim, could do anything.

He would do any and every job that was around here just to get enough money to live on. Sometimes he'd get work with the white men who lived up at the top of Soldiers Point.

You see my family were very good friends with the white people who lived around here in those days. Sometimes they would row across the bay and work for what was like, working for the dole. That was for the Government. But they would get paid with rations, with coupons – coupons for their food. That was their payment for working on Government projects.

Pop oystered and fished too and Nan said one time they went up to Queensland and Pop worked on the sugar cane up there for a while. But Nan got lonely and so they came back down here again.

My father was the same. He worked on anything and everything too, just to make a living. He fished and worked on the oysters, just like his father had done.

## It kept us fit

Us kids worked hard too. A lot of the time when we went out fishing we'd set up by putting bottles down on the water's edge with dough in them, to catch the little mullet.



The mullet would go in after the dough and get trapped, then we'd use them for bait. Or we'd go out digging for worms for bait and that was hard work.

But, it kept us fit. We'd take something like a garden hose with us to dig the worms. And you had to be quick enough to grab the worms while you were digging too. We used to do that for years, but back then, unlike now, you were allowed to dig for worms. And if you got any extra you sold them to the bait shop and that was a bit of extra money for food, for the family.

Mind you, I don't think we had a real shop here until after the road went through. And that's about when the electricity came through which was about the time we started getting other sorts of food.

## We had shell irons

Like I said in the old days we just had a safe to keep things cool but later we got a kerosene fridge. We had to fill the fridge motor up with kerosene and that's how it worked.<sup>4</sup> And then there were the old irons we used, we had to put them on the stove to heat up to do the ironing. And then we had the shellite iron<sup>5</sup>, you pumped them up and lit them underneath, they had a flame that went through the iron to keep it hot while you ironed. Our family had a lot of ironing.

## I learnt to cook at nine

I first learnt to cook when I was nine years old. My mum was having a baby every couple of years you see, so I had to just learn to do it. Someone had to do it so we all had to pitch in to help. So I learnt to cook on the old wood stove.

We kids had to go and get the wood too. We'd go out there with a cross cut saw. We'd cut the wood, collect it up and bring it home for the fire. We'd either go up to Soldiers Point or we'd row across to the islands and cut wood over there and then we'd put it in the boat and bring it back home. I wouldn't have been very old when I started helping with that job.



## Chores were part of childhood

Chores were just something you did. It was simple, if we needed wood, we'd go and get it or we went cold. I had to learn to cook or we wouldn't have had hot food. So we just did it. We kids had to help with the washing too. We'd get up at daylight on the washing days. Then we'd get this big copper going. We'd get it on the boil and set the clothes line up, then we'd set up the old round galvanised tubs. We'd sit down there with the soap and just wash the clothes. After they were washed by hand they'd go into the boiler. Then they came out of the boiler into the first rinse with fresh water. After the fresh water we'd rinse them in blue water, with the bluo, and then we'd wring them out and hang them on the line. And there were just so many lines!

**Opposite page:** Viola's grandfather Jim (her dad's father)

**Opposite page:** Viola's parents George and Charlotte Ridgeway (in the middle)

**Above:** Viola's grandparents Louisa Ridgeway (standing) and Jim Ridgeway (kneeling)



## Looking back

You look back on it now and you think, "God we worked hard". And you know, everything was ironed back then! And blankets when you washed blankets, you put them in the tub and then you got in the tub and stomped on them – you trod on them with your feet because you couldn't rub them by hand, because they were too thick. So you trod on them to get the dirt out, then you stomped them again and again until they were washed, and then you stomped them again until the water became clean. And you kept on doing that until the water was clear.

But we didn't think of it as hard work, not really, not back then, because it was just something you did. I suppose it really was hard work, but we still had time to be kids – we had time to play. And Soldiers Point had all trees and bushes back then and we had tracks all the way through it.

## Nan taught us about bush food

Nan used to take us out to get bush food. She'd take us oystering and fishing. Other times we'd go down ourselves. We'd go down to the rocks and we'd take a tin and some matches, we'd collect periwinkles and cook them ourselves, we'd eat them down there.

We'd have a pin and we'd just pick the little periwinkle out of the shell. They're about the size of a five-cent piece, maybe a bit bigger, and they're black. We'd just light a fire and put our tin on it with a bit of water in it and just cook them up right there. There were lots of common lemons around here too, so we'd go down and sit on the beach and pop them in salt water. We really did work hard. But I think we really did have a good time when we were kids.

Sometimes I look back and I think I wished we were still back there, in those days. But maybe not with the hard work.

## Most of our diet was sea food

Most of our food consisted of fish, oysters and crabs. Mostly seafood – meat was a luxury, even minced meat would have been a luxury. Sunday we usually had a roast of some kind, but usually we just didn't have any meat at all.

## Sometimes we had kangaroo

It was just sometimes that we had kangaroo. When they brought kangaroo home, Nan would fill a tub up with vinegar and soak it over night. Soaking it like that takes the wild taste out of the meat. We used to make stews and rissoles and all that sort of thing, out of kangaroo. Mum sometimes cooked possum and witchetty grubs too. They did all of that sort of cooking. I don't think I could taste that food again, but my kids still do and the grandkids do.

That's because they are with the other Aboriginal people, who still do that tradition food. My kids go out with them quite a lot and they eat dugong and snake and lizard, all that sort of thing.



## I ended up working as a cook

I was the family cook. I used to cook cakes and everything. And it's funny, because when I got older and went out to work, I started working in hotels and ended up working as a cook! And I have to say I enjoyed working in hotels, especially when I was working *A la carte*. That was really interesting because everything went out looking beautiful. And I enjoyed doing that and doing big buffets too.

## My first job was in the boat shed

When I first started work, I was about 13. My dad had built a boat shed over the back for Fred Hanson, that's who he worked for. Mr Hanson had him looking after the boat shed so I used to work there when dad wanted time off. I'd look after the boats. I'd sell the bait and all that sort of thing.

When someone wanted a boat, I'd have to go out and get one. If it were a launch or rowboat, I'd bring it in for the customer. So I'd fix the customer up with boats and bait and made sure when they brought the boat back in the afternoon, it was cleaned out and washed out properly. Then I'd put it back out again.

## Being the eldest in the family

You see, I was the oldest in the family so I had responsibilities and it never really worried me. I used to love it. But I had to leave school quite young because my mum was sick. She had a tumour on her kidney and when they operated on her it ended up killing her. She had always been sick so everyone had to get on in there and do things. We ran the house, I mean there was nothing else we could do.

My brother was only 14 or 15 when mum died, young Kevin. She died in 1971. She'd had a hard life. Her mother, my granny had about six or seven kids too. That was mum's brothers and sisters. They all had hard lives in those days.



## Cleaning houses and seasonal picking

I did lots of work when I started. I worked at the boat shed and then later I cleaned houses – holiday houses and I worked on the farms too. I did picking on the farms; I used to pick beans. Hard work, you have to pick to the end of the patch and at the end of the day we'd dump the load in. You had to bend over, up and down over these big piles and lines of beans, all day long. And tomatoes – that wasn't too bad. I mean you didn't have to bend so much but it was very tiring.

They were good bosses that we worked for. We earned a percentage of how much we picked. So when the bosses sold the beans, we got an amount of what they sold them for.

It was a hard way to earn a living. We used to go picking at the end of Soldiers Point Road and I think that's why we've got so much trouble with our backs nowadays, from working in the paddocks.

**Opposite page:** Louisa Ridgeway (Viola's grandmother)

**Above:** Old Kerosene iron. Courtesy of Gundagai Museum.



## I managed different hotels

Eventually I got a job working at the hotels and I've worked at a few. I ran the 'Salamander', here in this area. Then I went down to Canberra and I worked at 'Noeh's International' down there. And out at the 'Jamieson Inn'. Then we went up to Queensland and I worked up there in Ipswich at the hotel up there. The bosses wanted me to go up there to the new hotel they'd bought but it was too much. The new hotel was over near the airport and it was too far to go. From there I worked in a motel down at Sale in Victoria and I worked as a waitress there.

**Opposite page:** Family reunion at Bagnalls Beach in the nineties

**Above:** Old fishing tree

## I came back here in 1989

I came back here in 1989. My husband was in the air force you see and that's why we'd been travelling around so much. We'd been in 14 houses in 12 years!

So by then, by the time he did his 20 years, I said, "Lets get out and go back home". If we'd stayed in one place it would have been fine. But the moving! – Not that I didn't enjoy it, because I love the travelling. And we'd seen a lot of places we'd never have seen. The only thing was when you're in the air force you're always leaving your kids behind.

I've got my oldest son up in the Northern Territory; he is the executive officer for the Department of Education, Science and Training. And the other one is in Bunbury and he has just taken over as coordinator for the Aboriginal part of it up there – at Cowan University.

## Working with the council

I work on the planning committees for the councils. We try to get them to leave the bush alone and if they have a housing thing going on we try to get them to leave the bush there as a bush corridor and build the houses inbetween. Build on each side of the corridor. And try to get them to make everyone start planting natives in their gardens. We have great success with the Department of Infrastructure, Planning and Natural Resources. They've got an Aboriginal consultant committee. It is made up of Aboriginal people who work for the environment, on projects that are going ahead and we help with the *Water Plans* and the *Wood Shed* plans for the State Government. And that's really good because that group goes from the South Coast up to Taree and right up the Hunter Valley and you have all these people coming in and they know their own areas.

They know what they need. For me to go up to Taree and say this is what they need up there. Well I wouldn't know because I don't come from up there. But here, I know this area.

## Looking after sites

I hope we've made a real difference on these committees because they've changed the boundaries and things. So we hope that it keeps going and we've got some input into it. That way we're not only helping the environment – we're helping white people look at things through Aboriginal eyes and see how to replace some of the stuff that's been knocked down. And we want them to not destroy our sites. I mean around here, they think nothing whatsoever of destroying a site and then going to get the *Development Application*.

## We didn't see the destruction when we were young

When we were young it was much easier because we didn't see the destruction. But now all you see or seem to do is to fight all the time to save things. And it's not just us fighting for Aboriginal rights. You've got white people that are helping and that makes a big difference. If we didn't have them behind us, we'd be in trouble. And this is what we are always grateful for. We go to meetings with Fisheries, at Taylors beach. A lot of the kids at the schools around here are doing clean water projects where they take the samples to see if the water is clean.

## Since the netting has stopped

Since they have stopped the fishermen from netting so much, using the figures four and six and so forth, the fish are coming back. They were nets that are set like a figure four or a figure six. Designed so that when the fish come in, they're trapped. Which means they're trapping the little ones too. And they're trapping the ones that come in to lay their eggs in the Port. They've stopped all those type of nets now.

The fish can come through now and they are laying their eggs and surviving so the fish are coming back.



## We see fish we haven't seen before

My brother fishes a lot and he has seen fish in here that he has never seen before. He said he saw some big drummers the other day and he has never seen them in there before! And the fish stock is building up in here too. I heard them complaining on the news that Lake Macquarie up there has all the sharks coming back in, because they've stopped netting! Now the sharks are really just following the mullet. And that's how it should be – I mean the shark only eats what's around.

## Sharks

You know the sharks have always been in here. When we were young we used to walk with Dave Sands, he was a real good friend of ours and he and his brothers would come up here and we'd go walking around the Point and we'd see the sharks swimming past. We'd just throw the rocks at them, but you know they never used to worry us. We used to swim all the time and sharks never worried us because there were just too many fish out there. The sharks were more interested in fishing than chewing on people. So it was really good.



You know, we depended on fishing – we would not have survived without the fish and the seafood around here. There is no way we would have survived. We would have been hungry.

## Fish stocks

Aboriginal people have always looked after the fish – they would never have gone out and deliberately killed little fish. They knew that the little fish were the next year's food stock. They just didn't do it. I can understand where they're coming from with these fishing restrictions, because I've seen people take the little fish. My family would never do that. We'd throw them back, but you see people come around here taking fish that should never be taken out of the water. They are just too small. And once you take those little fish, there is no stock for next season.

## Being brought up as an Aboriginal

My grandfather was still doing initiations, right up until the 1920s. So when you're brought up as an Aboriginal person, you have an understanding of tradition or law, especially like it was for us in the

early days. We still had Aboriginal laws and they may not have been as strict as they were in the old days, but they were still there and they were still taught. And it's something you grow up with. Like I say my kids, Lee goes out with the old men and they go camping and story telling over there. They camp over night. They still do it because they have been brought up with that type of thing and a lot of Aborigines who have been brought up on a mission have lost it and that is really, really sad.

We want to try and do environmental business / tourism business because we want to get the Aboriginal people back and teach them the old ways, because you can live both ways because we could do it. You have to sit on the fence as the saying goes.

## Teaching is our role

Teaching culture is our role. And that's what we want to do – teach the young ones their Aboriginality. So that instead of getting into drugs or alcohol, they'll have something else. They will be taught to believe in themselves. To have self-esteem. At the moment, it's all been taken away from Aborigines.

## I'm proud of my family

I'm proud of my family. They have achieved a lot – I mean with my kids we never had any money when they wanted to go through school and university, we could only stand behind them. But they got the grants and everything like that and they put themselves through.

My eldest grand daughter is going through university at the moment – she's doing environmental science. At Murdoch University in Western Australia. And Karma is paying that – they pay all the fees and everything.



## You can't get rid of your Aboriginality

My kids have learnt like I have to work both sides of the fence. Because you're Aboriginal that's something you can't get rid of, but you have to look at the white man's way too. Because a lot of those white people were brought out here too. They were convicts – they didn't have any say in it.

So you have to look at that side of the family too. They were brought out here against their will. This is a multi cultural country now. The only way this country will work is if we all work together. We need to put our Aboriginal side of things to those people and get them to understand what we're talking about.

My father's side of the family were very, very strong people. Carol and I often laugh when we watch that film of a *Lousy Little Sixpence*. Because they're all related to us. My mother was from Cummeragunga; she's one of the Atkinson's, so if you had people who fought back then – well it's going to come through the line.

She was a very quiet woman, my mother – she was very small, they were all small on mum's side of the family. But my dad's side were all over six foot, and they were big with it. Not fat but big muscled men.



**Above:** Viola's family. Back row from left to right:

Mark, Leon (both Viola's sons), Mal Brown, Dean. Viola

Front row: Colleen, Zoe and Tegan (Leon's children), Pru (Leon's wife)

**Opposite page:** One Tree Island, also known as Yarinebah off Soldiers Point

- 1 Ingles was a grocery store company that focussed its trade on country regions.
- 2 The safe worked on the principle of evaporative cooling. It was a cylindrical mesh contraption with a well for water at the top and a gutter around the base. Canvas or a hessian bag was stretched from top to bottom and the water dampened the canvas or bag.
- 3 The Port Stephens Story, 1999. King Billy Ridgeway, an individual highly respected among the Aboriginal and white community at the turn of the century.
- 4 Kerosene was the universal fuel in country Australia. During the depression of the 1930's people became very inventive with empty kerosene tins; each tin held four gallons and was rectangular in shape with a handle at the top. Chests of drawers made of kerosene tins now sell for a fortune in the antique/collectables market. Kerosene was used to fuel stoves, refrigerators, irons, space heaters and bath heaters.
- 5 Shellite irons used a white fuel like turpentine or kerosene. The iron was pumped and lit.



# Beverley Manton

11



*This is a special place that we have here. We make it special through our strength and we get that strength through keeping our heritage and history alive*

## Born in Sydney

My maiden name was Beverley Simms. I was born in Sydney in the Crown Street Women's Hospital, in 1948. I was reared on the former Aboriginal Reserve at the Karuah, now affectionately known as the mish. I'm the second of eight children and the oldest girl.

## My father and step father were lovely men

My biological father, John (Jack) Simms, lived in Sydney however I was reared by my stepfather Fred Ridgeway. My stepfather was a lovely man. He came from a traditional family from this area. Thanks to him I have six other brothers and sisters who I love dearly. When growing up there were big responsibilities in helping to care for my younger siblings. And that's how it is for Aboriginal people, but our lives were not so different from a lot of other people. We all had our jobs to do like gathering the sticks to start the early morning fire, otherwise the house would be very cold in the morning, and if we did not do our jobs the house did not run smoothly.

My father Jack Simms came from Ullugundy Island, then came to Karuah to live for a while before moving to La Perouse in Sydney. Grandfather Simms made artefacts and sold them at La Perouse

for many years and my grandmother was a champion Sculler (boat rower) on the Clarence River at Grafton back in 1936 and 1937. I have 2 trophies she had won. Dad was a very good swimmer, he actually equalled the world swimming record of John Weissmuller who went on to become the first Tarzan in the movies.

My brother is Eric Simms. Eric was a terrific footballer who played for South Sydney in the 1960s and 1970s and went overseas in the Australian World Cup Kangaroo Team. He held a world record for the most points scored in a season and was a prolific goal kicker, and in the earlier days a field goal got 2 points but they changed it to 1 point because Eric was so good at kicking them.

## My mother was a beautiful lady

Mum's name was Gwendoline May Cook. She was adopted by my grandfather, Joseph Ping, after he married my grandmother, Jessie Cook. Then her name became Gwendoline Ping. Mum was well respected here because she was a very kind hearted person, just like her own mother Jessie Ping. My mother was a beautiful and sensible lady who provided good advice and instilled common sense into us kids.

*Opposite page: Beverley at the age of 4*



## Mum made the clothes for all the children

Mum made all our clothes. She would even knit for the wider community as an income, she could follow any pattern. She could do all that intricate work. Mum would do the whole baby layette herself. This included a matching shawl, jacket, dress, bonnet and booties.

## We had a two classroom school

I can remember starting school here on the mission. We had our own little Aboriginal school here. It was up on the hilltop overlooking the river. It only had two classrooms and a woodwork shed out the back. The boys learned about woodwork and they made things for the houses here on the mission.

It was a one-teacher school and the principal's wife usually taught sewing. My recollection suggests there were about 12-15 children there. I can remember the happy days in the playground. We had some fixed equipment, made by our men and there were little tables and chairs outside where we sat for lunch, it was all very nice

and comfortable. The schoolyard overlooked the river, so it was quite beautiful too.

The government decided that the Aboriginal children should attend the Karuah Public School in town, much to the protesting of the white parents. Aboriginal kids were subjected to much hatred and were left with a feeling of being unwanted and unwelcomed in this town.

The mission school house was relocated to the big school and it was never returned to the Aboriginal community, I hope to have that building relocated back to the mission as a heritage project to reinforce our history and culture in our children.

We also had a church that our men had built it in the 1930s. We don't have that church today. But we are working on getting another one built for the future.

## Our school lunch used to shame us

We used to have to take crab sandwiches for school lunches when we had no money. Sometimes there just wasn't anything else to put on our bread. You see we were very poor. I mean these days crab sandwiches would be a luxury, but in those days it was a shame factor. Mum would wrap our sandwiches up in a tea towel, and say, "Now don't open your port before lunch, because the flies might get in and they'll blow the sandwiches". You see we only had the one little port for the whole family. So we'd have our crab sandwiches or oyster patties. Sometimes we'd have cold fish.

Nowadays we realise that it was really a good diet, and we'd had lots of vegetables and fruit at home. And of course we had the little bottles of milk from school too. So we were very healthy.

## It was very pleasant here

We didn't know about racism in those days, because we didn't experience it, I guess that was because it was a small community



here, so we didn't pose a threat to the wider community. It felt safe here right through my growing up years. We didn't have any fear of being taken away by strangers. The only fear we ever had was from the Government. Fear of the Government policy of the day, the one that removed children from their families. That was the Aborigines Protection Board and they were the authority that caused the biggest scare and heartache for our families and for our mothers in particular.

## We were afraid of the Welfare

I remember in later years, I was working and my mother looked after my two younger daughters. Pricilla is 32 now and Rowena is 33. They can recall mum quickly sending them into the bedroom to hide under the bed if a strange car came down this street. And that fear was in my mother until the day she died.

## This was a Christian community

There wasn't an alcohol or drug problem back in the old days because originally this was a Christian community. We were raised with Christian morals and standards. So that was a positive, and the church we had here was very special. It was built by the men of this community. The men logged the timber to build the church from the land at the back of the mission. We call it the *back dam* and it's on the mission. They would cut the timber and bring back the logs on a dray towed by big draught horses. They split the logs and built the church from that timber.

## Our men were craftsmen

One of the old grandfathers would also row a boat down to Cabbage Tree Island, or to the other islands around here in Port Stephens to collect timber. There were bamboo and other species of wood growing on Cabbage Tree Island so that's what they made the furniture out of.



I can remember the big house that overlooked the wharf had bamboo furniture on the veranda, and old Uncle Paridy used to sit and look out upon the river all day long. Inside the houses people had lounge chairs, tables and interior type of furniture made out of bamboo too. Then they would make sturdier furniture out of hard wood as well but with dove-tailing around the edges. We had the same type of furniture in our school.

The men made the bookshelves for our school too although the desks were government supply. But, our church! We had the most beautiful pulpit in our church! It had dove-tailing around the top with carved legs and it was made in that really dark, dark furniture colour with those really rough edges. I can remember the feel of it now as I talk about it.

They were real craftsmen. And they were great boat builders too – the Aboriginal men from here up to Taree were all great boat builders. They even made and raced sea-going yachts.

**Opposite page:** Beverley's mum Gwen Simms, nee May Cook.

**Above:** Inside the old Karuah Mission Church

They'd head straight out from the Karuah River and straight out to the Port, down through the Heads and up to Taree. Then there would be the race back. So it was just great excitement at that time of the year I guess. I don't know what time that happened but it would have been when the weather was suitable.

## Fishing and Timber were the industries

They made boats for the oyster farmers around here too, because the traditional industries here are oystering, fishing and timber harvesting.

The men were also great fishermen who would hang their own nets too. I remember they would just get the twine and weave the nets. We've still got a big iron bark tree where they used to hang the nets to work on them. It overlooks the river right next to our school playground. The tree stood just outside the playground. And we would see the men trimming bits of iron bark off the tree with a blade.

The pieces of iron bark were only about four to five inches long and about two inches deep. They would boil the iron bark up in big copper boilers, and that made the tanning mixture to tan the nets. Nets were white twine before they were tanned. They would dye the net to camouflage it in the water and it would also stop them from rotting.

## They made nets for the white people

Our men made and repaired nets for the white people. Repairing nets from here only stopped in the last 15 years or 20 years. It was a practice that continued for years. The older men have passed away now and that left only a couple of people to continue the craft. However by then, they could buy cheaper nets imported from overseas.

*Above right: Old fishing boat in Karuah*



## We kids had to help

We kids helped with the nets too. We would gather the bark and firewood for the fire so the men could heat the big copper boilers ready up for the tanning. And the kids would help string the nets too. The nets would be hung from tree to tree so we'd start with those big bag needles and we would also mend any holes we found in them.

And then they had to hang lead along the bottom. The lead would be melted down and then pounded out flat before it was cut into

little strips, maybe three inches by two inches. So we had to help thread corks along the top to make it float and add strips of lead to the bottom rope to weight the net down so it would sink to the river bottom. So as kids we played a part in collecting, gathering, threading and repairing fishing nets, the whole thing was a learning process for us.

## They were very industrious

It was very industrious here prior to 1967 when the Referendum came in and gave Aboriginal people the right to vote and the right to be counted in this country's census. Prior to that the men had always worked for the oyster farmers and the timber mills of the area, and were never unemployed.

I have seen some statistics which stated that we had 16 men on the reserve and 14 of them usually picked up some form of full time work. I thought that was a great statistic to see. This just shows the previous strength and calibre of our community.

The farmers were good too; they knew when we didn't have an income, so they'd keep a job for people, and especially those who had worked for them previously. Farmers tended to re-employ a good worker every season.

And our men helped with the oyster leases too. But after the Referendum, I guess the non-Aboriginal people saw there was money such as pensions and unemployment benefits available from the government, because after that, work for Aboriginal people started drying up.

## Some of the men worked for Philips

Some of our men worked for the Philips Oyster Company. They were the largest oyster company in the Southern Hemisphere. The company was based at Oyster Cove. Our men would hire boats from the little boatshed in Karuah, owned by Mr Clyde Johnson down at the point, and they would go across to work at Oyster Cove.

## There were no motorised boats back then

When you consider that Oyster Cove is probably about 45 minutes away by road, it wasn't any short distance for them to go all that way by boat. It was a long way! We didn't have the powered boats like we do today. The boats they used were either motorised launches, or rowboats. With a rowboat, they probably had to row all day to get there! So they'd be away working for a whole week.

But they had no fear of the water. In fact they had a great respect for the water. We all respected it because we all knew what tragedy can come from nonchalance about the conditions out there. We had and still have a respect for the water and for the fish in our river. There have always been sharks in the river and to my knowledge no one has ever been taken by a shark.

## Women had definite roles to play

In those days there were definite roles for the women. They had to run the house and they had to rear the children. Everything in our house was in its place and everything was kept in its place. We had the first house here with electricity. But prior to electricity we just had the old fuel stove and kerosene lights and I can remember the lanterns, the pump hurricane lamp. We had a hurricane lamp and we had a hanging one too and that was pretty flash.

## We carted water into the house

We didn't have a specific bathroom as such in the old days because every bit of space under our roof was used for bedrooms or living areas. So having a bathroom was considered a waste of space when we could quite as easily bath or wash outside. But I fondly remember when we built a bathroom onto our house what a joyous occasion that was! To have our own bathroom! Mind you it was at the other end of our veranda. I remember we had to carry the hot water from the fire place in big iron pots, all the way out to the bath room to this lovely big bath tub.

We had water in the house – tank water – but even that wasn't until later on. Before that we had to carry water in a bucket from all the way out at the tank, back inside the house. You see our family was mixing in the wider community, so they brought home ideas, like putting a pipe from the tank through the wall and into the kitchen. That was a treat for mum when that happened.

All the kids had to do chores and I remember as school kids, one of our chores was to get the kindling for the fire, ready for the next morning. So I remember we'd pick the kindling up on the way home from school. We'd get home from school with a big arm full of sticks! (We had to make sure we went out and got the wood before dark so it was ready in the house for the next day). So the kids would get the wood on the way home from school because we calculated our play time expense. We calculated that if we did the job on the way home from school all we had to do after we got home, was to change our clothes and then we could go out and play.

## Stories to keep us safe

There were stories about getting in before dark too. There were stories about the boogiemán, he was supposed to be out there waiting to kidnap you if you were out of the house after dark. As we grew up we realised that it was just a safety mechanism to make sure we were indoors before dark. So it served its purpose because then people didn't have to try and find you after dark.

## We had a natural environment to play in

Sometimes we went to play down by the riverbank. It was a wonderful big natural environment. We learnt things that come from the ocean could sustain us and we played there and enjoyed it. We played shop down there too. We'd have all the little things that were growing along the foreshore. And we'd pretend we had a butcher shop, we'd chop up a jellyfish and pretend it was mince,

or sausages, or whatever. We had this little creek, just down the road. We'd play and swim there all day, then we'd swim up the creek on the high tide and go to the dam and wash ourselves in its fresh water, before we'd go home nice and clean.

## The dam played a big part in this community

The dam played a big part in this community. Firstly it was an important supply of water during drought times for the mission. In drought times when our tanks were getting low, we'd have to preserve our water for drinking. The mothers had to hand wash the clothes and they would take their washing down to the dam to do it. My mum used to load the big old cane pram up with the washing. She'd pack the washing powders and knobs of blue<sup>1</sup> to make the clothes white. We'd have to take enough food with us, because we'd be there all day and she'd feed and bathe the whole family before returning home. We had two fires, one for boiling the copper and one for cooking the food. There was a track through the bush so we'd all carry our things down and spend all day there. We'd have the clotheslines strung up across the bush from tree to tree.

## The women had designated wash days

There were designated washing days. Some women who didn't have loads of washing to do would share their day with others. So their little groups would go down together. But my mum had so many children, her washing was always so big, we had our own days. We were always taught to change our clothes before they got too dirty because then it was harder to wash them.

We loved going down the dam. It was like a picnic day. Sometimes we'd have bread or fried scones down there, but it was mainly sandwich fillers. Sometimes we'd cook a bit of kangaroo leg, fried up with a bit of stew, things like that.

*Opposite page: Karuah boys note flood waters in background.*







## We even had our bath down at the dam

But the dam also served another purpose because we'd have our bath down there too. It was the girl's job to make the bath ready. We'd find a clump of little trees and break them up. We'd hang the branches all the way around an area for modesty. Then we'd go in and have a bath. We'd all share the same bath. We'd just keep topping it up with hot water. We'd get out of the bath and then get dressed in our nice clean pyjamas, straight off the clothes line. We'd pack up and all choof off home. We'd have our tea and we'd be ready for bed before dark.

## All the kids pitched in to help mum

All the kids had a big role to play in running the house and there were lots of chores to do. Everyone had chores. We all pitched in because if we didn't, our mother wouldn't have had any time to spend with us. She wouldn't have had that quality time to play with us and teach us.

## Our community shared a veggie garden

We had a vegetable garden to tend and I know there was evidence of the gardens that existed here before my time. You could still see the evidence of great mounds of dirt piled up in straight rows. We have beautiful black soil here at Karuah. And you could see where these communal gardens used to be. They were pretty well self sufficient here. They grew the veggies and when they were ready to be picked, they just shared them with everyone.

That was the same with our fishing. We've got a reef just out the front of the mish. The men would just go and drop a net out the front and every now and then, and if they got enough they just shared it out with everyone else. It was the same with kangaroos, or with anything else they hunted. So even though we lived in houses we still had that food sharing and caring within our community.

## It must have been hard for my mother

My mother had a hard life looking after eight children. It was a good time for us kids when we look back, but for mum, it must have been difficult at times.

## I became a tailoress

I left here when I was 15. Mum sent me down to stay with my father in Sydney to obtain work. I became a tailoress. That was an introduction for me to the wider society. Both my older brother Eric and I would go to Sydney to my dads for the school holidays and

then return to Karuah for school. The next school holiday, dad might come up this way and he'd bring some of his friends from Sydney.

## Now I manage the Land Council

Now I'm manager of the Karuah Local Aboriginal Land Council. I came back here and married my childhood sweetheart, Kevin Manton. Kevin's family is an old family from this area. Firstly I became a schoolteacher, an Education Assistant in the Karuah Public School back in 1976 and stayed in that position until we moved from here in 1980. We moved to the Gold Coast where I worked for the North Coast Institute for Aboriginal Community Development and I also did recruitment for the Northern Rivers University. Then in 1987 we moved to Bega.

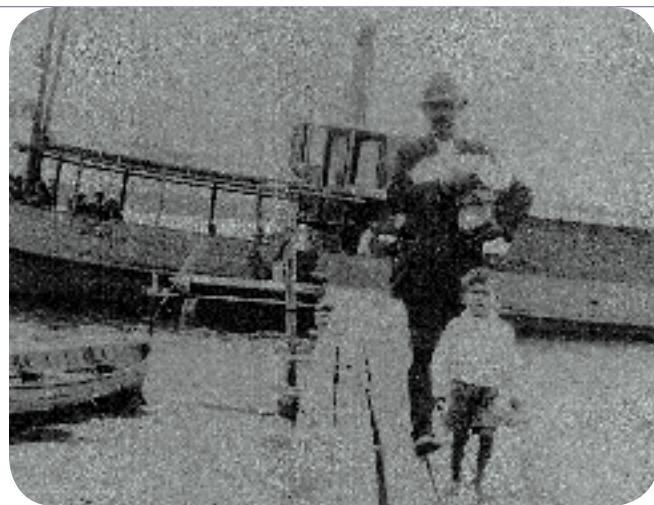
I became a Vocational Officer in the Bega CES and stayed there for the next 3 years. We came back to Newcastle when daughter Rowena completed her HSC and Priscilla began year 12. I became the Senior Executive Officer of the Aboriginal Programs Branch in the Department of Employment, Education and Training. I supervised 35 Aboriginal staff across the region, and after 10 years I decided to retire.

## Like my mother my priority has been my children

I've been with Kevin for 37 years and we've had a successful marriage because we did our growing together. For the whole of our life our priority has been our children.

## My Nan died in the 1980s

Nan Ping died in the 1980s, she was 83 years old. She was a very independent lady, she was able to fend for herself right up to the end and she lived alone and walked to the shops every day.



## Our old people were respected

We respected our elders and I can remember Auntie Janey Ridgeway's mother was Queen Charlotte Ridgeway. I can remember her where the old people's houses were, and I can remember how we behaved when we were near her house. We were never allowed to be boisterous or noisy anywhere near there. Those old women had a special place in the community. They were given lots of respect because they gave us leadership in return.

So as kids we had strict rules of behaviour. Like with the elders, we had to help them, we had to carry their bags for them. I would like to think that we were all very well mannered here and that we practiced proper etiquette and that our men still do the right thing just like they did in the old days when they gave up their seats for women. So as I say, we still had fun as kids, but we had very good manners.

*Opposite page: Karuah Dam*

*Above: Passenger and Supply Boat delivering to mish.*



## Lots of our people moved on

We have had many of our good people leave here. There wasn't enough employment, or houses, so people had to leave the area. We have had some very successful people come from Karuah too.

There have been quite a few business people who were reared here and people who have lived overseas and have achieved. I can't but wonder if we had been able to house them and accommodate them and provide for them, what this place might have been like today. What might have this town been like?

## My role models

My role models were the women in my family, especially my mother and my Grandmother Simms. Then there was Kevin's mother, Hyllus Manton nee Russell. Mother Manton had a large family of fifteen children and Kevin is the eighth child.

Most of them are small business owners today up and down the East coast. The traditional families were the Ridgeways, Mantons and Russells, they were the main families of the area. If you look at the street names at Karuah you can see our streets here carry those names.

## We have a special place here

This is a special place we have here at Karuah. We make it special through our strength and we get that strength through belonging to this land.

You know we always say to the kids "you should be proud to be Aboriginal" but we need to show them and tell them what there is to be proud of. We could start by saying "Did you know that our grandfathers were great boat builders, fishermen, fishing net weavers etc or did you know that our grandmothers were able to do this....

We need to provide role models or mentors for our kids and let them pick out the things in that person's life that they would like to emulate in theirs. And through the provision of positive support for our youth, children and families we will rebuild and strengthen our Aboriginal Culture.

1 Blue was a laundry brightener





*I'll be telling my future generations to be proud of who they are. To be proud of their culture.  
The oldest culture in the world.*

I was born on Karuah mission in 1943. Mum's name was Drucilla Russell. Her parents were Alec and Daisy Russell. Her parents came from Foster. My grandfather was an oyster farmer, he worked for a lot of the oyster growers around the Port. The family had lived at Soldiers Point until the navy took over the area. (All the Aboriginal families from there were moved on after the navy came). First my family moved to Pindimar. I can remember my mum telling me how they had to walk out to the mud flaps to catch a boat to school. From there they moved to the Karuah mission and that's where I was born. I had three sisters and two brothers.

Mum's father was a missionary on the Karuah mission. He would walk, (on missionary business) all the way down as far as the Victoria Border, he and his sister, my Auntie Ellen Dates. And that's where he met my grandmother, he brought her back here to Karuah and that's where they stayed until they both passed away.

My dad's name was Stanley Lilley. My dad was a fisherman and so was his father Herb Lilley. They would supply the mission with plenty of fish. And fish was the main source of food at Karuah. We always had seafood to eat and there was always sharing in this community – we always shared what we had – I think it was just a blackfellows way. But people really relied on that sharing.



## Dad was a fisherman

My dad fished with nets, both he and his dad. When I was a little girl, I'd go out in the boat with them, down towards Soldiers Point. They would go out with the tide, fishing along the way, and come back with the tide. They only had rowing boats in those days,

**Above:** Val's dad and her brothers: Neville, Stanley Lilley, Owen

no motor boats. We'd just pull into the bank of the river to have our lunch. Us kids used to help my grandfather and my dad with cleaning the nets and drying them too. We'd get the bark off the trees to dye them.

## My dad smoked the fish

My dad used to have a smoke hut – to smoke the fish, mainly mullet. And it was lovely too. My brothers and everyone helped with the smoking. We had to clean the fish and hang it up for so many days, then salt it down. That got us through the winter.

## Everyone has a connection to Karuah

We are all related from up there – it's just one big family. Everyone was related at Karuah. And we had some happy times. Most of the women were Christian women and they would go and do a bit of work with the ministry. They had mothers meetings and things like that. So it really gave them something to do.

## Our house was just like a tin shack

In the early days our house was more or less, just a tin shack. It had dirt floors. My mum used to get the bread bags and slice them up to put them on the walls and they would glue the newspaper on them too – that was to keep the wind out and to keep it a bit warmer in the winter. Things were pretty hard and I have to think back to realise just how hard our parents must have had it. But it's all changed now. They've all got lovely homes built up there now.

## Sugar bags inside the Welfare blankets

They all had their way of doing things. They had to make the best of what they had. Mum used to cut up the sugar bags and sew them to the inside of the Welfare Board blankets to make them soft so they didn't itch. They were scratchy those blankets – they were terrible. We never had much money to spend; they would go and buy the main things like bread, butter and a few veggies (if they had

veggies). But it was mainly potato and onions and flour, they could make anything with that. And fried scones. If you never had money for bread, it would be fried scones.

## Life on the mission

They were pretty hard times on the mission in those days. I often think of my mum. Now we just turn a switch to do the washing but I can remember my mum dragging the washing basket down to the dam at Karuah. (All the women had their days for washing). They would draw the water from the dam and spend all day down there. And us kids would be there with our mum. They'd hang the clothes over the trees or on a couple of clothes lines. We were only tiny, but they were happy times for us.

## Mum would curry the oysters

We used to go and get oysters. Our mum would do curried oysters and flathead, which isn't bad food. I still have that today with my kids and we still spend a lot of time out at Stockton Bight fishing. Nowadays we take our grandkids out there, and they have a wonderful time, there in the sand hills, fishing and getting a few pippis. So they still carry on our traditions.

## We had good food

We would eat dried bread dipped in lard or fat and we'd have that with all our food like: Curried oysters – you need to fry up some potato and onion, we fried it in lard; drained that off; add some curry powder and a bit of water; cook it until the potatoes are done and then add the oysters, heat up, heat it all through and serve with fried scones. Or Flathead – using the same recipe – slice the flathead and coat it with flour. Cook the potatoes and onions, add the flathead pieces and thicken it like a gravy. We made rissoles from pippis too.

*Opposite page: Stockton Bight in the background*





## Life was good

I have some good memories. Us kids used to amuse ourselves up on the mission. We used to go and swim in the Karuah River. There was a jetty running right out into the water and we never thought about sharks in those days. We'd go walking around the water all day. We'd have our bread and we'd get oysters off the rocks and periwinkles. We used to take a bobby pin and pull them out; then we'd just boil them up in a tin. Why we never got poisoned, I'll never know. We'd spend the day at the little creek there; we'd swim all day. We'd even be swimming in the mud. There was a little creek that ran at the back of Karuah and us kids would go down there to swim. When the tide went out –it would just leave a hole of mud, and we'd get all covered in mud! You could imagine us Koori kids swimming in that and we'd stay there until it was time to go home for tea. I often go back there and show my kids the creek.

## Kids Games

We never had television; well we never had any electricity. So it was a pretty hard life but we still enjoyed it, we made our own fun.

We used to play at night too; we'd have a fire going and the boys would get these pieces of stick with a tin cut in half to put a candle in and that was their motor bike! We often think about that – John Ridgeway and I, we often have a laugh.

## The Dam Dog

I don't know what it was, but we used to go to what we call the Point. (That's where the white people lived and where all the shops were). We'd go down there and if we were late coming home of a night, our parents would always warn us about what they called a Dam Dog. (This is where the mums did their washing). As soon as we got near the dam someone would sing out "Here comes the Dam Dog", well we'd run for our lives! My sister reckons she saw it, but I don't know. I don't know if it was just a way for our parents to get us home. But there is a certain tree over there near the cemetery, they reckon stones used to get thrown from it, so when we'd get near that tree, we'd run too.

## Making a bit of money

Some of us kids used to dig worms to get a couple of dollars to support ourselves. You see our parents never had any money. So we'd go digging for worms with our brothers on the mud flaps. I can remember my cousins, Viola and Bev Ridgeway, the three of us would go and get oysters off the rocks and bottle them up for a few dollars. It was nothing for us girls to go and dig for worms to sell to the white people.

It must have been pretty hard going but they were good times really. We'd go to Mr Johnson (the store manager) at the local store. We'd take our drink bottles back for our refund<sup>1</sup>. So while some of us were in the shop keeping him busy, the others would be out the back raiding more bottles and coming in with them! We'd buy our broken biscuits and a few lollies and an ice cream.



## You could really only fish in summer

Life was pretty hard on the mission. The only employment our men could get around here was cutting timber, timber getting, fishing and oyster farming. There was no other work around for them. My eldest brother Owen worked on the oysters all of his life. When my dad was alive, they could really only fish in the summer because the water up there would get a green slime in it during the winter; they couldn't put the nets out or they'd just fill up with this green slime. It was like a real fine weed, and it's a sort of a winter thing. But it was around during April and May when the mullet travel here.

There are still some Aboriginal lookouts around the Port where the Aboriginal men used to climb up to spot the mullet coming in. They would signal and let the others know so they could get out to put a net around the catch. They still do it today as a matter of fact. The fishermen today stand on the cliff to spot the mullet coming. Then they run a net out on the beach and get them all. So it's still happening. It happens today with the non-Indigenous fishermen.



## It's all changed now

We used to dig for mud worms. We'd use them for bait. It didn't cost us anything. But now that's been taken away from us, we can't get our own any more. And fishing, now you're only allowed to catch so many fish. (Our main fish used to be flathead, brim and whiting). And one of the main things that hurts is not being allowed to collect the pippis. We all loved getting our pippis off the beach, but now we are only allowed to get a certain amount. It changed because people would come up here and take them away by the garbage bin full to sell in Sydney.

## Net fishing has taken its toll

And the guys with the nets, they did a lot of damage. In the Port where I live over here in Tanilba Bay – Lemon Tree Passage, they used to run a net from one end of the creek right up to the other.

**Opposite page:** John Ridgeway

**Left:** Stockton Bight in the background

**Above:** Val with her three sisters in Holland. From left to right: Val, Margaret, Delma and Pamela.



You can't catch a fish up there now – so that has really hurt those waters. And it's all pretty hurtful because blackfellows used to live on fish and now they have to go and buy it at the Co-op. But it's not only fish they are taking out – it's the little ones (the under size ones) they're killing them too, and that's it – the cycle's finished!

## Aunt Ellen Dates

I've got to mention this because my great Aunt Ellen Dates –there are books written – One is called the 'Port Stephens Blacks'<sup>2</sup> and she is in it, although it doesn't mention Auntie Ellen Dates by name. It

tells how my great Aunt used to go and dive out at the entrance to Port Stephens. Out on the cliffs – she used to dive out there for lobsters and the men used to stand on the cliff and throw the stones in to keep the sharks away. So I always remember that story and I think how brave our dear old Auntie Ellen Dates must have been. When you picture it – it must have been amazing – those Aboriginal women divers.

## The dolphins don't come any more

And there is one other thing that was brought to my attention. About four years ago the dolphins were always going up the Karuah River. You would see them coming! That doesn't happen any more and I think it's because of the dolphin cruises they've got around the Nelson Bay area. These days the dolphins have stopped coming down the river and they just hang around up there now.

## Mum wanted us to have a better life

My mum moved us off the mission – we went to Raymond Terrace and that's where I got my first job. I was lucky because I got a job at one of the cafes there and my brother – he began his training to be a minister. My sister was in Sydney doing her nursing training and my younger sister was still at school, so all of us older ones were working – and that made our life a little bit easier. I think my mum knew that it would.

## I still remember the hurt

One thing I do remember is – that after I married my husband (its 40 year ago now) my mum, my dad, my husband and I were in Raymond Terrace this one day. We were doing our shopping and we all went over to the pub for a drink. I was allowed in, my dad was allowed in and my husband was allowed in, but they told my mum to stay out! That happened in Raymond Terrace – and I'll never forget it. It was about 40 years ago. And that's not that long ago.

I just never realised how hard it was for our parents. I didn't realise it at the time but now when I think back – I realise how they used to treat us. All the Aboriginal people from up on the mission had to sit down the front in the picture theatre while all the white people sat up the back! When you think of it now you realise how cruel it was – to segregate us and restrict us like that.

## Married for 41 years

My husband and I have been married for 41 years. We have 4 children and 9 grandchildren and one great grandchild. When I first met my husband the family still lived on the mission and I had to leave to go and see him (he is a non-Indigenous person and they didn't let non-Indigenous people come on the mission).

So even though life has been good in some ways, in others it's been hard.

## Stockton Bight

Today we have a land claim on Stockton Bight. That's the big beach here and my son is a ranger out there. My own daughter is involved in the Land Council here, and we are trying to help get things for our people. So Stockton Bight is one thing I'm very proud of. I want my kids to feel proud too. That area is really linked to our heritage because that's where we got our food. When we had a family gathering out there – we'd go and get pippis and cook them up. You can't do that anymore. Some Aboriginal women used to make rissoles – they would grind the pippis up and make rissole out of them, they say they were really nice. So all of Stockton Bight is a traditional area. It's our heritage.

But even so, now we can't do what we used to do – like getting bait and fishing. We can't run a net out to get enough food for our families any more. That's gone, we can't do it any more.



## The Cultural Centre

This Cultural Centre, where this land council office is, has a fun park, a cultural centre and a tourist centre with it. We hope we can make good for our people. We have tours over to Stockton Bight so that we can show visitors how our people once lived and let them see all the middens. Stockton Bight is the place because it's a very special area. It's a very special area for most of us. We never had a car to go anywhere so the closest area for us all was over to Stockton Beach and down to Nelson Bay. It's pretty special.

So for blackfellows to have this Cultural Centre – it's something to be very proud of. I'll be telling my (future generations) to be proud of who we are. To be proud of your culture. The oldest culture in the world.

**Opposite page:** Val's mother Drucilla Russell

**Above:** Val's sons Jamie, Rodney and Darren

1 Glass bottles were refundable. You could make about thruppence on a bottle—(1950s-60s).

2 Scott William, Port Stephens Blacks 1929









*I've loved fishing for as far back as I can remember. And I reckon that over the years, I've caught my share plus others.*

## Born on Sunrise Mission Station

I was born on Sunrise Mission Station at Purfleet<sup>1</sup>, Taree in 1932. I was born in a hut that had dirt floors and bags sewn together for its walls. It had a bark roof and a drain running around the outside to stop the water from coming in when it rained. If it were a nice day we'd throw the bags up on the roof to let the sun in. We had it really nice. For furniture, we had a table made from posts set in the ground with tin stretched across the top, it had stools made from split timber on either side. And there was this big wide-open fireplace painted white with clay. We had a lot of pride in our fireplace. We didn't have a lot of crockery so we used enamel plates and mugs made from milk tins. They were beautiful days.

My mother's name was Jessie Cook and she came from Barrington up near Gloucester. The Cooks were the first known Aboriginal family to live in that area. Mum's grandfather and uncles were all drovers, they were well known up there.

My father's name was Joseph Ping – he came from here, he was born out at Sawyers Point. That's down around the area where the bridge is. There used to be two shops and a post office there at one time.



Dad had wanted to come home, so they came back here to Karuah in 1939 when I was seven years old. I've seen so many changes here (since we came to Karuah). There were only a few houses here back then. And everyone built their own homes in those days.

**Above:** Award given to Colleen at the Newcastle National Aboriginal Week in 1991  
**Opposite page:** From left to right: Colleen's dad Joseph Ping (holding her brother) and her grandmother



They were nice houses too for their era, compared with the hut we lived in, back in Taree. And everyone had a garden. It was really nice.

In those days, if you were sick, some of the people in the community would be there to help you. If they went hunting kangaroo or went out fishing; what they got was always shared. You were asked if you wanted any. Or people would help you with your garden, because every house had a garden and a few fruit trees growing. Or they would do anything else to help. There wasn't much

**Above:** Colleen great uncles

**Opposite page:** Colleen's mum Jessie Cook

alcohol around in those days and the men all worked. Some did oystering, some cutting pit props, masonite or sleepers, everyone seemed to work.

In those days you could only buy petrol at this one place but nowadays we've got three modern service stations in town. And where there was a ferry to take the cars and timber trucks across the river, there's a bridge and a by-pass with another bridge almost completed. But (the old days), they're all gone now. We still have a good community here but it's not like the old days, a lot of the sharing and caring has disappeared. I suppose times change.

## A house full of kids

I've been a widow for nineteen years now, but when my husband was alive, we had a lot of children living here. At one stage I had sixteen children in my house and only four of them were mine! I've had six children of my own, but we've always taken other kids in. And there was no Government assistance or anything in those days. We just lived on my husband's income. And I have to say, my own children were very helpful to me, they never ever complained about going without to help those other kids. In the last twelve years I've still taken in a few children from DOCs<sup>2</sup> (for short and long term stays), but they're all gone now and I only have one child left.

## My favourite fishing spot.

We used to do a lot of fishing. I remember when we'd walk from here right down to North Arm Cove. There used to be a small bridge across Number One Creek. It was a short cut, but it's long gone now. We'd take our lunch and spend the day down there, fishing all day off the rocks and especially on the big rocks out on the Point. We would catch some nice squire there (that's young snapper). Nice big bream and flathead, and occasionally we'd catch some blue swimmer crabs. We'd walk back home in the afternoon. That was one of my favourite spots.

## But times change

But now there's a house built near my favourite fishing spot and the last time I went down there (which was a few years ago), the lady who owns the house told us that we couldn't fish there any more. (There was only one house in the area back in the early days, and now there are houses everywhere). I told her that we had always fished there. But she just said "Now I own the property and the property goes half way between the high and low water mark". So we never went back. As far back as I can remember we'd always fished there.

## Catching bait

As kids we had our own special spots along the riverbank. The day before we'd go out fishing, we'd go up to a big mud flat called Duck Swamp. It had a lot of small creeks running into it where the young mullet used to breed. We used old hessian bags and we'd catch a bucket full of them and bring them home for bait. Everyone had their own favourite fishing spot. If we didn't catch enough to go around we'd make a curry up with what we had and sometimes we'd gather cockles and curry them up too. Cockles were plentiful then but now you don't see them any more. They just seem to have died out.

We'd dig bloodworms and catch nippers under the rocks too. You can only dig worms when the tide's out, so we'd go down the river with the tide and fish until the tide was low. But it wasn't like today, there weren't as many boats around, and there was more fish about too.

## Catching crabs was an art

I used to always take my children crabbing. I had a knack. I used to be able to know how to put my hand down and grab the crab from behind. My eldest daughter used to get nervous and scream "Mum you'll get bitten". Other times we'd take a mattock and a piece of



wire with a hook on one end to poke into the crab hole and hook it around the crab and pull it out. Or we would just dig them out. I don't go any more. While I was on holidays this year, my youngest daughter was telling me that her son was laying around doing nothing and she told him to go for a walk, to do something, to go down the creek and look for crabs. He said "How was he going to find crabs"? So she got a piece of wire and took him crabbing. You see the young ones of today, they haven't got an interest in anything like that. Things come too easy. There's too many motor cars. And there's too much alcohol and drugs. When we were kids we were always out in the bush. Finding berries or yams, or down at the river fishing or getting shellfish, we had a lot of good times.

## Things changed on the mission

When we were young we had a really good life here on the mission, but as we grew older we had to get permission to come and go. Karuah was run by the AIM.<sup>3</sup> Our schoolteacher was the manager and he was very strict. There was a lot of religion here too, even before we came. As you know the Europeans forbid Aboriginal people to practice their own culture. So most of the people here



became very religious. They would have prayer meetings every morning; they had mothers' meetings and church meetings, and it was all very religious.

## My Dad taught me about the bush

My dad was a timber cutter. He worked hard all his life. He began cutting timber when he was twelve years old. He could pick up a piece of timber and tell you what sort of tree it came from. He was in his late sixties when passed away, about two years after he finished work. He had taught me so much about the bush, as had some of the other old people. They would tell me things and say "Now don't you forget girl".

## The old Government blanket was our sail

I can remember when we used to row and sail down to Soldiers Point for the day. We would get up early to catch the tide and sometimes if there was a good breeze we would hoist the old government blanket (it was grey with a red strip down the middle) on a pole for a sail.

A lot of them (the Aboriginal people) down there originally came from here. They (the families) followed the work. The oystering and timber cutting wasn't as lucrative as it once was, so families moved down to Soldiers Point and Pipe Clay and worked for Phillips, the firm that ran the Melbourne Oyster Co. As the younger ones grew up, they married and settled there.

## Mungo Brush was a place we used to go

Years ago most of the community would go up to the Lakes, to Mungo Brush, at holiday times, but not very much now, not like they used to do. You see it's a publicly recognised camping area nowadays. You have to pay to camp there. They would also spend a lot of time at Soldiers Point; but it wasn't as settled as it is today.

## I reckon I've caught my share of fish

Karuah River is a very good fishing area. And I reckon that over the years I've caught my share plus others too. I've loved fishing for as far back as I can remember. I'd always use a hand line and I rarely used a rod. Sometimes we'd use a trap. But I can remember when the traps for fish and crabs were made of small branches or sticks nailed to make either a round or square trap. Now it is simply done with wire netting.

## Pacific Oyster is a problem

We didn't have a problem with our oysters here, not like they had at Forster, although we do have problems with the Pacific Oyster now. That only started in the latter years here. But now they (the Pacific Oysters) are taking over in places where some of the oyster farmers grow a different strain. The Pacific Oysters are fat in the winter where the Sydney Rock Oyster is poor in that season.

**Above:** Karuah Dam

**Opposite Right:** Colleen with her great grandson



## Herb took us out fishing

There used to be two brothers here who were professional fishermen: Sid and Herb Lilley, we used to go out with Herb on the weekends sometimes, he'd take about four of us with him. We were only kids. He would set his net and check it for fish. He would take some out at about lunchtime, and we'd go ashore and cook them on the coals and have a nap until it was time to bring the net in. They never had motors in those days, so we had to row back.

## We ate what was available

So fish was always popular here, always. People used to eat fish three or four times a week back then. And we ate a lot of kangaroo, porcupine too, we hunted them regularly. There isn't much of that today, as there is a larger variety of different foods available, plus you can't have a gun to shoot kangaroo. We used to eat cobra. You have to go right up the river to get that, there's a lot up in the Hunter River but that water isn't salty enough and they taste different. I eat it whenever I can get it, which isn't very often. Witchetty grubs are my favourite wild food and I love them.

Sometimes we would go out into the bush hunting the old porcupine. If we got one we'd bring it home to cook. They were very happy carefree young days.

Everyone still eats pippis. We get them a lot when we go to the beach. We'd cook them on the coals. You can make pippi soup or you curry them. I even tasted them in a Chinese cafe in black bean sauce, they were lovely.

## What you'll catch around here

The fish don't bite or aren't as plentiful in the winter as they are in summer. In summer you'll mainly catch bream, flathead, flounder, tailor, farwine and squire, that's a young snapper. There are a lot of mullet in the river too, but they don't bite, like in other areas. At



Foster they bite using bread or dough. And there's a lot of blackfish or luderick around the rocks here; they feed off the weed on the rocks. They use green weed to catch them. I've never fished for them. I get mine off the fishermen. But I really like fish. I can eat fish every day and for every meal. If I could get it.

## But fishing has changed

It wasn't that long ago when you could go down to the river bank at high tide and catch three or four nice bream. (You can really only fish off the river bank at high tide; it's all mud flat when the tide goes out). You can't do that now, because the fish are definitely diminishing. I think it's been overfished. Commercially you would survive on the income, but you would never make a fortune out of it, the fish just aren't that plentiful any more and net fishing has taken its toll. I am a keen fisher woman and there are not many places in Australia where I haven't fished. I like going inland to Wilcannia and to Menindee to fish in the Darling River when the fish are biting. I like the big rough shell crays you get out of the Murrumbidgee. I've also been outside on the ocean fishing – it's great.



## There are Aboriginal sites around here

We have got huge middens along the shores here. Places where the tribal people would meet and gather shellfish, like oysters, conchs, cockles and periwinkles. They would all gather to have food and dancing and corroborees here. There are a lot of Aboriginal sites around, but not in this immediate area. They are mainly around North Arm Cove and the coastal region.

## I love the bush

I love being in the bush. And I do know a lot of things about the bush and about my culture. I can breathe it, to me it is natural. I can feel nature all around me. I don't have any special places, it's all special. I was lucky to have been taught by some old ones. Like the things you can talk about and things you can't. I remember how those old people used to respect the elements, especially the storms. When a storm came up mum would put us kids under the bed and cover up anything that was shiny, she wouldn't let us out until it was gone. I still hate storms. And I respect every part of the country that I go to and I have respect for their (different) cultural and spiritual beliefs. Like, here, it's the little Willy Wagtail. I was taught that he was the old Koori messenger bird. That's the only bird that I don't like; he makes me uneasy at times.

## When we lived in Taree

When we were small and lived in Taree, mum would take us out in the bush every Sunday, getting witchetty grubs and yams. She used to have a tin with a hook on the end. She would chop a piece out of a tree, put the wire in the hole and pull out a grub. Sometimes she would boil them or cook them on a piece of tin over the coals. Our staple diet was damper and fat, which we had every day. We would have kangaroo or sometimes fish, sometimes cobra; we didn't have a lot of vegetables. The kids nowadays don't know how lucky they are and how easy everything is and what a variety of foods they have to choose from.

## I remember how things were

I remember when we only had tanks here to catch rainwater for drinking, (because of the drought). And we used to go down to the dam to do our washing and to have a bath. We had clothes lines down there with coppers for boiling up our clothes, there would always be someone down there doing their washing. The dam was a lot cleaner then. Now it's full of reeds and the water is brown.

I often say to my lot how I would like to go back living like we used to in the bush. I could live without the modern cons. Just how peaceful life was. I wish our younger generation had more respect for the land and nature. The modern day society has done a lot of harm to our culture and our lives.

*Above: Sign at the entrance to Karuah Aboriginal Community*

- 1 Purfleet became a reserve with an Aboriginal school in 1907, it became a station during the Depression with an appointed resident teacher-manager.
- 2 Department of Community Services
- 3 Aboriginal Inland Mission

# Carol Ridgeway Bissett

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*A lot of things have been taken away and I guess what I'm trying to do now is revive our culture so that it will be carried on*

## Born at Soldiers Point

I was born at Soldiers Point in 1946. Its Aboriginal name is Carbar. I had four brothers and four sisters. This was such a magical place when I grew up here. We'd play in the bush all the time, building cubbies; we were taught how to build Aboriginal shelters. And when we wanted to get a feed of fish, we'd either go around the rocks or out in my father's boat. We'd go all around this harbour, because we knew the best places to fish. We'd go over to the Pig Station over on the other side, or across to Mud Point where we'd dig for worms. We'd take the launch over to Fame Cove or Bundabah and sometimes we'd even go up to Karuah to see our grandmother Russell.

## Our parents were strict

My mother and father were strict, we had to be home on time or otherwise we'd get into trouble big time. But when you're kids, time doesn't matter, you just want to play. There's the bush out there and you just want to do things.

**Right:** Carol standing next to the old fishing tree



## Getting bait

Sometimes we'd go out and catch bait fish between Oakey Island and One Tree Island; that's the best spot for little baitfish. We used little bits of dough as bait. We'd mix the flour up with water and put that on our line – when we caught as many as we needed, we'd go fishing with them. Another thing we used to do was to put a bit of

bread in a milk bottle and put that on the edge of the tide; when the fish came along they'd swim in after it.

## We made our own traps

I can remember when we were kids we'd make our own traps, we'd put them out around there (at Soldiers Point) and the next morning when we went back we'd have a feed of leather jackets. You know when we went crabbing we'd take a round trap and put things like fish heads on it. We'd lower it down on a rope, to attract the crabs, and when they nibbled we'd make sure we had a scoop net there ready to scoop them up. At night, we'd go prawning with a throw net, lantern and bucket. We'd bring our own prawns home to cook in a big boiler on the stove.

## No more twirling lines

I used to go fishing with my sisters and my grandmother and I will never forget this one day, we went out fishing with this non-Aboriginal friend. My family were great ones for twirling the line around over their heads if they were using a hand line. And of course, I'd never been one for that sort of thing. But I thought I'd try it. So I was twirling it around my head and I hooked him!! (The family friend) in the head!! So to this day, I just do one throw of the hand, and that's it and it goes where I want it to.

## Stockton Bight

We used to go over to Stockton Bight when we were kids. We'd hop in the back of my aunt and uncle's ute. (That's my grandmother's sister and her husband) and we'd go out there. We'd be tumbling around those sand dunes and we'd get pippis for them to fish from the beach with. But these days there are restrictions on fishing and restrictions on pippis too.

## My Nanna lived with us

My Nanna used to live with us back then, she had been born over at Carrington, (the Koori name for it is Carribeen) and that's where she got married when she was about 16. She got married with a lot of other couples. She had a great influence on us kids. She used to round us up – I can tell you – if we did the wrong thing. "Get home you kids" she'd say.

## The Pig Station

Nan used to tell us how they'd be put in a boat over there at the Pig Station and rowed over to school. Then they had to walk along to Pindimar to get there. We never thought any more of it until in later years when my eldest sister Viola went to the Institute in Canberra<sup>1</sup>. It turns out that the school was an Aboriginal Mission Training School! And we'd seen a photograph of it about two years before, over at my uncle's place at Tea Gardens. We also discovered that some of these people there had been brought down there from Queensland (to go to the training school).

## Nan's family split up when the Navy came

Some of Nan's sisters left here in the 1940s. Some of them left to live over in Tea Gardens. That part of the family is still there. Another part of the family went to live up at Karuah. (But they didn't live on the mission). When World War II was on, the Navy came in and took over the whole harbour. They wanted to move my family from here up to Karuah. Now my grandfather's brother, who they called King Billy, actually lived down here with us, and the missionaries would come down from Karuah and stay with him. But we wouldn't move, we said "No"; my grandmother and grandfather said "No". So King and his wife went up to live on the mission. And our family, on our side stayed here.







## Dad was a boat builder and a fisherman

The boat shed up here, at what they now call West Beach at Soldiers Point, was originally built by my father. He managed it too. He was a fisherman and in later years worked for the oyster industry. Just around from the marina there he had these poles set up where he'd draw his fish nets in. Dad made his own fish nets. He made them big enough to allow the bi-catch to be conserved. He'd only catch the good size ones.

We kids would help him collect iron bark in the bush. That's what he used to dye his nets with. He'd boil the bark up in a big copper of water. It made them last longer. We'd always helped him, we'd sew up holes in the nets or anything like that.

He was a boat builder too and the boat we used to row around the harbour, seated eight people. Every winter we'd pull the boat up on dry land and we'd fix anything that needed fixing before we put it back in the water.

**Above:** Soldiers Point

**Opposite page:** The old ship bell that once belonged to Carol's great grandfather at Soldiers Point Public School

## We had lots of favourite places to fish

Sometimes we'd pull up to Cromarty Bay, it's pretty good fishing up there and around Green Point too, they call it Kent Gardens now. And over there near Carrington. I remember my father actually going there with a mate of his – they used to go out after sharks. Now we used to have a huge shark in this harbour and when my father was managing the boat shed and saw that shark coming along – he'd go and bang a drum to let everyone know that it was around.

But there was one thing that we had to remember when we were over there: we were always told that when we were out in the boat, we had to realise when a westerly was blowing. When that happened we had to stay in close to the shore, because sometimes if you went too far out, the current in this harbour would soon take you out between Tomaree and Yacarah Heads, now called Yacaaba. And it was pretty hard to pull around from what we called the Front Beach around to the Back Beach, with a westerly blowing.

## Dad smoked the fish for the winter season

I can remember my father drying fish over the open fire. Smoking it so that we could have fish at Easter time and all through the winter. Coming from a big family, we had to supplement our diet. We grew our own veggies too. And of course things in those days were a lot cheaper.

## The ship bell is at the school

My grandmother's father, Louis Ridgeway, was actually a Russian Fin. He worked for the Australian Agricultural Company as a ship's carpenter. When my grandmother's sister married Arthur Spencer, they had this ship's bell that belonged to my great-grandfather. And when I went to primary school, at the Soldiers Point school in the 1950s—there was the bell. It was actually given to the Soldiers Point School. And it is still at that school today.

## Growing up around here was fabulous

You know growing up around here when we were kids was just so fabulous and it was all bush around here. I can always remember the bush across from our house where this old Aboriginal man would camp. We'd go over there as kids. He would show us possums up in the trees and he'd show us how he made spears and that. And everyone knew each other too. We got on pretty well with the non-Aboriginal people around here. And we had our own land. We were always told that our land was a land grant. And that's what we didn't know. We didn't know that my grandmother actually owned the land, so when the old house got pulled down, everything was taken to the dump. Now we have to start a long search on where to find that information. It's part of our heritage. When Nanna lived around here, she'd always talk about Granny Sarah, our great-grandmother.

## Too many houses now

There are too many houses there where we live now. The road into Soldiers Point, it was once just a track – and when you went up to Soldiers Point School – the road or the track that we followed was actually behind the houses on the road that's there now. And the road actually went through the schoolyard.

You can see the changes over time – from traditional times. Like traditional people we kids were taught never to take any more fish than what we needed. Never take anything too small, because they were our future resource. But in later years I'd go down to the Co-op at Nelson Bay and I'd see undersized crabs and fish there and I often thought, "Why aren't people getting into trouble for catching undersized things like that?" We would never have been allowed to do that.

## Horried to see the legal sizes

One of my sons, a friend and I went to a meeting up at Fisheries one day – my son and I went into the office, and said, "Can we have



some measurements for shell fish and for fish?" So they gave it to us and when we looked at it we were just horrified to see that the legal size were ones that we considered to be illegal! And I think one of the most disappointing and disheartening things is that as the population increases – even in holiday times we'll get a lot more people fishing!

My father made his own nets, but now you have fishermen using entirely different nets that catch all the little things too and sometimes you see all that little bi-catch floating dead around the harbour. Being washed up on beach.





## Pollution has taken a toll

And another thing is that our marine environment is getting so polluted. We're getting storm water run off. Like the drain that runs right through Anna Bay, you've got nutrients going down there into the ocean and I know there are mud crabs along there.

And then you've got all these motor boats in the harbour – you've got the marinas where I've seen diesel going into the water. Diesel spills all the time!

I've seen dead birds floating in there. Out around Point Stephen, which is the island off Fingal Bay and Fingal Headland, I've seen this white scum with thousands of flies from the sewerage pump system out there around Boulder Bay. And it goes all over the sea weed and sea anemone! And you just wonder what that actually does to the marine species.

**Above:** View from the Gan Gan lookout at Nelson Bay

**Opposite page:** Carol at the Gan Gan lookout in Nelson Bay

## Aqua culture will never replace the real thing

And I think it's about time people really thought about that sort of thing and no matter what they say; aqua culture will never be a replacement for the real thing. Because the species that are in a marine environment live on sea grass and other sorts of things.

## You can't fish like we did

The thing is – we can't fish like we did when we were kids because for a start there are so many restrictions. Aboriginal people can't use things like they used to. Like fish poisons. That was just the sap from different trees, used to stun the fish in water holes and even in salt water. We can't use traps now. Not that we had a lot of traps, but we had a couple, and traditional nets.

Things like oysters – we'd get them off the rocks – they were just the best – but now, I think it would be a bit unsafe to get them in this harbour.

## The tourist boats are a worry

And another thing that worries me is that there are so many tourist boats around now. We have dolphin watching and we've got very few dolphins that haven't got cuts from propellers.

## We've got underwater heritage sites here

This area is really a sunken valley caused by volcanic activity. The ocean was a lot further out than it is now and the land went further out too. So we've got a lot of underwater heritage sites here. Now do we register underwater sites, or do we just keep quiet. But the thing is, what does that pollution do to our sites? And you've got people who when they hear about things like that, they go out and destroy the site or they just take the artefacts not realising that it's a historical record, or that there's a fine if they're caught!



## We had a happy childhood here

I can say I had a happy childhood around here. With all my brothers and sisters. We had a fabulous time and it's really sad to see it come to this, where things are wiped out for a better view, and where people just don't care what happens (to the environment).

We are actually doing research at the moment and we think we can trace our family line way back to traditional times. We had one person in, 1817 or 1825, they called him Corbon Wogi, King of Port Stephens. His son was also called Carbon Bill. Then our great grandfather was named William, and he was called, King of Port Stephens and that title then went on to my uncle, King Billy. So in European times they all go down a line like that. They were both called William King of Port Stephens. So King Billy was the son of William and brother to my grandfather James. We figure if that's the case, and there were no Kings or Queens in our society (only Europeans putting this type of emphasis there), then maybe that's the way we should be looking at that research.

## Our heritage here

When you look out across from Soldiers Point – there's the northern part of Soldiers Point, North Arm Cove, Carrington and Tarlee where the Australian Agricultural Company had their settlement started in 1824. We had some of our people working for the AA Company over there, as domestics.

And in later years, my grandfather, James Ridgeway worked with the surveyors over there mapping areas and so the road to Beauty Point there is called 'The Ridgeway' after him.

Now when you look over near<sup>2</sup> North Arm Cove you will see the land coming down. That's Bundabah. We used to go over there, just looking around and fishing. Back this way from there is Fame Cove. Now you will find in Scott's book<sup>3</sup>, where he talks about our people never going in there. He thought it was just because there



were sharks there. Well I've never seen any sharks there until some of these tour operators started to go in throwing their food over board! It's a place where my sisters and some of my brothers and I used to go to shoot kangaroos, and collect birds nest ferns, things like that. And there is a big ceremonial site over there too.

So that's where Fame Cove is and when we come back this way you see Middle Island. Middle Island is a place where we girls were never allowed. Certainly not up on top there for some reason. We always wondered why and once my father saw my nephew (who was about nine years old at the time) coming from there with his mates. So he got what we call a flogging.

And I think it was men's land – because most of the sites around here are men's sites, in our area – on islands or on points and cliffs.

## The old fig tree

Over on the western side there's Rabbit Island and One Tree Island. You can actually walk across to One Tree Island and to Oakie or Dowolie Island at low tide. Now you can see how big this harbour is.



Well we used to row across to the Pig Station, which is up on the other side of Middle Island. There's a deep hole there. We'd catch things like lobsters and Jew fish there, and just a few yards along from there is where the old fig tree used to be. And we always knew that if you went out fishing there we had to line our boat up with the fig tree – that's where all the whiting were.

So we'd get a good feed of whiting from there. We used to fish all round the rocks around to the eastern side of the Point. You'd get things like Flathead there. When you walk around to the eastern side, you'll see the remnants of an old wharf. It was knocked down just before I left primary school. It was getting a bit old but we used to fish around there all the time.

Last year we asked NPWS<sup>4</sup> to donate one of our fishing trees to the museum. The fishing tree was where we'd climb up to see the mullet coming down the harbour.

And another thing is, we had what we call calendar plants, so when the calendar plants were in bloom, you knew the mullet was going to run.

## They taught us lots of signs

There were lots of things like that, that they taught us. Like the mopoke owl he was the death bird, just like the curlew. And the currawong or Ghirreewong, as we call him, it lets you know when the rain was coming. And of course the other signs for bad weather – ants scurrying around – building their nests up high. And dragonflies come around. Sometimes if it's going to be bad weather, you look out on Tomaree Mountain and you see this long cloud – we'd call it the feather, so when you saw that you knew there was bad weather coming.

*Left: Heron in Mangro*

1 AIATSIS – The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies

2 Scott, William, 'The Port Stephens Blacks: recollections', 1844

3 Standing at Gan Gan lookout

4 NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service is now part of the Department of Environment and Conservation (NSW)



*Things are different nowadays, the tourists don't think about anything. They don't care and they just do what they want. I can see my area changing.*

## Born on the Macleay

I was born up on the Macleay River, in the Macleay District Hospital. There were seven of us in the family. I had always believed I was born in 1932. But my kids chased up my birth certificate for my 60th birthday and I found out that I was actually born on the 24th of December 1933. Would you believe that my sister was born on the same date, 4 years later?

## We lived at Green Hills for awhile

We lived in Green Hills when I was born, near the slaughter yards there. They'd give the family all sorts of meat. Even bullock gut, which they'd clean, and eat like sausage. I can barely remember that. I was just little at the time.

## Going to school

When I had to go to school, they sent us to the Burnt Bridge Mission School<sup>1</sup>. And I have to tell you that I can't stand the smell of cocoa to this very day because they gave us kids cocoa to drink every single day! It was awful and I just can't stand the smell of it now. I left school when I was 12 years old, but I used to wag a lot too,



because I just hated it. My grandmother on my father's side would say "You're going to get sent away down there to that girl's home down the coast". And she'd say to the boys "You'll all get sent to Kinchela Boys home<sup>2</sup>". They would warn us all the time, they'd say, "You'll be going to Cootamundra<sup>3</sup>, Gweny and Lilly", and our grandmother would say, "If you see any strange cars"

**Above:** Shoal Bay

(she always warned us), “Take off”. We’d all go swimming down to this creek. It was right where this bridge went over the water so we could see if any cars were coming. She’d say, “If you see a car coming you want to take off and get into the bush and hide. It will be them after you”. We just laugh about it now but back then we were always worried. We didn’t know what it was we had to be afraid of, we just knew it was something and we had to get out of there if we saw something.

## Finding your history

So I came down here when I was 16. This is where the family originated. This is where my Nanna came from. But I didn’t find this out until years later. You know you don’t know your history because you were never told it. That was it, that’s the problem. You didn’t know these things. I nearly went off my head when I found out. I was so pleased, I thought, “Oh well the homing pigeon always goes home to roost”.

## I idolised my Granny Cochran

Nanna was a Richie. And there was Nanna Russell and Granny Cochran. Granny Cochran was the one I idolised the most. She was the one I went worming with. She always had to have someone around because she couldn’t hear properly and I was the one that was always with her. We just grew so close, I missed her terribly when I came down this way.

She used to catch some beautiful trevally and brim off the beach up there at Crescent Head. She had no problem landing them with a hand line – not a problem for here – she could bring them in. Her hands were so hard from all the years of washing and hard work. Hands like a man she had. I used the old hand line too when I went fishing with my husband Brian and the boys.

I learnt to fish from Granny Cochran and that’s how she fished. Really in those days, we didn’t know what a rod was, unless the kids

had a stick there in the river. They’d put a line on a stick and use dough to catch poddy mullet – that sort of thing. But nothing like the rods they have now with all the gadgets and things.

## We were a fishing family

My family was definitely a fishing family. My husband Brian’s father had oyster leases, we’d often get a feed of oysters from him. And he had a fishing license for the nets. He and Brian would go out fishing up around Soldiers Point way. Brian would sometimes go out at night, to get a feed of fish with the nets. There is a fishing spot there at Tomaree Heads but it’s probably gone now, no one bothers about it now. He had to sneak really because if he got caught he would be in trouble. But he would say to his dad, “Well you’ve got the license and I’ll make out that I’m picking it up for you”.

## Sharing was part of life

All the community people fished. And when you got a big catch of fish, you shared it. Sharing was a big part of life. They still do that sort of thing now. You know, if someone went out and got a feed of fish, and if it were more than they needed, they’d share it with everyone in the community. The fish was there to have. It was the same with the prawns; same with whatever we’d get.

## Then there were things I couldn’t eat

When I was ten years old I saw the old people catch goannas. They’d catch them and cook them up. I didn’t know this until after I tried it, but it’s like chicken, and white like chicken too. Now I love food but I’ve got a limit, I wouldn’t eat eel for instance. A lot of people love eel but they’re too much like a snake for me and I’m terrified of snakes. And I won’t eat squid or octopus either. The old people had possum and water hens and even wild duck, they were okay. And wild duck is beautiful.

*Opposite page: Zenith Beach at the bottom of Tomaree head*







## We had fish all year round

Around here in October, they'll catch black fish, brim, and whiting. When it's getting close to Easter, around April, it's the mullet that run. So you get mullet and you follow that to the brim. It just goes around.

It's the mullet that you smoke. You just open them up and take out all the gut. Salt them down with that strong salt, that rock salt, and let it sit for awhile. After awhile you hang them up and let all the salt drip off, then you hang them in the open fireplace for smoking.

And that would see the family through the winter. We had more than enough fish for winter and it would never go off because smoking protects it. My grandmother loved the mullet and the taylor; she used to do it like that, (smoking it). The other fish don't turn out as good. But mullet and taylor are just bloody beautiful when they're smoked.

*Above: Yacaaba Head with Cabbage Tree Island in the background*

*Opposite page: From the front to the back: Zenith Beach, Wreck Beach, Box Beach, Fingal Bay with Point Stephens on the left*

We had pippis too; they were plentiful around here. You could go and get them whenever. But mullet and taylor have to be caught in the right season.

## Other animals feed from the waste

Fish never really go out of season. The commercial fishermen still trawl them in and then they just chuck the dead fish back. But the pelicans eat the dead fish and that's a feed for them there. Nothing really goes to waste. The pelicans and the sea gulls eat everything. It's an ongoing thing, like a circle, it just goes around. And that's why I can't believe why our people are complaining. There wouldn't be a great many of the commercial fishermen throwing under-size and dead fish back in. And it's feeding other animals when they do. But people don't see it that way; they don't think of it that way at all.

## Mud worms

But there are some things that are annoying. Like when we'd get our own mud worms, they were about 12 inches long, but now when you buy them at the bait shop, they're about two inches long! So when you know and you've seen them and handled them, and then when you go to buy them and find the little mingy pieces they give you, you realise you should be getting a dozen times more.

## Stockton Bight

Worimi people are supposed to own Stockton Bight, all along there, but I'm a Worimi person and I still can't go out there, to get worms or pippis. At times I feel like going out and getting a feed and getting caught and just seeing what would happen.

## Brian got caught taking pippis

It happened to my husband years ago. He went digging mud worms and he took his old mate with him, who was a white fella. And the Fishing Inspector caught them and gave them a talking to. Brian said to him, "Well I'm a traditional owner. I'm a traditional person and I

think I've got the right to come down here and get some bait to go fishing". This inspector just said, "I don't think so". And he gives him a bit of paper and said, "There you have to be in court". It's something that is really getting to me. And I'm going to do something about it before I die. Just to prove the point. If they could just let Aboriginal people take their feed. And that's it. Let them dig their worms, have their worms. As I said, we are supposed to own Stockton Bight

## If you could just still take a feed

You know if people could take three or four dozen pippis, they'd have their feed. Maybe a little more if they've got a big family to feed. I mean I cook them here and all the kids love them, chucked on the barbecue. They are beautiful. And I would need, say, a bucket full, to feed this family. But that's it. That would do. But the tourists take too many and that's what has to stop. Traditional society balanced their food resources. If one area had enough gone, they moved on up to another area. For instance there are cunjevoi growing on the rocks and they make good bait. They are plentiful here, (for awhile). I don't know if anyone eats them, I wouldn't. You cut off the top and the stuff inside is what you use for bait. And then there are all these little periwinkles and cogs that grow around the rocks. But the tourists take everything. That has to be worked out. This is what spoils it for us, the tourists doing that. They are the ones that need the watching – not us.

## The tourists just aren't aware of the damage

Things are different nowadays, the tourists don't think about anything. They don't care and they just do what they want. I can see my area changing. Once we were too young to take notice of the way things were. We didn't question; we just went along with what ever happened. But now I just don't know where it's all going to end.



Every so often in the local paper will write that the pippis have got some sort of virus, and you can't eat them. Yet the fishermen can still go out there and get a truckload full, to bring back into the coop to sell. So how does that work?

## And everything is very different

And the seasons are changing, and the fish are changing their runs. The mullet run for instance. Now that was a season you could bet on—the same time every year. But now it's a bit earlier or a bit later.

## We like the Sydney rock oyster

They brought in this new type of oyster. A Pacific Oyster<sup>4</sup> I think it is. It came in with the boats. But it's black all around the frill. It looks yuk. I can't eat them. We like our Sydney rock oyster. And there was such a scare with the oysters years ago, with the poison<sup>5</sup> and everyone backed off from them there for awhile. It's better now but people still have that in their mind. I still have my feed of oysters, of Sydney rock oysters at least. The eldest son is just up the road from the oyster farm.



## They change things

And there is no abalone around now! And you had to have a license to get them when they were around. That was what we called old muttonfish. They changed that name to abalone and then they changed black fish to luderick.

## Fishing is part of the lifestyle here

Fishing is just part of the lifestyle here. Especially around this area. One of the aunts still goes out fishing with her son, she's really crook now and she can't go anywhere much any more. But she used to love fishing especially out there amongst the whiting. She used to go out there catching one after another. There is a special spot over at the Back Beach at the back of the Point, behind Oakey. Or out on Front Beach, it all depends on the wind and the tide. The wind and tide is the biggest thing to consider, with fishing. You can only get bait at low tide. That's a must. You can't get it at high tide.

## Mud worms

And there is another thing, like with the beach worms. My husband used to come down this way and get the mud worms. The kids used to love going out with him, getting worms and putting them in the buckets. He didn't sell them to the fish shop; his mates would ring him up and say "We're coming up your way fishing, how about getting us some bait?" so he'd go and get it. The kids would get their pocket money for helping him. His mates would only want so many dozen to go fishing with, and it made a few extra bob for him, and he'd give the kids a dollar each.

## You can't get them now

He knew the right spots, because he grew up here, he knew every inch of everywhere. You are not allowed to dig worms at all now! You can't dig the mud worms anywhere. They reckon digging for them ruins and kills the food for the fish. But you would think that turning over the mud like that would clean it. How can digging ruin anything?

And yet they still let you go out and get yabbies. There is no law against that, but to go and get the mud worms – you can't. I mean I've taken my lot over here and showed them how to catch the beach worms. They all know how to get them from their father taking them out. But now you can't get them at all.

## My life was very different to my children's

You know I started my married life without any electricity or anything like that. We had an old kerosene fridge, a kerosene burner to cook the meals on, or over the open fire. And then (we had) the old icebox. When you had a few kids you don't have money to spare, so we had to run around looking for electrical second hand things. We couldn't afford to buy new things. When you've got kids like we had and you've got to feed and clothe them, then you look for the second hand best of what you can afford.



I had to wash by hand. Rubbing the clothes with my hands. I washed like that right through all my kids up until the last four when I finally got a washing machine. I had 12 children. My last child is 29 now, he was the only one I had a dryer for. And it was all towel nappies back then. And in my grandmother's day they had the old coppers and the Rinso soap powder. She had such hard hands from all the washing and hard work that she had to do.

## I tell my own kids things

I talk to my kids and tell them things all the time. The different words and what they mean. We sit and talk and I'll come out with something (in language) and they listen and they talk it and use it too.

We tell the little kids ones we tell them about the Mookey or the Warky and the Red Eye.<sup>6</sup> All those things and they take notice.

## My girls will pass on the heritage

My girls, my twins are a great pair of researchers. I've given them all a pride in their heritage. I think I've done wonders with them all, and without the husband. Brian died in 1988. The girls are going to keep all the information for the grandkids, through each of the generations.

One of my daughters has 3 children and she is a nursing sister, their father is a doctor. He is a Chinese Malayan. The three children have all decided to be doctors. One is going to be an Ear, Nose and Throat specialist. I'm very proud of myself and proud of the whole family. I've been blessed with my lot; I know that, and I'm proud of what they have all achieved. I came from nothing and I had thought that if I stayed down this way, it would be to better them. And it has. I did it. And they have followed on from what I was thinking.

**Above right:** Gwen's twelve children

**Opposite page:** Gwen and her late husband Brian



## We wanted our kids to know things

We shared and cared with our kids. We would tell them everything we could think of. We told them the things what went on over the years. How we were treated. If you don't tell them – well we were never told, we didn't know anything, we come out being black fellows and we didn't know anything of the lingo and we were told we were not allowed to talk any of that, especially when we were out. And not to tell other people our business. This is how we were taught. But now the kids can talk freely, not as we had to be.

All my elder kids went to school over at Soldiers Point and the rest of them went up here to the Bay and all the grandkids went up here to the Bay.

## It was a full time job raising kids

We didn't have any fish stories and ceremonies here, but everyone likes to go and watch the whales go past. Dolphins are unreal to watch. I've never really had time to get into traditional stories and things like that because I've always had the kids. Running after them

all the time. When would I get time – that was for other people who had time to get into that sort of thing. I was the one that was in the home all the time. I never let others mind my kids; I always looked after them myself.

Now three of my kids have become doctors and two are nursing sisters. That's not bad. Old father and grandfather they'd be laughing up there now.

## I've been blessed

I have been blessed. I remember that it was hard with my two younger ones with no father around to advise them. But they had the rest of the sisters and the elder brother there to pull them in to gear and to help me. They are not kids that run the streets and

they're not drinkers. One of my daughters died and left a little baby two months old. She had three children at the time. She died on the Anzac day in 1987 and then on the 29 of February of the next year her husband committed suicide. He couldn't handle life without her. Then on the 2nd of March 1988, my husband died from a heart attack. I went through hell at that time. But my kids were there to help me. I'm really truly proud of them. Eventually the two lots of grandparents brought up my daughter's little one between us.

<sup>1</sup> Burnt Bridge was a Protection Board Station established in the 1930s, near Kempsey.


<sup>2</sup> Kinchela was an Aboriginal Boys Home at Kempsey

<sup>3</sup> Cootamundra was an Aboriginal Girls Home at Cootamundra

<sup>4</sup> Introduced to Australia in 1947. The Pacific oyster can grow up to 3 times faster than the Sydney rock oyster.

<sup>5</sup> Contamination scares at Wallis Lake in 1997.

<sup>6</sup> Evil spirits that come about especially in the night



## Credits

Compiled by: Kath Schilling  
Edit by: Sharon Veale and Sabine Parti  
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Please direct all enquiries about  
Aboriginal Women's Heritage in NSW to:  
Kath Schilling,  
Aboriginal Women's Heritage Co-ordinator  
Department of Environment and Conservation, Ph: 02 9585 6505  
[Kathleen.Schilling@npws.nsw.gov.au](mailto:Kathleen.Schilling@npws.nsw.gov.au)