



Aboriginal Women's Heritage:

Nambucca

THIS BOOKLET CONTAINS PHOTOGRAPHS OF ABORIGINAL PEOPLE WHO HAVE PASSED AWAY.

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NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service

43 Bridge Street Hurstville NSW 2220 PH 02 9585 6444



NSW NATIONAL PARKS AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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Acknowledgement

A special thankyou to the elders who contributed their stories and took the time to sit and share their memories with me, mapping the Aboriginal history of the valley through the story of their lives. Appreciation to the Nambucca Heads Local Aboriginal Land Council for their support, assistance and encouragement throughout the project. A special thankyou to Virginia Jarrett, who acted as collaborator, many thanks for her tireless efforts, her advice and for sharing her pride in the heritage of the valley with me. For the advice given by the NPWS cultural heritage staff in Coffs Harbour and their offer of assistance when it was needed. Thankyou to the catering service at the Nambucca Heads Island Golf Course for their efforts in catering to the needs and comfort of the elders during a function held on the island to review this material.

Thankyou to:

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Nambucca Golf Club Stuart Island

**THIS PUBLICATION IS DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF GRANNY BONN
(YVONNE DAVIS JARRETT) 1930-2001.**

Introduction

Nine Aboriginal Women Elders from the Nambucca Valley gave their stories for this booklet and took part in a project instigated by the New South Wales National Parks & Wildlife Service in an effort to help raise the profile of the unique historical experience of Aboriginal women along the coast of NSW. The Elders tell their own stories and give a brief insight into their lives during a time when Aboriginal people lived under the policies and control of the Aborigines' Protection Board (APB) and the Aborigines Welfare Board (AWB). They tell of their early years as a time when Aboriginal children and young women were not given opportunities in education or careers but rather were sent to be trained as domestic servants away from their home and family. The elder's stories tell of being moved away from the areas where they grew up, like Stuart Island, their home for 72 years, gazetted as an Aboriginal reserve in 1883. In 1955 the island was leased to the present day Golf Club and Aboriginal people were moved to a new reserve along Bellwood Road. In Bowraville Aboriginal people had lived on an unofficial Aboriginal reserve, from around 1887 up to the 1950s. From there they were moved to a new reserve along Cemetery Road, later renamed Gumbayngirr Road, (see Bowraville map on page 13), land now held by the Local Aboriginal Land Council. The elders tell of their feeling for the areas where their families had gathered wild foods to supplement their diets and where they had played as children. The Elders tell of a time when there were strict rules of behaviour and protocol and they as children had to live by the rules. Their stories tell of harsh times and of hard work but of a time they enjoyed and think back to with nostalgia. They tell of their achievements, in raising money for the war effort, singing and winning races, and of overcoming difficult circumstances to succeed. A number of the interviews took place on Stuart Island and at Bowraville Reserve. This publication is the first in a series of similar publications highlighting the role of Aboriginal women across NSW in the historical setting of their towns and areas.



How the island looked before. Circa early 1900s.



South Beach

Site of Valerie
Cohen's bait shop

Golf Club

Coral Trees

Island's fresh
water wells

Aboriginal
Cemetery

Bellwood
reserve

Causeway

Site of
Aboriginal
School

Stuart Island

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Valerie Smith Cohen

1



*I think everywhere I look here holds a memory. Even out at the Headlands and Swimming Creek.
It doesn't matter where you go, there are memories.*



Growing up

I was born here on Stuart Island in 1936. The island flooded so many times we moved away, in 1967, and that was it. I went to school here, grew up here and started a bait shop here (see map). In the early days I'd go out fishing with Dad. We had a launch. Dad was catching mullets in those days and I would help him pull in the nets. Rosie and I would sit up the top of the Headlands. We'd signal like mad when we saw the fish coming in the waves. When they got our signal, they'd go out in the boat, drop their nets and catch them. It was quite an experience. Later on in the years we went over to Scott's Head, Dad was fishing over there and I went to school there for a while. From there we moved over through Beaumont out to Valla. I went to school

there too while Dad and Mum went to work on the plantations. After that finished we came back here to the island and Dad built a place here again. Grandfather Davis was still living here at the time. I went to third class here on the island, but we never had trained teachers, we just had who ever the government could appoint to teach us.

The island had fresh water wells

We had a well here on the island in the 50s, that's where we carted water from. I can remember our washing days started with carting water from that well. We had a copper here and we'd fill it up with water and build a fire under it. Mum boiled the white clothes up in the copper. I can remember we used the old dolly dye. Even if we wanted a bath we had to put a tub in our room and heat the water up and take it in. We had a stove in the house over an open fire; it had an oven on the top with this wire across it to hang the billy can. But if we had to do any washing or heating water it was outside. We had a well over on the other side of the island too and one over on the South Beach. All fresh water wells. There's one at the top end of the island

Above left: Valerie's house, the bait shop & two of her fishing boats. Circa 1950s.

Opposite: Valerie as a baby.



and that's where Jim Pickett brought his live stock. There was a fence straight up there blocking us off from the animals. Dad worked for Jim Pickett. There was plenty of water really but he took his stock away because of the floods. One time there was this one cow that was in calf, she got caught up in the flood and lost the calf. When it got dry, she came down and put her head through our back door and bellowed looking for it. She was an old house cow. Dad had to go out and release some of the milk from her because she was in pain. So we had fresh milk for some time after that. Jim Pickett let us have her for awhile until she got better.

The families got together



In 1951 we had a Jubilee here and we had the last big corroboree where the Golf Club is now. We had quite a few elders here then, men and women all living at this end of the island. Dad died in

1952. When we had our Christmas parties here all the families would come from everywhere. All Dads' relations from Kempsey and all those on the Smith-Davis side. My sister married Harry Kelly from Yellow Rock; they lived at Culburra, and they travelled down. The women would start cooking on Christmas Day and our parents would tell us to give our beds to the elders. Uncle Bob Walker would always tell us, "Make sure you get out of bed early in the morning or I'll put an octopus in your bed", anyway one morning I did get one in the bed, because I was a bit of a sleepy head! But after that—no way! Women cared for the elderly in my day and our Aunts and Uncles would tell us stories around the campfire at night. I had one Uncle; Uncle Milton, he would start telling us a story—and he'd come to the most interesting part and then he'd say—"We'll continue this tomorrow", so we had to wait until the next night to hear the rest of the story. It was like a continuing serial. We'd get wild with him.



Its sad to see the island change

We planted all those coral trees along the side up there to where the Golf Club is now. A lot of it's broken away now and you can see why they put

the sand there. They're trying to protect it now, but I think in years to come there'll be no Golf Club. There'll be no island here because it's all being washed away. It will be sad because we had such wonderful Christmases and good times here.

Top left: Plaque at the site of a freshwater well at Nambucca Heads.

Left: A young Valerie Smith Cohen.

Above: How the island looked. Circa early 1900s.

Right: My friends and I in front of my house. Circa 1950.

Far right: My family, Mum, me, Rosie and Dad.

We'd catch two or three thousand worms

If you wanted to catch bait properly and if there was too much of a tide, you had to wait until the afternoon, there were just certain times when you could catch worms on South Beach. We would catch about two or three thousand worms a day. Mum and Dad did all the packing when we had the bait shop here; they'd sell them by the dozen in these little plastic bags.

We had lots of animals on the island

We had a lot of animals here on the island. Cats, dogs, cows; we had a big white rooster and he would chase all my customers away. Dad would say, "I'm going to chop your head off" and I swear that rooster knew what he was talking about because he'd go hiding whenever he saw Dad coming. But no one had the heart to kill it and it died of old age.



Being protected

We'd take to the land a lot in the early days because Dad had a bad experience with the Welfare when he lived at Clybucca. They were rounding up children to put in Kinchela Boys Home and in



Bomaderry Childrens Home in those days. Dad would take Rosy and myself, Dawny and Irene Singh up the river, along South Beach and we'd stay there for two or three months at a time. There was lots of bush tucker. If we were after seafood we'd go and get some crab or fish. Dad taught us how to rob a bee's nest—on South Beach. It was part of our training. We learnt how to smoke the bottom of the tree so we could pull the honey in but if there was a little white bee in the comb – Mum or Dad would say, "Girls aren't allowed to eat that until after they're married". I never ever questioned them about that. We just weren't allowed to eat it. That was part of our learning and growing up and that's how we were protected. Dad was very protective. He wouldn't talk a lot about the early days.

Strict rules growing up

In my growing up days the only thing we were allowed to listen to was Dad's little wireless. Dad wouldn't even let us read a newspaper. The only thing that we were allowed to read was a comic. So our favourite comics were Donald Duck and Mickey Mouse. We grew up with them. And then later on when we were young women we got permission to read romance magazines. So they became part of my shop, we sold comic books and romance magazines. In my growing

up days we weren't allowed to go to dances or anything, even to the pictures at night. If we wanted to go to the pictures we had to go as a group and then we were only allowed to go to the matinee. That was down at the entertainment centre. That was our picture hall. We weren't allowed to go to dances and that unless Mum and Dad came with us. They were very strict. Even to the circus. If there was a circus in town, Mum and Dad took us. We weren't allowed to do a lot of things. I think—looking back now on Dad and Mum, it must have hurt them a lot to bring up the past. It's unbelievable what we're learning today. That hurt is still there and you wonder how our parents and grandparents survived those days. Even for my late husband, he was born and bred at Wallamumbee at Armidale, he and his parents were all stockmen. He was a stockman at Cunderang Station, and that was the only life he knew when he was a boy growing up.

Dad was a healer

I grew up with three clever men on this island, like Harry Buchanan; he was a traditional storyteller. And Uncle Lambert Whaddy, he did initiations, he put the young people through the rules and Dad was a tribal medicine man, through the healing. The last time Dad travelled to Kempsey was to heal a young boy. A bad tribal fellow tried to take this young fellow's wife and he pointed the bone at him. The doctors didn't know what to do about it. The Kempsey mob sent for Dad. I, like a tomboy, followed him. But I had to sit outside; he wouldn't let me in the room. Dad stayed with this young fellow all day and he came out all right in the end and the doctors were amazed.

Mum and Dad taught us the things we needed to know

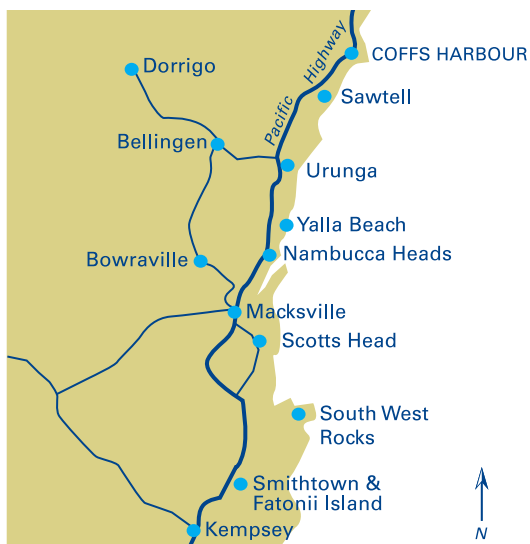
The women told us about growing up and about babies and all that sort of thing. Mum showed us these berries, they were like the contraceptives you buy from the chemist. Mum told us that if you

didn't want a baby you just took these berries. We were taught lots of things, like not to leave our hair on the comb, to burn it and not to leave our personal stuff lying around. That was because there were still quite a few clever men around and they could use their magic. They'd say, "Make sure your shadow doesn't fall across a grave or else that spirit will follow you home". When we were growing up we had to be in bed when the sun went down. We weren't allowed to make a noise, Dad would say, "Don't make a noise because you can hear things at night that will come around if they hear you". And if you hear a daytime bird singing out in the night, you know there's something wrong. Or if a daytime animal comes in the night—there's something wrong.

There was only one doctor who would help Aboriginal people

There were no hospitals or doctors for us in my day. I was delivered here on the island by Auntie Stella Flanders. That's Larry Kelly's mum. Auntie Stella and my mum were both Stellas. She was mum's best friend too. Auntie Stella delivered me and Granny was sitting around supervising, that's how I came into the world. They all had elderly grandmothers to help the babies come into the world. Like a lot of the women travelled from Bowraville to Bellingen to have their babies. There was only one doctor that looked after Aboriginal people and that was Dr. George Hewitt in Bellingen. He delivered my young sister. Mum had a very hard time with her. I lived in Bellingen while she was hospitalised. My mother had me and she lost a boy, he was between my sister and I. Dad was married before, he had two boys and Gladys was his eldest. My brother married and moved to Kempsey. He was married to a Singh and my other brother Eric married Ivy Dotti, they lived in Bowra for a while, then they moved over to Kempsey too. My mother's name was Stella Jane Davis and she was born at Roland's Plains in 1900, she died in 1969 out at Neville. Grandfather Jack and Granny Elizabeth are buried at Bowraville. They lived over there for awhile after they came down

from Roland's Plans. My brother lived up there too, Eric Dotti, Eric Smith and the other fellow was Herbert Smith and my sister Gladys she married Podgy Kelly and they have four boys living on Cabbage Tree Island (in the Richmond River, formerly an Aboriginal Reserve).



Working out at Valla

Mum and Dad worked together out at Valla. At Gilmont. I went to school there with the Bryants. I'd walk four miles to school every morning. That's when Valerie, Josie, Untie Phoebe and Uncle Joe worked out on the plantation at Valla¹. As I got older and before I had the bait shop I went out to work vegetable picking. We picked peas and tomatoes and packed tomatoes and bananas. After the bait shop, I shifted Mum and Dad and my younger sister from here up to Neville. That's when I started my nursing course, in Kempsey. I trained there until I got married, then I came back home to Nambucca. I got married in Nambucca in 1969 to George Cohen and started a family. My first was born in 1969, the second in 1970, the next was a girl in 1974 and the last one was born in 1980. They've all grown up now and they've got families of their own.

I couldn't work in their system

I lived up in Armidale for 31 years. After I lost my husband I reared my four children up alone. After they'd grown up in the early 1980s, I went to do a university course in Sydney. I did Social Sciences; to become a social worker. That took me seven years. After I graduated, I came back to Armidale and went into the hospital as a professional Social Worker. But I couldn't agree with the white workers because of the way they had limited time with their patients, you need more than half an hour or even an hour when you're dealing with a mental health problem. I broke away from that Government health system and just went out doing voluntary work on my own. That way I could deal with clients on my own terms, I can spend a couple of days if they want me, or all week. So now I work from Nambucca with Rex Marshall, we work from Grafton to Wauchope and out to Port Macquarie, doing voluntary work. That keeps me busy. So I'm quite happy.

A strange thing happened one night

I'll tell you a ghost story, I had a cousin named Teddy McGrath, and his mate was Benjie Buchanan. In those days our house was still here [on Stuart Island] and Dawn and I, Len and Mary McGrath and my sister were all here in the bedroom this one night. These two were a bit under the weather and they came here with one of the sacred stones they'd found up there on the island. Dad came rushing in to the room and said to us, "Stay in your room" and we didn't know why until we heard Teddy and Benjie coming through the front door. We were all sitting in my room and Teddy came in and gave me a hanky full of coins, Dad was walking behind them talking in lingo and he said to me, "What did he give you?" I showed him and he just grabbed them off me. We could hear all this commotion coming from the kitchen; these two were calling up the spirits. One of our floorboards in the kitchen had a little hole in it

Above left: North Coast NSW

and that's where this spirit came up and grabbed a hold of Teddy and was trying to pull him down. Dad was talking in the lingo and we could hear all this commotion coming from the kitchen. This went on until morning. Next morning when we got up, Teddy was asleep and I don't know where Benji had gone. Anyway Dad took whatever they had and buried it up the top end of the island up here. So from that day on Teddy would develop this sore in his arm. The doctors were puzzled because they couldn't make it heal. Dad told them that it was Aboriginal business. So you know they left it to Dad. It would heal up and then at certain times of the year it would break out again, and that happened until the time he died. And that's because he found those stones and he shouldn't have touched them.

We don't come here in the night

The local Aboriginal people here won't fish on this island [Stuart Island] in the night. You wouldn't catch them over here. Even on the South Beach, from the Vee Wall to Scott's Head. They're all spooky areas. I know where all the haunted grounds are around here but Rosie won't believe it. Like leave her over there for a couple of weeks –she'd probably be frightened of ghosts herself then! When I tell my children about these things they say "Yeah sure mum". That's all they say but I'm having more fun with my grandkids—where they take more notice of me than my children.

Fighting for South Beach

All the things you want to know about Bush Medicine are growing along the South Beach. That's why I'm fighting for South Beach now, to have it preserved and given back to the Aboriginal people of the Valley. We need somewhere to take our young people. Where we can train and teach them about the bush. Somewhere where they can go and enjoy life in the natural state of growing up. Up the top there at Scott's Head there's a birthing cave where the women used to take the younger girls and talk about women's business. That's what I'm trying to recapture, just some of that. We need to do that

for our younger girls. But there's still a long way to go because some of the young girls have got too much education, they seem to learn more from the school than from their elders. There's another place at Scott's Head where there was another initiation ground. There's a birthing place here at Yarranapini. And there's one out at Thora out the other side of Bellingen, going up to the Dorrigan Mountains. And up at Mary's Watering Hole (Wedding Bells Forest, Coffs Harbour). That's a very special place for us. It's a healing place for women. Young and old. Auntie Jesse and I and a couple of elders



from Armidale wanted to go to be initiated and Auntie Jesse and May, they can do that and I can help. Auntie Jesse still does it. It's just a natural way of life. You know the smoking and the water and the earth and all that. This Sunday I'll be sixty-six and I'm still learning about my Aboriginal background in my old age.

Above: Mouth of the river showing the other islands including South Beach to the left.

¹ Valla plantations grew beans, tomatoes, grapes and bananas.



*The old people used to tell us about signs. If you saw a Willy wagtail you knew a visitor was coming.
They'd come right up to the door. The Mopoke predicts a death.
And the Black Cockatoos predicted rain; if you saw two, then it was two days rain.*

Growing up on the mission was good

I was born in Bellingen in 1940 and lived all my life in Nambucca. I'm Granny Bonn's sister, she's the eldest in our family and I'm the youngest. I went to school on this island (Stuart Island) until I was around twelve or thirteen. Ms Higgins was the teacher. Growing up on the mission² was all right, we were happy. It was good fun; we went swimming almost every day over there on the island. I



remember crossing the river to get to the school. We crossed near the cutting there at low tide, just where the well used to be. Our school was just up a bit from the ninth hole.

Our parents were always strict

I can remember playing soccer with the boys. There were games like twos and threes and taggings. Our

parents were very strict. We had to be in at a certain time in the afternoon or else we'd see our Mum coming with a stick. Sometimes the parents whistled for the kids or cooed out to tell them to come home.

School at Macksville

I can remember later when I was going to the convent school out at Macksville we all played basketball. We had these maroon and white sports uniforms and today when I look across there and see that they still have the same uniform, it makes me feel really good inside. Because we were the ones who picked that style and colour. One of our sisters named one of her daughters after Sister Stephanie from that Macksville convent school.

From the island to the mission

There was plenty of bush food when I was young, we ate oysters and had plenty of fish. There were dinner leaves, gooseberries and roly-polys. There were lillipilli trees here on the island but they cut them down. There were so many, just heaps of lillipillis at the back of the school, in the old days³.

Left: Fay with her sister Granny Bonn.



Moving up on the mission

When we moved up to the mission, to Bellwood, in the 50s, we went onto rations. I can remember we got meat, sugar, tea, and a bag of flour, baking powder and salt. We had to pay rent and the managers would come up to the mission to collect it. There was a meter box on the wall for electricity and you had to put money in it to get the power. It was better before we moved up there.

We had entertainment

There were lots of social dances. We'd get a bus to go to the dances, over at Kempsey, Burnt Bridge or Bowraville. In Nambucca they held them up at Grants Hall and at the old Convent school there up on the hill at St Mary's Convent. We went to the pictures too. There was an old picture theatre down town there where the School of Arts used to be in Bowra Street. The bus would come up to the mission on Fridays and everyone would go, then we'd all come back home on the bus. We went to the new theatre when they built it and the bus still came to and from the mission to get us.

Church on the mission

I remember the grown ups would play two-up on the mission and Dad played tizzy wizzy. There was a game called pups, like poker. We used to go to the old church up here before they came to the mission to see us, later we went off the mission to church. Father Dean Redford was the minister, then there was Father Goss.

We had our chores

We had a chip heater for our baths. That was one of our main chores when we were kids, getting chips for the chip heater and fire. We cooked outside on the open fire in those days. And we had to collect bush to make the bush brooms too. Dad would put an old rag around the bush to make the broom. When it got a bit old and looked like sticks, we used it for a rake outside. For washing we had rinso and rickett's blue, bleach and sunlight soap. We made starch from flour

for our petticoats. And our skirts were so starched they would stick right out. We had ribbons and bands for our hair and hairnets.

Working and Picking tomatoes at Valla

We used sand soap for the floors, and we scrubbed them on our hands and knees. I did seasonal work when I was younger, out at Valla, picking tomatoes and beans. There was lots of picking. My sister was a very good packer; she was very quick with her hands. We worked for Alf Smith. Our Dad worked for him and then we did too. All the family worked on the tomatoes. We were paid by the drum, it wasn't much.

We used what we had even at Christmas

I remember my Mum made beautiful date pudding. She handed down the recipe to us kids and now I've handed it down to my daughter. I can remember getting a celluloid doll for Christmas. And our Christmas trees were cut from the bush, oak not pine, we'd put them in an old bucket filled with soil or sand. We used to cut up paper to make rings for the decorations.



Left: Bush tucker.

Above: Family photo of four generations.

² Bellwood Aboriginal Reserve, Nambucca Heads.

³ For a discussion of the Aboriginal use of wild foods, see Anthony English, *The Sea and the Rock Gives us a Feed*, NPWS 2002.

Granny Bonn (Yvonne Davis Jarrett)



Granny Bonn passed away in December 2001.

She was well known and respected in the Valley and is sadly missed by everyone who knew her.



Always from the Valley

I was born in Bowraville in 1930 and lived in the Nambucca Valley all my life. My father was Eric Davis and my mother's name was Elva Monaro. There were twelve kids in our family. My mother and father came from the Nambucca Valley and I can remember that my grandmother, my mother's mother, she came from there too. Even after I got married we still lived in the valley.

School on the island

I went to school there on Stuart's Island until I was fourteen years old. Miss Higgins was the teacher at the school; she was a lovely girl. There was a causeway to cross over to the island from the main land, to get to school. The priest would come to our house because our house used to be the main house for prayer. We had house parties for the church too. Up where Muurrbay is now, that used to be our church up there, and its always been on the mission.

After school

After school we'd swim over there on the island. We would dive in clothes and all; we'd play on the sand. There were chores that we had to do. We had to get bush tucker; we used to collect yum yums and roly-poly, yams, bush potato and gooseberries. We had plenty to eat, we never went without. The men used to go out and get honey too.



There was sharing on the mission

There was a lot of sharing on the mission when we went out and caught fish. We'd rent a boat and go over to South Beach to catch it. We'd catch a lot of fish over there. I used to love fishing. We'd get oysters too. Later when they moved the school to the mission we'd get rations from the school teacher, Mr Nelson.

Seasonal work and making baskets

I did seasonal work out at Valla and at Gumma, picking beans and tomatoes. My grandfather used to get cane and make baskets. I'd help him clean the cane; it was a native cane, a vine. You had to stretch it and strip it all to make it into the baskets, then we'd sell them.



The dances were the best

We went to dances at Bowraville and Nambucca. We never missed a dance. I loved dancing especially the barn dances, the Pride of Erin and the waltzes. We had dances at our house too. I remember Dolly Roe would play the piano, Laurie Kelly from Bowraville played the violin, and Les Nixon was another violinist.

Work was a chore

Mum used to work, she used to clean the church out. We had bush brooms to do the sweeping. You tied a rag around the bush to make



the broom. Mum used sandstone to clean the floors in our house, and she washed by hand. We had to walk up to the well to do the washing, and we'd boil our clothes. We had an

old kerosene drum to heat the water up for the copper. Then we'd wash the clothes and throw them over the bushes to dry. We'd get the wood from up where the RSL is now.

Carnivals at Macksville

There used to be carnivals in Macksville, where the showground is now. There were merry-go-rounds and there were those boxers who used to get up on the boards. I never went to see the boxing, we were never allowed. They had swimming events there at the bridge too.

I met my husband in Nambucca; he lived here in Macksville. We got married in Macksville, in the church there. We lived near the riverbank, near the big oak tree at the bridge. The reserve wasn't there in those days.

Op left: The old church, now the language centre on Bellwood Road, Nambucca Heads.

Op far left: Language centre sign.

Above left: A basket like the one Granny Bonn helped her grandfather make, now held in the Nambucca Heads Museum.

Above right: An old washing machine and kerosene heater, similar to the ones the family used, held at the Macksville Museum.

Ann Flanders-Edwards



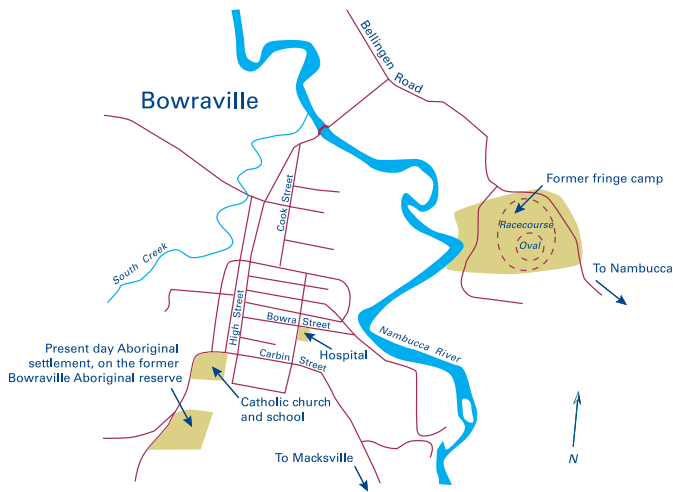
*We weren't financially rich. The only thing that we were rich in was love.
Mum and Dad gave us plenty of love.*



My name is Patricia Ann Edwards. My maiden name was Flanders. I was born on the first of February 1945. I was born at Bowraville racecourse (An Aboriginal fringe camp situated on land now occupied by the racecourse), not far from the main road; some people know it as Grassy Road. We had a little old shack on the side of the road; it was kept beautiful and clean. Mum's name was Brenda Doreen Kelly. My father's name was Hubert Donald Flanders. There were thirteen children in the family, nine girls and four boys. I have strong connections to the racecourse because I know that's where all my ancestors are and that's where their spirits remain. When I need to be strengthened or healed in my body and my mind, I go over to the racecourse and sit under my special tree over there. It's the tree my sisters and I played under as children.

Carrying on Traditions

I still carry on my Aboriginal traditions over there at the racecourse. When my children and my nieces have their babies in the Macksville hospital I've taken the afterbirth from the hospital to my special land (at the racecourse) it's always a big shock to the sisters at the hospital, as they could never understand what I wanted to do with it. But the burying of the afterbirth was handed down to me through my Dad's sister. Aunt Stella was a healing woman. She had those special powers. A lot of people today don't believe that sort of thing but I saw it with my own eyes. I saw her heal my brothers and sisters. I guess she would have got those powers from my grandfather because he was one of those special men who carried out men's business, he had special powers. This knowledge has been handed down to me through my Aunt. I take my grandkids over there a lot and as I take each new one over, I introduce them to my spiritual ancestors, to the ancestors first and then to the land. I take them out to the cemetery to Grandfather and to my own Dad and then I speak to my Dad and to my sister; that sister was the one who passed away, the one next to me. I still miss them both even though it's been years since they've been gone. Not a night goes by when I don't think about the two of them. So I take each of the grandkids out there and introduce them. That's something that's been handed down.



The river used to be grand

When I was young, we lived along the riverbank. We were champion swimmers. If we saw a turtle we'd just dive in and get it, if it was lunchtime and if we were hungry, we'd just cook it up, right there by the river. All my brothers had a very special bond with the river, especially to our old swimming holes; we had special names for each one of them. In the summer time, when we were young, we'd get up early in the morning and get our chores done around the house. We didn't have that much to do, but our chores had to be done or else we'd get a hiding. But then we'd head for the river, it was our playground. But now, if I go down and look at it, I sit and cry. Now there are limbs of trees everywhere, it doesn't look clean, it looks as if it's been tampered with. It doesn't flow like it used to when we were kids. My brothers won't go down there fishing with me anymore because all I do is cry when I see it. What will it be like for my grandkids? There'll be no river, it will be all dried up, what are they going to do for water?

Shanghais

My brothers and sisters and I were great shanghai⁴ kids, we'd carry the shanghai in our pockets. We were all champions on the shanghai and that was handed down too. We knew which sort of birds were out of bounds to us. My sister and I loved the carwaks. We would eat them and the baldy pigeons. When we were hungry we found our own food; we made the fire on the gravel and when we were finished we'd put it out by carrying water on our clothes from the river. We'd just squeeze the water onto the fire. We'd always take a fishing line with us. We liked perch and catfish the best. A couple of times we had a go at eel but we didn't have the taste for it. The only time we went home was when we heard Dad's whistle, as soon as we heard that we'd go straight home.

Following Mum's footsteps

We weren't financially rich; the only thing we were rich in was love. Mum and Dad gave us plenty of love. Mum was the one to give the discipline and now I'm doing the same thing, with my own kids and grandkids. I am religiously telling the grandkids right from wrong. I'm telling them my beliefs so they get a good sense of the land over there. When I take them over to the river and its time to come home they always want to stay longer. When they come home they dream during the night and it's often about the land over there and about Grandfather talking to them. It freaks their mothers out and sometimes it freaks me out too. One of them could go right back to another life, and this was when he was only three or four! He'd dream about battles between tribes and tell about fishing from a raft. About how he wore his hair and how he caught and cut up the fish. Things that would be impossible for a three or four year old to even know.

Op far left: Children at the first Aboriginal School, Bowraville. Circa 1940.

Op top right: Anne with her grandchildren.

Above: Map of Bowraville.



School was a disaster

When it was time for me and my sister to go to school we went here in town to the Bowraville Central School. But that didn't last long even though we were

learning everything because the nuns came over and convinced Mum to send us up there to the Catholic school. Well that was a shock for us. They had the biggest fence going right across the school yard; they had blackfellas on one side and whitefellas on the other! The blackfella side had this little shed that served as our classroom. And that was an improvement from when Mum went up there, because her classroom had been a log under a tree! That's how it was for Mum. Anyway we weren't allowed to mix with the white fellas and that's why they had the fence but I was always inquisitive and I'd go up to it to see what was going on, on the other side, when I'd get caught, I'd get six cuts from the nuns. I was always in trouble. The only thing I learnt up there was how to garden, and how to clean the convent. I can still smell that brasso smell today!

Learning to read and write despite school

In 1957, they integrated the black kids with the white kids. I was put in a second class with these white kids that knew everything. I can still remember that teacher. I was the only black kid in the class and she would tell me to read and she knew damn well that I couldn't. I'd put my head down and then she'd say 'What's wrong with you?' and when I'd say that I couldn't read the white kids would laugh at

me and poke me. The next minute there'd be a fight and I'd be getting cuts for bashing up a white kid. This went on for months. Then this one afternoon, I'd had enough; I went home determined to teach myself how to read and how to write. I was going to make myself the best speller in that school; And that's what happened I taught myself to read and write and spell by sitting on the toilet reading the newspaper off the wall.

The best childhood

Despite school and despite the Welfare Board being about, my childhood was the best. I had a strict mother and there were heaps of rules, for instance we always had to be home before dark. There was no dawdling on the way home from school; they'd time us. We were kids until we were twenty-one, but overall they were good years. I can remember going out to Valla as a kid, we went out there

fishing and getting oysters and pippies. There were always families going out to Smoky Cape and out to Middle Head. And there'd be family gatherings at South Beach there at Nambucca on the island and even though the white fellas have built



barbecues there, everyone knows not to stay there after dark. Even the grandkids know that, something's moving them home.

Left: Bowraville classroom. Circa 1950s.

Above: The Catholic Church in Bowraville.

⁴ A shanghai is a forked stick from a tree branch, with a rubber sling across it. Like a catapult.



*They were hard times, but they were good,
there were lots of friends.*



Living on the mission was hard

I've always lived on the mission there at Bowraville, I was born here in a tin shack on the 28 May 1924 and continued to live here even after I got married. Midwives used to birth the babies in my day. I remember Granny Flo was our midwife. Living here was pretty harsh; we had to cook outside on campfires because we only had these little tin shacks to live in. There wasn't any kitchen with a tap to turn on when we wanted water. If we wanted water we had to go

all the way down to the river and that was all the way across there, over near the Golf Club. We had to do our washing down there too and there were no clotheslines in those days, we'd just hang the wet clothes over the barbed wire fence to dry. I remember there were some old people living down there on the river, right down the end paddock near where the football field is today.

A segregated school and hospital

The kids would go to a special school here, it was a school just for Aboriginal children. It was at a little Catholic school up there near their church. I went there with all my sisters and brothers and I even got married in that church. Sister Bernadette was up there in those days and Father Cohalan was the priest. Sister Bernadette was lovely. They pretty well looked after us and wouldn't let anything happen, they would help our parents take us to the hospital if there was anything wrong. They had a special section at the hospital for Aboriginal people too.

Above left: Alma with her granddaughter and great grandchildren.

Being kids

When we were kids we played marbles and cubby house in the bush. We'd run away from lizards and snakes. I remember there was this old woman who lived down in the paddock, down there. Old Berretta was her name, she used to grow all these fruits and things, and the kids would try to take them. She had this big dog and she used to sool it on to us. Then you'd hear Old Granny Florrie singing out to us; she used to talk in the lingo and she'd sing out "Come away from there". We always had to keep a watch and run away from the Welfare Officers when they came around because they always came down to the mission to try to get us. They wanted to put us in the homes and we didn't want to go. Our parents would hunt them away.

The old people would warn us

The old people always warned us kids to keep safe. There were some bad things here too. Clever things on the mission like the blue light. It used to travel about and we were warned not to touch it. The old people would see strange things and they used to talk to them to make them go away. The owl was a sign of bad news and the kookaburra meant rain. We had a big carpet snake come around just the other day. It's the totem of the Ballangarry. It's a warning that something's going to happen. My Grandmother was a Ballangarry.

Childhood memories

I can remember when Dad put a swing in this old tree and this little brown jack⁵, this little hairy man would come over to swing. It wouldn't attack us or bite and scratch us. They were quite friendly creatures. Once we were playing ring a ring a rosy up there near the clinic and one came over and started to play with us. Some of the old people made the best damper; they were all good damper cooks. They cooked it over the fire on a wire rack. There was this

one clever man I remember, Old Bill Dottie, he used to smoke this tobacco and his old missus, Old Auntie Alice Dotti, she would bake the best damper bread you could ever hope to taste. They would tell us kids to keep away when it was hot straight off the fire, because we never had forks and knives so we ate it with our fingers and it was beautiful, lovely. Sometimes we had it with cobra.⁶

Getting rations

I remember we would go down to the police station for rations; some of the police were no good at all. Some of them. They just didn't like Aboriginal people. Mainly we lived on bush tucker, porcupine and cobra were the main foods and we still eat that today.

Working and singing

I started working when I was young. I used to scrub floors up there in that town (Bowraville). My mother and I would clean Gleeson's old shop. I won a couple of talent quests when I was a teenager. I used to sing Connie Frances's songs. And once I even sang at the hospital. We used to hold concerts up there near the church. We'd go swimming and play sports. I even won another couple of trophies for running in the relay events. They did a write up about me in the paper. They were hard times but looking back they were good times too, we had lots of friends.

Opposite: *Alma under the tree where her dad built the swing.*

⁵ A brown jack is another name for a little hairy man.

⁶ Cobra is like wood worm, its found in hollow logs by water.



Amy Marshall Jarrett



I felt very emotional when I did my language course because for fifty years I didn't know anything about my culture. I sort of found myself and my connection. I have a sense of belonging now.



I was born in Bellingen in 1943. My brother was born here on Stuart Island. That was Pompy, he's seventeen years older than me. Aunty Rose was born here too and Eileen's midwife was Granny Jarrett Taylor. Auntie Queenie was a midwife here too. Dad was a sleeper cutter, so we mainly lived in the bush. That's how we escaped the Welfare Board. After we came back over here to my Grandfather's house in Sea View Street [Nambucca Heads], we stayed there until Grandfather Marshall died and then they moved us up to the mission on Plover Island.

Always moved on

Stuart Island used to be called Girr-Girr Julgaa. That's 'island' in Aboriginal language. That was until the white man came and named it after Stuart, that's how that came about. They moved people here, to this island, from over at Cows Creek, that was a reserve up there in the early days. They moved them here and then they wanted this for a white man's playground, so they moved the blacks up to Bellwood. You see the ground up there where they moved them? It's terrible; it's all clay.

I didn't realise

Mum's father lived on this island, Grandfather Buchanan. Mum would bring us over to spend time with him. They called him the doctor. He was a clever man. I saw him do a few things when I was young, I was about seven or eight years old. Grandfather Buchanan had healing powers, he was very clever. I saw him suck a small ball of hair out of Pompy once. He just sucked it out and it just left a little pinhole. My brother Okey had a toothache this once and he did the same for him. He was an amazing bloke. I was only young at the time and I didn't know what to think, Mum never told me much because she died when I was twelve. My brother and sister

practically brought me up after she went, that's Pompy and Jessie. I lived with them up on the hill there for awhile, just up there where the Bellwood Motel is now. We had a house up along there. It was all bush and there was only us there. I remember we had to get wood every morning before school and again every afternoon or else we didn't get any supper. It was good in a way because it taught us how to get on with things ourselves, help ourselves, but at the time I thought it was very hard.

I went to school up there. There were a lot of Goories⁷. At lunch time we'd come down to the island here swimming and the teachers had to come and get us. We had a good time there. We played two's and three's and spin the bottle, all sorts of things. We'd swim over there where Fay and her father used to live.

The first time I saw the mission

I can remember the first time I saw the mission [Bellwood]. Mum, Dad, John and I went up there. I was young—I was still swimming around in jarawirals, (trousers). We were looking at these houses and I was expecting horses to come out of them, they looked like stables to me! And I got a shock when I saw my brother walk out of one! After living in little shacks! I mean the house on the hill with Grandfather Marshall, that was all right, but the kitchen part had these hessian bags across the front. We had dirt floors except in the bedrooms. But to go up to the mission! Like I couldn't believe it. After not living together with all the blacks and then to get up there and see them all together in one place. Like they shouldn't be up there all together, like on a mission. I reckon the missions were one of the worst things they ever created, for Goories. I don't remember if we had a choice about being moved up here, but as I got older, I really hated it; what it was doing to the families. And the racism. It wasn't too bad in Nambucca; but Bowraville! In Bowraville it was terrible. All the Bowraville people would come down here on the weekends and the Macksville fellows; they'd come down here diving for oysters. Grogging up, diving and eating up.



Wash Days

They had little sheds for our laundries up there (at Bellwood) we shared one between two houses. They had the old coppers in them and we washed by hand. When I had the nappies, real nappies, not Kimbeys, it was washing everyday and oh the sweat! They were just little shacks with two coppers and two tubs in them. Poor

Martha Ballangarry, she used to help me. It was hard work. It was the same over at Bowraville, with the separate laundry. Pompy had to share with Granny Bonnie over there. It was very hard work.

Bush tucker

There was lots of bush food about when I was young; roly pollys, pig's face, lily pillies, jarning and gooseberries. We'd get pig face over on the beach. There were blackberry bushes around the church up there on the mission too, but they've been killed off now. You could get roly pollys up around the mission. I only tasted jarny up at Baker's Creek the other day. Baker's Creek on the other side of Taylor's Arms. Now I've tried porcupine; that's beautiful, Turtle it tastes just like chicken and wallaby makes beautiful gravy.

There were strange things happening

When I was young we weren't allowed out after dark. We had to clean up the yard, leave nothing around. They⁸ could catch you, you know? The kids knew from when they're tiny. There are birds that warn you too. Like the Frog Mouth Owl. That's a messenger

Op left: Stuart Island. Circa 1950.

Above: The wash tub.



bird but mainly of a death. One time when we were staying up there with Grandfather Marshall; you looked down into the valley from his verandah and Mum said “Come out here and have a look at this”. There was a big fire going – in the rain! There was this tall black fella with a cape and a black hat on, and he’s just walking around the fire. You could see his cape blowing in the wind. Next morning I went down there to take a look and there was no sign of a fire. It was just like nothing happened there. Yet we saw it! Like Paul has seen a lot of strange things especially up there on the mission. Like the big red eyed fellows. You ask him. When we go up the mission even now they still throw stones. You can hear them. When they got together to play cards at number one; we had to walk Granny Bon home because there was someone or something over there—in that little bush over the road there. You can hear them running in the bush. Even from the Diamond⁹ tree there, you can hear them chanting. Coming up the hill. They reckon Killer went down there drunk this time, making fun of the tree and something just threw him. And Uncle Benjie took Johnny Gay down there when John was about five or six. He and John went down there and they followed him up the hill, they were after them. Mum was that wild, she had to talk in the lingo to tell them, they didn’t mean to bother them. Uncle Benjie should have had more sense than going down there near the Diamond tree.

School was just a formality

We went to this school here for awhile, we weren’t allowed to go to the school up town (in Nambucca Heads), so they sent us over to the convent at Macksville. There was Ruthy Bryant, Patsy Mumbler, Sunshine and his brother Eric, they were all there at the time. The nuns wore those long black habits. There was one tiny nun; they called her “Two Gun Minnie”. She had to make the boys kneel down so she could give them three on each hand. Schooling was just a formality though; they didn’t care if we went or not. I went to school until I was fourteen at the convent up there at Macksville. But it wasn’t any good. I think it was worse after leaving the island here.

Dances and ball gowns

There were good dances around; Aboriginal people would come from Kempsey, Armidale and Coffs Harbour. They’d be all done up in their ball gowns, it was really good. You got a prize for the best ball gown; Mavis Jackie used to win it every year. She was from Kempsey. They didn’t have bands like they have today. We might have had a piano and a guitar, maybe an accordion. They used to play the Heidelberg Waltz; there was no rock’n roll then. You held your partner in your arms to dance.

Catching sea worms and mullet

My biggest thrill was when I was twelve. I would stay with my Auntie Bryan here and she’d take me out worming. She taught me how to catch sea worms. I was frightened at first but when I caught my first one, it was wow! After I went out a couple of times, I caught hundreds. It was amazing. We’d go over to McQuires Crossing and everywhere. The Goughs owned the bait shop then. Old Gough would come and pick her up about four o’clock in the morning to go worming. Uncle Benjie was the first Goorie around here to have a fishing licence. Old Keithie Davis got it for him. We’d go out fishing with him up the creek. As soon as we’d catch a feed, he’d make a fire, shove a stick through the mullet’s mouth and shove it over the coals. He’d just put it on leaves or bark and just skin it.

People lived all around the place

The Ruthers lived somewhere here (Nambucca Heads) and the Smiths. Valerie had the little bait shop down on the corner; she’d be out working everyday. The McGraths lived across over there, over the other side just underneath the cutting. His mother and father built that house. It was a tricky little house, like you had a job to see it. It was into the cutting with trees out the front of it. The Whaddys

Opposite: Stuart Island.

lived just around the cutting. Jessie Whaddy lived over there, where the McKendal Ford place is now, that was Lenny's grandmother. Lenny Lardner and his family lived over where the Navana motel is and Kirk lived over the back there. The Davis's lived across from McKendal Ford, on the riverbank. There were a few families there but I can only remember the Davis's. It was better then, better than being herded up the mission.

Rations and working

In Mum's day they had to go down to the police station for rations. Mum would walk down with a sugar bag over her shoulder. My Dad had one of those licences. You had to have one to go into the pub. I did seasonal work when I was older, picking, up at Valla, at Pedicans; beans, peas and tomatoes. No wonder my back's bad today. When I was fifteen they sent me down to Sydney; me and poor Lenny Wilson. The Welfare sent us, we had to go down and do live in jobs. They sent me to the North Shore and Lenny to Vaucluse. I worked down there even though I was pregnant at the time. I had to clean and do the vegies. Mainly I looked after the doctor's wife because her back was bad. I had to do everything for her. I did all the hand washing. They paid me and Kate would take me out on weekends. But it was lonely. I was lonely for family. I stayed there for awhile for about six months and then I came back home to have the baby.

Learning was something special

I felt very emotional when I did my language course¹⁰ because for about fifty years, I didn't know anything about my culture. I felt very emotional when Uncle Harry Buchanan was talking. I sort of found myself and my connection. I have a sense of belonging now. I can see the trees and I look at them in a different way. The grass and the birds, it's all different from before I did the course. Now I talk to the birds. I found it hard to learn the language but I really enjoyed it. I want to go back because I haven't quite finished. I reckon they should have it in the schools. Maybe it will give the kids today a sense of belonging and they won't be so lost.

Reviving the language and getting into the culture helped me a lot and there are plenty of stories from all the elders around here. It would be good if they could just take the kids away for a weekend, just with the elders. I was never with my parents. I'd be off with Uncle Harry and Auntie Mable up the creek nearly every weekend. We didn't know what it was like to stay on the mission. As soon as we opened our eyes we'd be over there swimming and then we didn't get home until dark when it was cool. We'd walk to Bowraville, and wouldn't think anything of it. We'd sit under an orange tree and have a feed of oranges or lemons. We had water to

drink from the creek. Today it's a job to walk out the back.

It was good living on the island. I have very strong attachments to it. Whenever I've got a troubled mind, I just come over here and sit down, over there on the sand and I have a yarn with Grandfather. I go away pretty peaceful within myself. When

you're sitting here and there's no one around you really think there is some one here. Someone listening to you, really.

Above: Amy Marshall with three generations of the family.



⁷ Aboriginal people on the North Coast call themselves Goories.

⁸ Evil spirits beings.

⁹ A Diamond tree is a sacred men's site.

¹⁰ The Language Centre was established in the 90s. It's housed in what once was the church building on Bellwood Reserve.

Vilma Whaddy Moylan

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We ate eels and catfish from this river but that was before; the river was good then, but now, today it's just so sad. I could nearly cry when I think about it, it's not even as full as it used to be.



Moving from the Island

I was born here on Stuart Island and went to school here until third class, Miss Higgins and Miss Egan were the teachers. I have a brother buried on this island up between the highway and Bellwood Creek, we have a grandfather buried here too. Later when we moved over to Bowraville we lived on the race course reserve.¹¹ I went to school over there at Bowraville for awhile. The little Aboriginal school there.

We still had chores even though we were working

When I was fourteen, I worked for a shopkeeper at Bowraville and when I was older I worked as a domestic, we had to do the washing and the ironing. You would have to sprinkle water over the clothes before you ironed them in those days because they were so stiff with starch. You had to heat the iron up on a fuel stove to make it hot enough to iron with, and then we had one of those big mangles that you put the sheets through. They would make the sheets fold up flat like they were ironed. You could ring clothes out with it too. We had to get up at daybreak to start walking into town to go to work. But before we went to work we had to do all our own chores

around the house first, we had to sweep and clean up. We even had to sweep the yard. There was never any rubbish around in my day.



Left: Vilma, Virginia & Jessie on Stuart Island.

Right: A mangle.

Remembering how the river once was

We used to walk across there, under Grassy Bridge and they would have swimming carnivals there too. Our main swimmer was Jimmy Dotti. He won all the races. We ate eels and catfish from this river but that was before; the river was good then but now, today it's just so sad. I could nearly cry when I think about it, it's not even as full as it used to be. I can remember our Auntie Mooney would catch catfish here and take them home to cook them up; they were lovely.



Bullock teams would get the timber

I can remember the bullock teams here too, they used them to get the timber, and there were huge teams of them. They always frightened us.



Always moved on

You see they used to dredge this place (Stuart Island) and I think they dredged all the sand and made all that over there¹². All this is dredged up and moved. They wanted this place here, you see. Really they just hurdled you around like cattle in those days and it was the same as over at Yellow Rock. They moved people away. They came and loaded people into the lorry there; they didn't have buses in those days. But we knew what they were doing, we waved to them when they went past.

Left: Stuart Island. Circa 1950.

Above: Vilma at Jessie William's house.

¹¹ Aboriginal fringe camp in Bowraville on the site of the present day race course.

¹² The Nambucca River was dredged to make it deep enough for boats to get up the river. The sand was dredged and used to build up the shoreline along the river side of the Island.



*I've been through the era of assimilation, of segregation and exemptions certificates.
I've sat blocked off from the white people in picture theatres.
I've been through all the changes that effected Aboriginal people in the Welfare Board days,
and each change has a story of its own to tell.*

Being a Gumbayngan

I was born in Bowraville in 1937. Granny Florence Ballangarry, brought me into the world, she was a midwife. She was the one that gave me my first piece of possum, that's a cultural thing. She took me out to Valla, made a fire, cleaned the possum, cooked it in the coals and gave me a piece to eat. I didn't find out until later on in life that it was my totem. My mother was Dangatti, she was born on Fattorini Island (an Aboriginal Reserve in the Macleay River), near Smith Town and my dad was a Biripi man, born at Warchope. Lambert Whatty and Grandfather Buchanan, all the elders here just accepted me as a Gumbaynggirr person. Uncle Harry Buchanan gave me my first piece of porcupine and that's another cultural thing and old Grandfather Fred Wells was the one to give me my first piece of Wallaby.

Going to school until 1950

I had the advantage of going to a white school for four years when we lived up on the Macleay River. Then when we came back to Nambucca Heads, we built a little hut near Bellwood Creek; it had dirt floors and a gallery at the back and I started school here at the little Aboriginal school on Stuart Island; the schools around here

were segregated until 1948. When I was ready for high school I had to travel all the way to Macksville each day on the bus; there were no high schools here then. I went to the school there until I was fifteen.

The only work available to Aboriginal people in those days

When I started work, I had to do the only work available to Aboriginal people in those days and that was washing and ironing for white people, as a domestic. I had to walk about three miles a day to and from home just to go to work. Then I got a job at the old Victoria Hotel as a pantry maid. At eighteen I went to Sydney; even there the only sort of work Aboriginal people could get was either in a factory or as a nanny. So I worked in a factory until I got married. Then I became an alcoholic and drank for another eighteen years, that mucked my marriage up and that ended in divorce. I had four children by then. There were so many things to tell about, this just touches the surface. But once I got involved with the language and the language course, I gave up the drinking. That was on the thirteenth of January 1975.

Getting involved with language

Since then I've really got involved with language and education. I went back to school at forty-nine years of age and between 1988 and 1990, I did an Aboriginal Education Assistant Certificate Course. I could have worked in the schools if I'd wanted to but I went into doing Gumbayngirr language instead. We had a language centre in Kempsey, but that was in the wrong country because that's Dangatti country, you see? We had to wait until we got funding from ATSIC and then we came over here to Nambucca Heads.

Something changed for me

Nowadays I always say to people when I see them drinking that I've been there and I've done that, I know what it's like to be an alcoholic. I stopped drinking before I got involved in the language. I remember I was travelling from Stuarts Point to Nambucca Heads. I had a bottle of wine and a couple of bottles of beer with me and by the time I got to Nambucca Heads I knew I wasn't going to drink that wine and I gave it away to my girlfriend Phyllis. I don't know what it was that made me stop, whether it was a spiritual thing. I don't know but I've never had a drink since. So I always say it was a spiritual thing because I don't know what happened, I just knew that I didn't want to drink any more.

Now I teach and write poetry

I think if I hadn't given up drinking, I wouldn't be here now. I had two operations during my first two years of my sobriety and I think I wouldn't have gone to a doctor if I'd still been drinking. So I was meant to be in the world a bit longer. I've done a lot of things in my life time, good things and bad, but there is one thing I'm grateful for and that's knowing who I am as an Aboriginal person, as a Gumbayngan woman. And now I teach and write poetry and I go into the schools. And now I'm going to do some artwork and put my story on canvas. So then when I go into the schools I can show them things like the rings and rings of mushrooms, you don't see rings

like that any more. Even the witchetty grubs and prawns; we used to eat them raw when I was young. And the big fig trees that were growing here when we were kids, we used to cut the sap from them and eat it; just chew it and sometimes put a bit of sugar on it. We never had money for sweets and things because we were too poor.

Life had been good in a way

But that sort of life, back then was good in a way. Even when I was a kid here in Nambucca Heads all the young ones would come here from Kempsey and we'd get together and play twos and threes and rounders while the adults would go and play two up or something. There was no drink, no drugs, no sex there wasn't anything like that, we used to just get together and play. You say rounders or twos and threes to the kids nowadays and they say, "What's that?" "What sort of game is that?"

I've been blessed

I had four beautiful children, three boys and a girl, so I believe I've been blessed. And I'm connected to this land. I'm not interested in Native Title and I'm not interested in Land Rights or a Treaty; the land owns me, I don't own it. That's what I tell the kids in school, the land owns me.

I've always been a storyteller

We'd get a whole heap of kids in a classroom and ask them how much language did they know? And you can recognise where they came from by the words they knew. It's about people knowing who they are. Some people go to the cemetery to talk to their spirits, I don't have to do that, I know Mum's still there with me. I've got three brothers left, my eldest brother and Russell and Rowley the baby. He came to the house this morning and he said "I love ya" and I said "I love you too Rowley you're my baby brother". You see I nursed him, I reared them all. There were five younger than me and I was the one that reared them. I'd always tell them stories; I'd make

the stories up; we couldn't afford books you see? I was a storyteller then and I'm still a storyteller now. And I still tell stories to the grandkids; they never bring a book when they visit me. I did it with my brother and sisters and I still do it now with them.

We all have spirituality

I went up to Bowraville the other day to Mimi Mothers¹³ and there was a Cherokee woman there and she said "I never say anything about spirituality" and I said to her, "Well I'm sorry but I do". I'm always looking on the spirits to give me strength and all Aboriginal people do that. They've all got that spirituality inside of them, and it comes out in something they do. Like Sharon Smith said to me the other day "I don't know my Aboriginal spirituality" and I said to her she would, one day. Anyway she did this painting, she's a great artist, she did this Aboriginal painting and I said to her "Have a look at your painting Sharon" and there it was in the painting. I told her its coming out in your art. So I believe that we show our spirituality in different ways. For me it comes through in my poetry.

Its never too late

I always tell the young ones that everyone in this world gets a choice in life, that we all can't be artists, we all can't be poets, but we're all good at something. We need to look out for what that is and do it. It nearly took me over sixty years before I found out that I was a poet, I only started writing poetry last year. And I'm sixty-six now. Now I want to do art. Which proves that it's never too late in life to try something new. I've got a poem about love and all the sorts of love there is. Like the love for your lover, husband or boyfriend or maybe the love you have for your god. It can be the love for your mum, your dad or even for your pet rabbit. But there's one love that's most important and that's the love you should have for yourself. You need that before you can love the rest.

DEPRESSION

By Emily Walker 2000

*He called us the "depression syndrome",
Not knowing as a child we had nothing to call our own.
Hand me downs, living in sheds,
Mum working for white people so we can have a bed.
In her handbag she had coupons for butter,
sugar and tea,
Going to South West Rocks, we ate food from the sea.
Witchetty grubs, wallabies and mushrooms
from the land,
Happy we were, we want you to understand.
As Indigenous people survivors of this earth,
We had to live this way right from the day of birth.
So what, let us have our second hand things,
If we could only describe the good feeling it brings.*

¹³ An Aboriginal Women's Group who support mothers and their families in the Nambucca Valley.

Jessie Williams



All this golf course is over the old cemetery. We have our people buried here. Our cemetery has gone and our little school is gone, it makes me mad to think about it.

Moving from the Island

I was born on Stuart Island in 1924 and my brother was born here too. They had midwives in those days. Aunty Flo was the midwife when I was born, you see they wouldn't let Aboriginal people in the hospital in those days. I was born here and at five years of age my parents moved to Bowraville. We lived on the riverbank over there [at Bowraville] right in the middle of the golf course. My elder sister lived not far away and there was my Auntie, my Uncle Dough



Whaddy and his wife. Soon after they left their sister moved there along with Ivan and Hilda Ballangarry. I used to look after Lyn and Joan Ballangarry.

It was a time of traditional ways

My mother was born here on this island; her name was Eva Whatty. My father came from Berry; his name was Ernest Lindsay. When Dad came up here and fell in love with Mum, her father and brother made him go through the initiation so that he could become a Gumbayngirr. They made the young men go through initiation in those days. And after they had been through initiation the rules were very strict. They had to be careful not to get too close to their sister or to their mother. There was no more mucking around. We couldn't step over their legs or get too close to them. There was that sort of thing. The mothers passed the rules onto their daughters and we passed it on to our children. After the young men were initiated they could go away and look for wives. Two of my uncles went up to the Macleay to get wives.



The little school at Bowra

I was going to the Aboriginal school over there (on Stuart Island) in my early years. And later when we moved to Bowraville I found out that the white people there had wanted us to go over to the Aboriginal Station school at Yellow Rock, they didn't want us at their white school. And that was the reason why the Catholics built a school for Aboriginal children in Bowraville. I can remember one of the sisters, Sister Bernadette. But I don't know why they tried to mix everyone up at Yellow Rock.

There was plenty of bush tucker

We mainly lived on bush tucker and damper, jiddi and catfish. There was plenty of bush tucker. When we walked from Bowraville to Nambucca we knew where to get all the bush tucker we could possibly want; we had wild raspberries, yum yums, roly-polly, pigface and jarning, jarning's like a sweet chewing gum. Today you have to be careful because of the spraying. The old people had told us where to get it, that was something that was handed down. And both Vilma and I caught fish too. We used dough for bait and of course we caught yabbies and oysters.

The old people knew about bush medicine

My cousin Ivy Doyle lived with her mother on the top of Doyle Hill, she used to go down there across from where those homes are to collect bush medicines. She would collect the plants and make them up into medicines. She was like a doctor. A lot of the women knew about bush medicines. They all looked after each other. They respected each other. The old people used to talk in language between themselves, but when we started school we were told not to speak language, so they never taught us. We would get into big trouble if we were caught.

We started work young, cleaning the Catholic Church in Bowraville

When I started work, I worked as a domestic around Nambucca and Bowraville. But I can remember when I was going to the school at Bowraville; they would get two of the little Aboriginal children to clean that big Catholic Church up there. Upstairs and downstairs. All that sweeping and cleaning. All that polishing with brasso. That was a lot of work for two little girls and all that work for two bob and they would give us lunch. Then I went to work on a cattle station at George's Creek. I looked after the children and washed and ironed, cleaned the floors, things like that. When I was working over there, Albert Dunn taught me how to trap rabbits. I would skin them, dry them out and send the pelts up to Armidale where they'd sell them for me.



Social dances were big

The social dances were a big thing. We'd go over to our cousin's place behind the Navana Park. My cousin lived there where the motel is now. Tom my cousin used to play the gumleaf. Laurie Kelly played the violin and our cousin Lance Whaddy played the mouth organ. Jim McGrath played the mouth organ too. They used to travel around performing and even went out west. Brady Duckett's parents, Henry and Emily Duckett, they used their house over in Bowraville too, they did their house up for the social dances, and we held them out there.

Opposite left: This tree is on the site of the house where Jessie was born on Stuart Island.

Opposite right: Jessie's mother and grandmother.

Above: Rabbit traps.

We did our bit for the war effort

We would ride down from George's Creek on horseback, right down to Bellbrook. Once a horse bolted with me and I had to throw myself off. I hurt my shoulder and my head. Once up there at George's Creek they had horse racing, that was to raise money; we wanted to raise money for the war effort, for the soldiers. There used to be all sorts of sport events to raise money for that cause.



Remembering how the river once was

We used to walk across there, under Grassy Bridge and they held swimming carnivals over there too. Our main swimmer was Jimmy Dotti. He won all the races. We ate eels and catfish from this river but that was before. The river isn't good any more and that's so sad.

Bullock teams would get the timber

They used to have these bullocks here on the island, for the timber, they'd go across there to get the timber with these huge teams. They'd swim them over from this island and we were frightened of them because of their long thorns. And wallabies, they'd go over to the main land and hunt them too. Auntie Phoebe said she used to go over there to get yams, over by that creek.

We should have been able to keep our little school

We all have strong feelings about this island and about our little school. First they wouldn't let us go to the white school so they built us our own. The first school in Nambucca had been up there on the hill near where



the RSL is today. But too many Aboriginal children were going up there, so that's when they decided we needed our own. So they built it for us and then they took it away! First they moved it up to the mission, where the pre school is today and then they took it away and moved it down to where the museum is down at the Heads (to be part of the museum). They should have left it on the mission and made it into something for Aboriginal people. They

should have made it into a place where we could hold workshops or teach the children to sing or something like that. I remember my cousin Phoebe, she went to that school and now she



is in her eighties. There was a teacher named Miss Higgins, and all the Buchanan's went there; there was a teacher named Hagen, so that was a long time ago. For all the years there were floods on this island, that little school never got damaged.

Above left: Jessie & Vilma at Jessie's house on Bellwood reserve.

Above right: The School, photo reproduced.

Above: The sign on the island.

Christine Kelly



I think everywhere I look here holds a memory. Even out at the Headlands and Swimming Creek. It doesn't matter where you go, there are memories.

I am a descendant of the Wiradjuri nation and am married to a Gumbayngirr man, I feel and believe that I have a connection to his traditional lands through him. I am employed at the Nambucca Heads Local Aboriginal Land Council as a Coordinator/Property Manager; I manage twenty five properties for the Land Council and nine others for an Aboriginal Corporation. I am currently Treasurer for the Giiguy Gamambi Preschool, Gumbayngerrii Aboriginal Corporation and the Chairperson of the Aboriginal Consultative Advisory Committee to the Nambucca Shire Council. I do feel that I am contributing to the welfare and well being of the community through my work.

My husband and I left the Nambucca Valley in 1991 and worked for the NSW Aboriginal Land Council for six years, we came back in 1997 and I have been working at the Land Council for the past three years. Through my position here I have had the opportunity to speak to women about different issues and we have compared stories like growing up in the City and their growing up in the country. The stories are similar like in Cootamundra (central west NSW), dad's family ate lots of rabbit and yabbies where here on the coast it was more a seafood diet of fish, oysters and cobra.

Things need to be told, I remember when visiting Cootamundra, my aunts would use a shaker bottle to water down the dirt floors, then sweep them with a switch broom. The floors were spotless, like concrete. There were army cots all in a row for the kids, they had old grey army blankets on them and the kids used to sleep head to toe. One aunty had fourteen children.

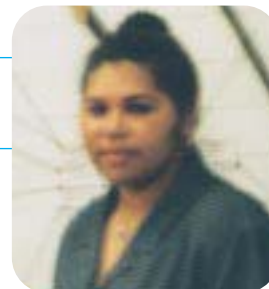
I'd like to think that this publication would somehow be seen as something for Reconciliation, we need to be working towards that as well as a treaty in some form.



Christine Kelly is Coordinator of the Nambucca Heads Aboriginal Land Council

Above: Welfare board blanket with welfare board label.

Virginia Jarrett



I participated in the Aboriginal Women of the coast project because I wanted to know what the elders had to say.

"I wanted to know about how they felt and continue to feel about the land here and I wanted to know what's important to them. I wanted to hear the knowledge that proves there is a history about the Aboriginal community here in the Nambucca, in the district and valley."

Virginia was the local Aboriginal collaborator for the project. We recorded the elder's stories together. Originally Virginia was going to explain her role, hopes and desires for the valley, but felt the publication should focus on the elders and their wealth of knowledge and experience.

Kath Schilling

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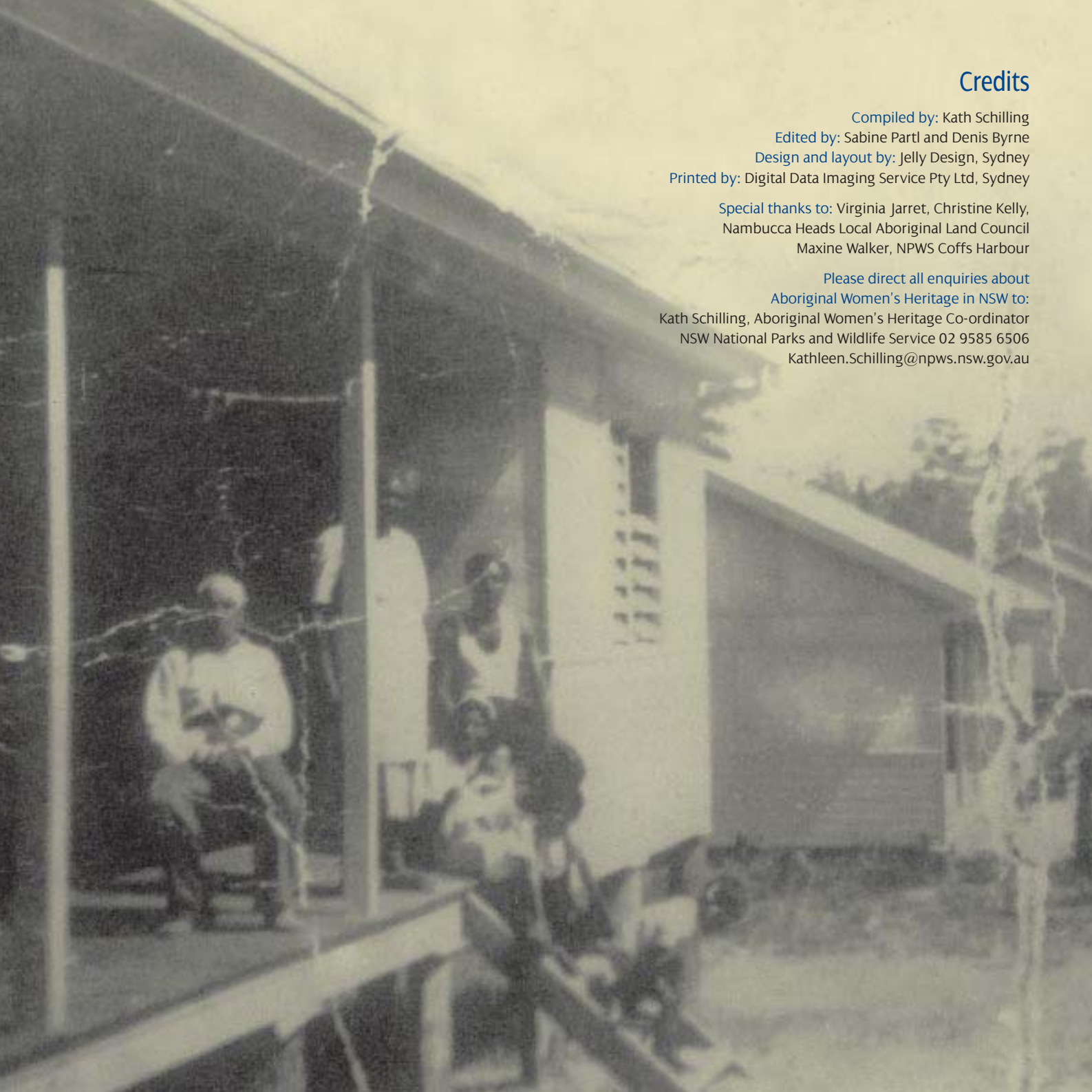
Maxine Walker, NPWS Coffs Harbour

Please direct all enquiries about
Aboriginal Women's Heritage in NSW to:

Kath Schilling, Aboriginal Women's Heritage Co-ordinator

NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service 02 9585 6506

Kathleen.Schilling@npws.nsw.gov.au





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