

# LEARNING



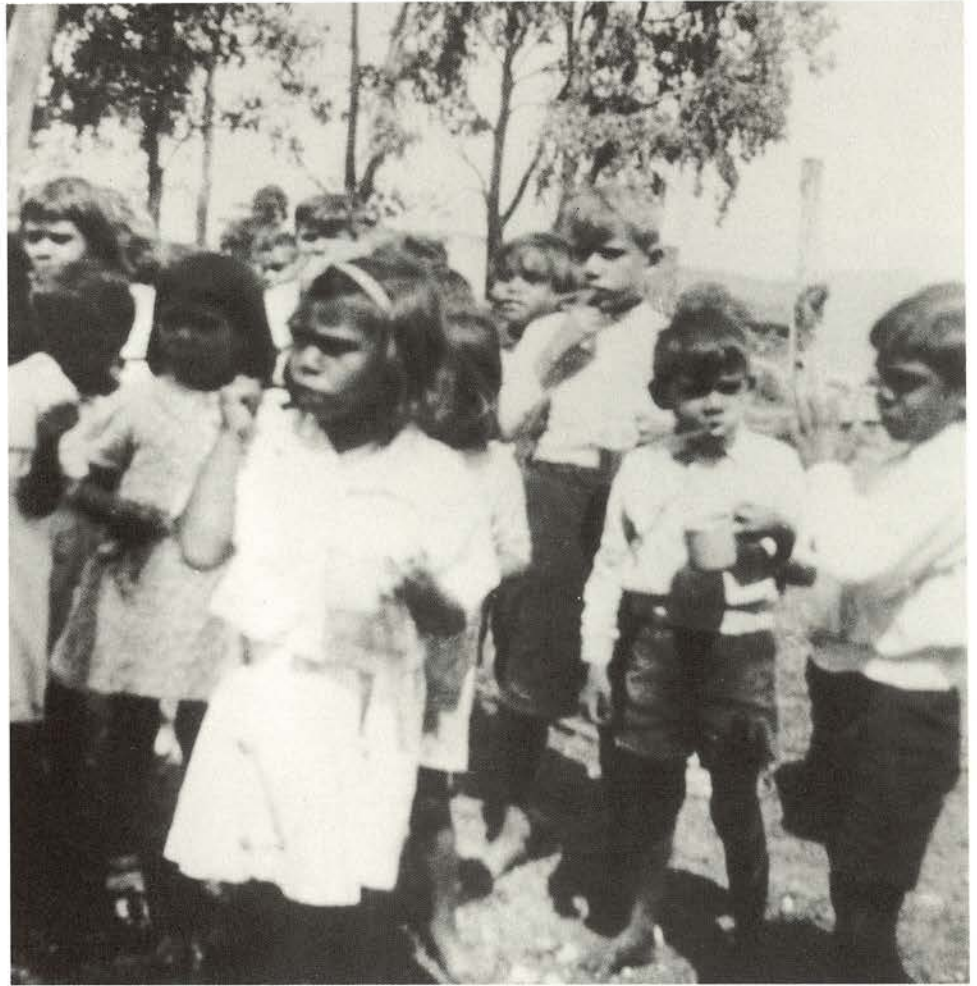
RAUKKAN SCHOOL, POINT McLEAY

*In 1938 Sophie Harrison was about six years old and had only been attending Raukkan School at Point Macleay, South Australia, for a short while. Sophie now lives in Adelaide, and here she talks to Doreen Kartinyeri about her school years.*

**M**Y MOTHER WAS SICK and I looked after her of course, waiting for her to die. I used to go to school in the afternoon. It was all arranged with the Education department, and yet I never failed in anything. I started when I was five. They had a rocking horse on the porch, and it was a privilege for new kids to ride that when you come in. Everybody had to look after that horse, dust it and shine it up and all. Nobody dare break it. It was lovely. When I started I went into Lower One first, but see you didn't do your full year if you proved yourself, they put you straight up into One.

The first thing we were taught when we went to school was discipline: what you had to do when you went into school, how to sit, stand up straight in assembly, and all that. Miss Marlow was our first teacher and Mr Lawrie was the headmaster. They taught us everything very well. They explained more to us. In some European schools they just put it in front of you and they'd expect you to pick it

*Schoolgirls at Raukkan School, Point Macleay. From left: Roma Rankine, Lorraine Carter, Harriet Walker and J. Rigney. Photograph by C. Hastwell, assistant teacher.*



*Toothbrush parade at  
Raukkan school. Photograph  
by C. Hastwell.*

up from there by yourself, whereas at Point McLeay they explained everything to you as you went along. If you didn't understand you'd have to ask and then they'd explain it all to you. The teachers really did their all for the Aboriginal children. Some of them started up plays and everything, concerts, that we never had before. And they had the amateur hours and everything going. We used to compete against other schools, singing and that, and of course we had all our sports. That was one thing Point McLeay was famous for, running and sports.

Your first day at school they issued you with a toothbrush and a mug and a bowl and things. Every day first thing before we went in we had our toothbrushes and toothpaste and we had to clean our teeth properly while the teacher watched. We was always cleaning our teeth. And we had a bowl each, where we had to wash our hands, and then they had to check our hands and fingernails and see if they were cut. They was very fussy about your hands being clean when you went into school—you dare not have any dirt under your fingernail or anything like that. And we had a thing where we had to hang our towels, with our names on it. Everybody had their own towels. At the end of the year we handed those things in, toothbrushes and that, and they were used for the next class next year. And we had the health sister, who used to come in and talk to us and check the kids out. Mr Lawrie was very strict about that, and if the kids was ill or anything, he made sure they saw the doctors.

In the classroom was the same system every week, although sometimes they changed it a bit. In the afternoons, Wednesday was drill, Thursdays cooking, Fridays singing. Mr Lawrie got you into that routine and that was the way he wanted it to be. Everybody, even the new ones coming up, had to do the drilling, everybody in the school was on parade. He was very strict with the singing, and put a ruler in your mouth to open it wide. Mrs Lawrie used to teach us to sew and cook. She wasn't a teacher, except for sewing and everything like that, like the domestic side of it. We were taught this in school so we could go out and work in white people's homes. It was a very good idea because even though you learnt domestic things in your own home white people have got different ideas. Also, the thing is in school it comes from the Education department, and that's where you get your marks. So when you're going into anything like that, and they ask you where did you get your training from, and see your school report and that, I think that was very good.

Most of the boys learnt weaving, carpentry and that, to help them when they left. They had some good carpenters and some terrific weavers there, they used to make those baskets and everything, and the carpenter work was marvellous, but none of them had the opportunity. And we used to do writing; I used to be good at it, but there were some fantastic writers in school. History, geography, we had everything. We started off with pencils for a little while, but then pens. We had to rule with our pen and everything. Even when you finished your sum you had to rule a line with your pen. We wasn't allowed to have rubbers or blotters or things like that. If you made a mistake you had to do it all over again. You could not rub it out. Mr Lawrie was very strict on that. We only had a certain amount of ink, and if you made a blot on your paper you were penalised. They used to issue us with pens and nibs and that, and that was part of whoever did the inkwells, to make sure you all had a new nib every morning. If you made a mistake or used too broad a nib bringing down, he checked that, and he was very strict.

That reminds me of different jobs we had. Inkwells—they had monitors on that. See different boys used to have that job, to wash them out, clean them and then fill them with fresh ink every day. Before school went in, as soon as Mr Lawrie came up, different girls used to have to go in every morning and do all the dusting,

*Junior girls at Raukkan school. From left: Thelma Rigney, Miriam Sumner, Sarah Karpany, June Wilton, Mavis Kartinyeri, Roma Rankine, Lorraine Carter, Harriet Walker, Jo Rigney, Rita Sumner, Phyllis Karpany, Flo Rankine, Edith Lovegrove, Bessie Gollan, Joan Gollan. Photograph by C. Hastwell.*



set up everything in school, and put all the things out ready. We had a roster. We were only young and we were taught all that.

If you done alright at school and got everything right, Mr Lawrie gave you a free ticket with a picture on it. That was to give you encouragement, you know for your work, and I think it was a good idea because every kid was fighting for it and there was a big improvement in everything. It was like a privilege to get a ticket, and you felt proud to be able to win one. At the end of the year you were presented with a gift, something that you'd fought for all the year, and it wasn't anything silly that they'd give you, it was something that you valued. I got a big cookery book which I valued.

Mr Lawrie had his punishments too. The boys used to get the cane and the girls used to get a ruler across the knuckles. There were three different sized canes you know, thick, medium and thin. He didn't use the big one, and he used the thin on the boys. He belted the boys often. For other things, we had to stand on the line for a punishment, or pick up stones. We had to throw all the stones in the heap because he hated to see loose stones around. If there was a stone out, and nobody picked it up and he saw that, that was a punishment too. And even if he saw any

## THE PERMIT STUNT

Wallaroo

June 29th 1938

*[To the Secretary,  
Aborigines Friends Association.]*

*Dear Friend,*

*You are aware what Mr. Smith said to me at Moonta. The day you good people interviewed me with reference to me taking my family to Point Pearce [mission], you will remember, He stated that I should go home & Live in my father's home & look after my poor mother, & Later on They would remove Mark Waters to another House, & give me the whole of the House of 4 Large rooms. I promised faithfully That I would go home as soon as my wife came out of the Wallaroo Hospital as you Know. Well a few days after you people Left Moonta, I got information from the mission to the effect That, when I go home, Jones the Superintendent intended to put the permit Stunt on me, that is to say that once I settled down at the Mission, I could not leave the mission without I get a written order from him to do so . . . I have also heard from people on the Mission That Jones is giving [away] my brothers Home . . . and my mother will have to get out of her house and get somewhere ever she can. Jones stating that he is in full charge of the Mission & he will do just as he pleases, & If I do go home I must live at the camp, Now you have it all in a Nut shell. That is Jones' Idea So I have Been informed but I am not going Back to the Mission to Be creued By Jones in that manner . . . now Sir I want to give you outline of what I intend to do should I go Back home. No 1 is that I will Be a man & do all in my power to gain the confidence of my senior officers Both at the mission and Adelaide No 2 I will in future mind my own Business & mine alone I don't think I can say anymore that That, I am fed up with living among the white class, I have had enough experience in that respect as you already Know and my earnest desire is That I should go home to my own people and the rest of my Life at home . . . [But] I wont go to live in a tent down By the Bushes as I have heard Anyhow I will leave it all to you Sir Trusting to hear from you at your earliest*

*I am*

*Yours respectfully*

broken sticks laying around, if you didn't pick them up and put them in the heap, he would make you go for about an hour, picking up all the sticks. Mr Lawrie had a good way of discipline. Another thing he didn't like was you sitting with your elbows up on the desk. He used to get a dish and make you sit with your elbows in it and sit up until you got tired. Same thing if you slumped on your desk when you was writing, he believed it would ruin your eyes, so you had to sit back. You had to sit right back and be up straight—if you didn't you'd get a finger in the back.

Then if Mr Lawrie caught you cheating you got punished for that. You'd have to write a thousand words and he'd tell you what you had to write. He caught me a couple of times. I'd give answers to the other girls, and of course I had to write that I should not do this. In the exams he'd sit me right around the corner from everybody else. Because he knew that they would ask me for the answers, see. He failed the other girl, but, 'I won't fail you', he said, 'you're just going to sit down and write now'. Two days it took me to do that. Another punishment was being kept in school, he would make you sit there until he told you to go. Or stand in the corner, that was a great one too. But he never shamed you if you were the dunce of the class. If you came top he'd give you your report, and tell you you'd topped the school, but he'd always say, everybody has done very well. He used to say 'there's some that didn't make it, but I believe they've done well'. I never heard him say that they were dunces.

He did not like anyone fighting in the schoolgrounds, so we used to do it outside. We used to belt some of the boys up and tie them up and put them under the boat down the lake. One used to cheek us in school, so we used to belt him up. We used to wait up in the wattle trees on the hill and jump down when he came. I used to be the first one down and flatten him see, and that's when the other girls used to flog him. He'd cry as soon as he seen us coming, because he knew he'd get a hiding. His brother used to try and help, but no good, we stoned him down. I got into trouble for that, and others got into trouble too. One was always taking things. I can remember him every day just about, getting the cane. But he couldn't help himself and we used to feel sorry for him most of the time. But then they came and took him away. Another boy got punished for throwing ink at one of the teachers, and he was always making smart remarks when he was spoken to. It would be hardly a day go past without him getting the cane. Oh, there was a few got into trouble. But even though Mr Lawrie was strict, the discipline worked out good in the end. Point McLeay was one of the places you could be proud to live in. For a mission school I think that it was very good. It had a lot to do with Mr Lawrie. One thing I will say about him, he wasn't there just for the money part, he was there to help the kids. He was a very strict teacher and he expected you to do the right thing. We wasn't there for the fun of it. But we never got the chance to go on to higher schools. Some of us could have made it but we never got the chance.





CHERBOURG

*Cecil Fisher of Brisbane was born in 1933 on the government reserve at Cherbourg, 200 kilometres north of Brisbane. Here, Cecil talks to Andrew Markus about Cherbourg.*

*Aboriginal children, 1938.*  
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IT WAS SET UP like a town. There were about fifty weatherboard houses, unpainted, with two or three bedrooms, a kitchen, dining room and a bit of a verandah, on about half an acre. There was also a little shanty town made out of tins—people made their own little houses while they were waiting for the other ones to get built. They were in the town area, right next to the houses. Where the streets ended the shanties started.

The old Aborigines like us lived half a mile away. We wanted to live there. I lived with my grandmother and her relatives. Cherbourg itself was on the Barambah Creek and it had a tributary called the Bralbion. We lived on the Bralbion. I suppose we classed it as our home. We got tin, dug holes, put framework up for the house and just nailed tin around it: tin roof, doors, just ground floor.

On the reserve they had several dormitories. They had a girls' dormitory that catered for orphans. If the parents died then the dormitory was there, but if other relations wanted the orphans they could take them. It was also for kids that nobody wanted. Perhaps their family split up, and the husband ran away, and the mother couldn't manage them or the kids couldn't cope with the mother or something, so they just went to this home. If the kid was playing up, and the parent couldn't handle it, they'd say do you want to put them in a dormitory for a couple of weeks. They had a boys' dormitory for the young boys, and a place for some of the bigger girls who left school and were still unmarried, and the babies' quarters, they called it, for the women that never got married but had babies.

I was told that some of the fairer kids were taken off the missions early and sent to places like the Salvation Army. A couple told me that their elder brothers were taken away because the government did not want to rear the fairer kids with the black ones. To the white people it looked too obvious to see this white kid running around with the black kids; it was obvious that their father was white, and to hide their shame they took them away and put them in the Salvation Army homes or whatever. They wouldn't let them go back, hoping that they wouldn't remember who the parents were and everything. Then there wouldn't be the slur of the white man going around sleeping with the black women.

They had an old men's quarters; they never had old women's quarters. Old women stayed at the babies' quarters or the girls' dormitory. The girls' home had

a six to eight foot fence around it, the top three feet was barbed wire like a prison camp, I suppose to keep the girls from sneaking out and the young fellers from sneaking in. After six o'clock or something like that, I don't know exactly what time, they used to lock the big gate and you couldn't go in. I was led to believe that you couldn't come out either, and they locked the dormitory itself, but I don't know, I never got past the fence.

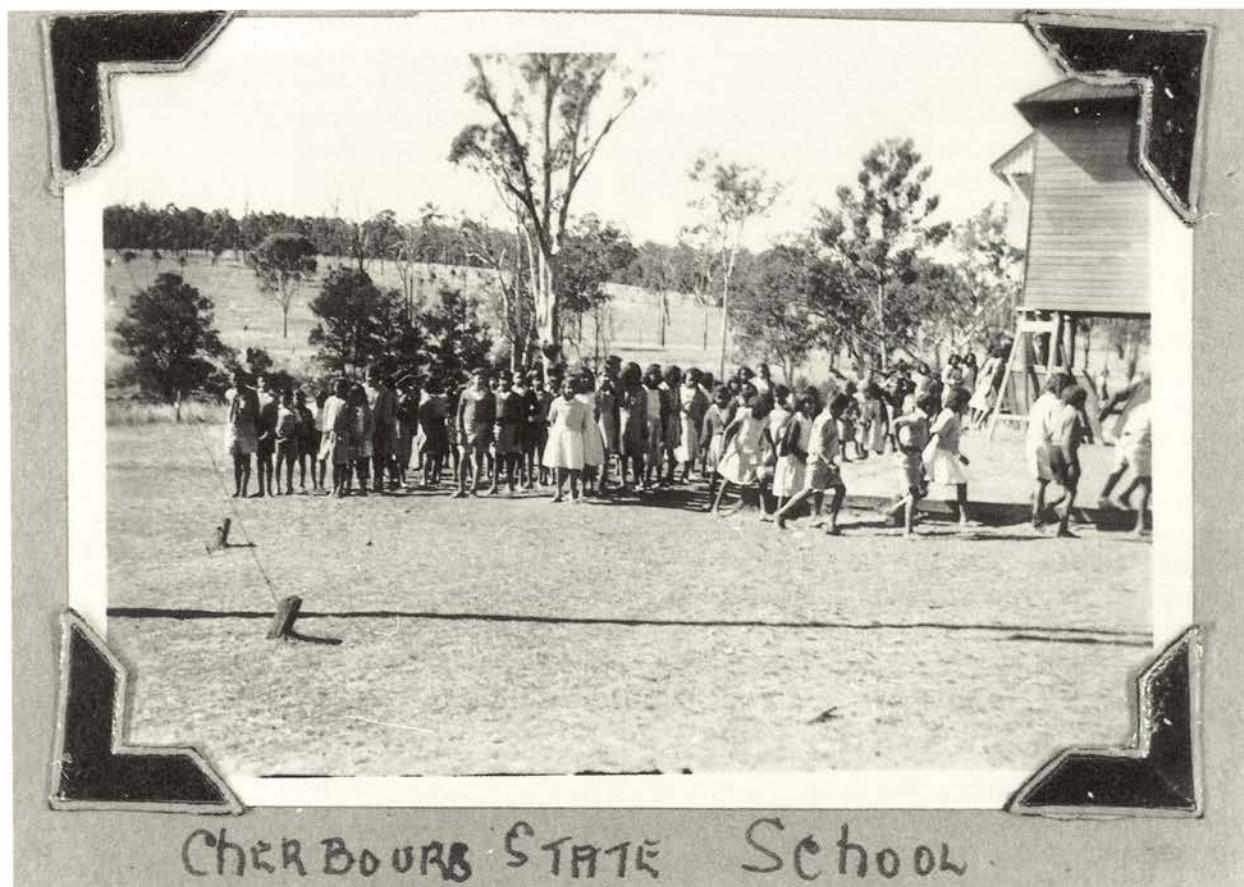
There was a men's and women's gaol. The women's gaol was inside the fenced-in area, separate from the dormitory but inside the yard. The men's gaol was over next to the butcher's shop. Someone who didn't want to work or who had been in a fight would be put in gaol, and you could be gaoled for kidding around or going in to Murgon. I was locked up for the night when I was about nine years old because I was sneaking in to a circus in Murgon. You had to go and ask for a permit—one of the white people at the office would write them out or one of the black overseers—but when we asked to go to the circus they said no, no-one was allowed to go. They said it was quarantined or something, I don't know why. So two or three of us just decided to walk in and we were about two or three miles along the road and along came the black policeman on a horse, and took us back and put us in gaol.

There weren't any white police on the missions, just the superintendent and the black cops. There were about six black police, I suppose, but it was a big joke because there were no tests you had to go to, they just came around and said 'You want a job, alright you can be a policeman', and they gave you a police uniform. You might be a policeman for two or three weeks, then you say 'Oh, bugger it, I'm finished', so you just didn't go, and you weren't a policeman. Or you could fall out with somebody, and they take your uniform, you wasn't a policeman no more.

I never had much to do with superintendents. I was scared of them because they were white, and they were bosses, and they could gaol you if they wanted to, and they could flog you or give you a hiding or take you away from your parents. They had powers to separate a family. The only time you saw them was during the office hours, or when they walked around the mission inspecting the jobs. They'd go to the dormitories or the butcher shop now and again, to make sure everything was functioning. They had a town area all of their own, separate from the Aboriginal area but still in Cherbourg. They had their gardens and work done for them for nothing, they had cooks sent down from the dormitory to cook for them, they had housemaids, everything they wanted, like tin gods. They had all the privileges; they could do what they liked. I suppose you looked at them with awe. They were like a boogiemanager, I suppose, or a little god.

I was caught for throwing about twenty or thirty .303 bullets into the fire one night at the boys' dormitory, and I was called before the superintendent and he gave me a hiding. But he was a soft old guy, Semple. As soon as you'd see him coming you'd cry. If we cried from the first hit he gave you two or three, but if you didn't cry he'd whale into you. We had him worked out. We knew if you wanted to be tough he'd keep whacking, but if at the first you started wailing, about two or three hits and he'd knock off. You'd learn from the other kids.

From the time I could remember, when I was about four or five, grandmother used to take us up to get rations. You'd queue at the window, you'd say your householder's name, Esme Fisher, and how many people you were catering for, and they'd issue food for the amount of people. They had a butcher shop just to get your meat, and they had a big barn thing, and in it they had flour, sugar, sago, rice, tea, all the things you needed to survive. You walked in with about six to eight bags and you'd work out how much you wanted. The government would supply the food. They'd have Aborigines there serving out, with a book with the names



*Cherbourg State School,  
c1938.*

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on it, and they say, 'so-and-so', and cross the name off and give you your issue. Then you'd go to the next window and you'd end up with your rations. There used to be treacle or syrup, treacle I think it was, in 44-gallon tins, and they'd issue it out to everybody who wanted it. You'd take a bucket or tin or whatever, you fill it up or they'll fill it for you, as much as you liked.

Nobody worried about the weight because the government never taught the Aborigines these things. You always seemed to get enough, and if you ran out you could always ask your neighbour. Someone always had some left over. On Monday it would be open again, and you'd just tell them that last week they never gave you enough. So they'd put in a bit extra, and say, we must have made a mistake. You never went hungry, the tucker was always there. It wasn't luxury, but at least you always had plenty to eat. We weren't taught to economise or anything like that. The government never taught the Aborigines the value of money, or saving, or voting, or all that business, because they couldn't see any reason to, and didn't think that the Aborigines' brains could function as well as the white people's. Perhaps they thought the Aboriginal people would die out, I don't know. Money had no value to us because everything was free, even smokes and clothing. I think every three months you got free clothes, free boots—they were always handed out. Money was only for luxury to go and see a movie or something in Murgon, or buy fruit or whatever. When the fruit man came out he sold lollies and that.

I had a swim every morning, summer or winter. There were no taps, we had to carry our water up and down about a hundred yards to the creek. After swimming we got dressed and ran to school. Every day you lined up in the morning and they



inspected you to make sure you were clean. I used to run home for dinner. We used to live half a mile from the school. We had one hour for dinner, gulped down a cup of tea and a bit of bread, whatever, and ran back to school, just in time for the bell. A lot of kids took dinner, but I went home every day, never missed. None of my family bothered about lunch at school.

There was prep 1, prep 2, prep 3, then grade 1, grade 2 which they sectioned into two, grade 2A and grade 2B. Why grade 2A and 2B? Because they thought the Aborigines couldn't pick up one year's schooling as quickly as the white people, they didn't think the Aborigines' brains or minds could function the same as the whites, or they didn't think there was any reason to give them a first class education, so they made us go through grade 2 twice, and grade 3A and 3B, twice again, and then fourth grade. One day a week they took us to manual training, and taught us the basics of woodwork or leatherwork or tin-smithing or whatever. By the time we reached fourth grade we were about fourteen years old and there was no further to go. Once you got to fourth grade you had to leave school, you couldn't do anything else, you had to go to work.

Everyday after school we went home and played games kids play, in our case we used to get horses or play cricket or marbles. I had my own horse. We were allowed to run our horses on the reserve, but my family had about six or eight of them. In the night time we used to go hunting for possum and we always had a couple of kangaroo dogs. They call them greyhounds now. We never had them for racing or anything, we just had them for sport and play. We used to take the dogs and chase hares and kangaroos on the weekends, it was something to do, it was just like a sport. Of course we ate the meat. We would go with my uncles or by ourselves, go out with my grandmother for a week when school broke up, go fishing or whatever on weekends, go for a couple of days up the creek about four or five miles. The local farmers were pretty good, they knew we were coming up there, they never worried. You didn't need a permit if you were going bush, only if you were going into town.

They didn't teach us the tribal ways. I would say they were detribalised before I was born. Even though my grandmother came from near Burketown, as far as I know she never discussed it. As far as I was concerned Cherbourg was my land, it has always been my land, and I still class it as my place, but none of the tribal customs were ever practised. I saw five or six people with the scars on them, tribal marks and things, even my old grandfather had tribal marks on him, but he never practised; he never taught us language, never spoke about his tribal days. Perhaps before I was born he might have been told not to talk about it, I don't really know. Perhaps it was too far back, or too long away.

The tribal people were just the same as everybody else, more or less happy to be in Cherbourg. Most people who came there were from different tribes, possibly ten or twelve or more, I don't know exactly. They were pushed into a community; they weren't doing their own thing, and weren't sure of the ones next door, and probably didn't know one another's language or whatever. But they all knew English, so everyone just spoke English, and languages died out. There weren't any tribal clashes. There were fights: two women might have a fight, or two kids, or two men or whatever, but not tribal. By that time everybody went to school with everybody, everybody was related to everybody, intermarried. We did have corroborees, once a week, Friday or Saturday, twice a week sometimes, then it all died out, just like that. The older people died, or whatever, and it all went.

We used to be allowed to go to the Murgon Show. You weren't worried about the white people, you worried about having a good time. Still you were always a bit touchy if they growled at you; you'd walk away, you wouldn't answer or

## AN ORDINARY AUSTRALIAN

30-11-37  
Robe S.E.

Mr. Sexton,

*Being a half Caste fisherman of Robe I had very much pleasure of reading the paragraph in the news 20-11-37 of aboriginals such as my self being classed Australian natives I myself was born in the year 1870 & at the age of 45 years 1915 I enlisted myself to serve King & Country I served 3 years & was wounded & gassed & invalided home in 1915 [1918]. Now I humbly plead to you & others who take such interest in us unfortunates to give me my right to be classed as an ordinary Australian citizen, with Australian rights. Foreners such as Italiants ect. can live here for a certain term & be naturalized & have Australian rights: so why can't I who have been classed good enough to fight for my King and Country have these same privilages instead of being classed as just an ordinary Abo.*

anything because they'd report you to the superintendent. They were sort of gods; you were led to believe they were superior to you so you weren't sure how to treat them when you were away.

When you were a kid, brought up within your family, you didn't notice differences between people. Everyone was the same; you didn't think the world was different anywhere except for the houses. You noticed when you got older. When you went to a neighbouring station the white fellers would eat with the other ringers [cattle station hands], and we had to eat at the woodheap or with the blackfellers. At the movies the blackfellers had to sit down the front, all the white people at the back. It was discrimination.





## CUMMEROOGUNJA

*Merle Jackomos of Melbourne was born in 1929 at Cummeroogunja, a government reserve on the Murray River. Merle recalls her life at Cummeroogunja as she talks to her husband Alick.*

CUMMEROOGUNJA is Yota Yota for 'our home' and that is what it was to me for many years. It was a government reserve, although we called it a mission, on the New South Wales side of the Murray River about thirty kilometres up from Echuca, on Yota Yota land. I was born there in 1929. My father, Michael Morgan, was the youngest of a large family. His father, Bagot Morgan, grew up on Maloga mission. Bagot's mother was full blood and his father was white, but like many half-caste children my grandfather never got to know his father and he was reared by his mother's tribe, the Yota Yota. Bagot Morgan would make artefacts and boomerangs by hand from the elbows and roots of trees. He would rasp them down with a piece of glass.

*Merle Morgan (Jackomos) in 1938.*

My mother, Maud, was the only child of Tim and Rachel Ross. My grandfather Tim Ross, whom I adored, came from Framlingham mission near Warrnambool, and my grandmother Rachel was the daughter of Lizzie Barber, nee Atkinson. Granny Lizzie was the daughter of Granny Kitty, a full blood. Granny Lizzie and others her age could speak the Yota Yota language, but when she died the language was heard no more. She was to play a big part in my life, for when my mother passed away in 1936 my great-grandmother Lizzie moved from her little house on the Victorian side to live with my brothers and sister on Cummera.

The little house where I was brought into the world by an old Aboriginal midwife, Aunty Florrie Walker, was a four-room weatherboard. It had two bedrooms, a living room and a kitchen. I often wonder how we all managed to live in that little house. There was Granny, her two sons and one daughter, my four brothers and myself. My grandfather Tim lived in a small hut in our yard, much loved by all his grandchildren. My sister Elizabeth lived at the mission hospital with the two nursing sisters. My father stayed with his sister Lydia, whose house was nearby. There were times when he would miss his family at Framlingham and leave for short visits there. He spent most of his time away from the mission for he was a good shearer and was always in demand by the local white farmers. Some of the men worked on Cummera but most were gun shearers and worked on neighbouring sheep stations. Others worked in the Barmah forest.

During my childhood Cummeroogunja was a community of 250 people under the control of a manager. We were a close community, with many families being

closely related—everybody was called uncle and aunty. The settlement was like a small town. It had three streets with 46 cottages, including some of the original homes that were moved from Maloga in 1888. Every house had its own garden and fruit trees. There was a church, school, dispensary, hall and a hospital built by the government in 1934. The doctors from nearby towns used to visit the hospital on certain days, and we children used to go from the school of a morning to have hot cocoa and to get doses of hypol in winter.

Our school had two rooms: first to third grade were in one room and fourth to sixth grade were in the other. That was the limit of our education. The schoolteachers were Mr and Mrs Austin. They were a very kind couple and took a special interest in my sister and I, probably because we had lost our mother. Mrs Austin taught the girls to knit and sew and the boys learnt woodwork. Each morning Mr Austin used to make us do exercises before class began. We used to get the cane across our hands if we failed to do them. Every day after school my friend Midge Walsh and I would go voluntarily to the manager's house and help with the chores. Aunty Sophie Briggs was the cook and she would reward us with cakes and buns.

The manager's wife used to visit the houses once a week. She would check the food cupboard and check the bed and look in all the rooms. But everyone on the mission was very houseproud. Most of the people had lovely gardens. Even though most of us were very poor, we were always happy and we cared for one another.

Growing up on Cummeroogunja provided good times and bad. After school the girls would play skipping, also rounders, which is similar to softball. The boys played football, marbles and cricket. Hide-and-seek was a popular game as was hopscotch. Of a morning the children used to go into the paddocks and gather bark from the trees to start the fires in the wood stoves and open fireplaces. During the season we would also go mushrooming, walking miles to gather them. Then we would all share them among the people. We were never lonely or bored. There was always something to do and always lots of mates to play with. Of an evening the older folk would relate the history of Cummeroogunja, of the white men and how they first met them so long ago along the Murray. They showed us the sacred areas and the canoe trees in the forest. Cummera was home. My grandparents, parents, brother and sister are buried there. It means so much to me because my roots are in that land, the land that is ours, the Yota Yota heritage that extends back into time immemorial.

There were good times playing along the river Murray. We were all good swimmers and during the summer months, apart from attending school, we swam and swam all day. The river was abundant with fish, turtles, yabbies, swan, duck eggs and freshwater mussels. This supplemented the basic rations provided by the manager, which included tea, meat, milk, sugar, jam, salt, and flour and baking soda for making bread. Cummera had its own cattle. The cows were milked every day and the milk was distributed to the families. The people loved bush tucker and when possible the men would hunt kangaroos, rabbits and hares and gather wild honey. Many times we children would accompany the menfolk into the forest to watch them smoke the bees away from the hive so they could gather the honey. Rabbits used to be our main meat dish. The men would go trapping for days at a time. Then the skins would be stretched on wire and left to dry for a couple of weeks, when they would sell them. Fox skins would bring more money, so there would be much excitement whenever one was trapped. The skins had a horrible odour about them, but once they dried out it was alright. The meat was never eaten; they were always skinned before the men brought them home.

All of us young ones would walk to Barmah town, about two miles away, to



*Alma Charles (left) and  
Merle Morgan (Jackomos)  
(right).*

MERLE JACKOMOS

collect the mail and buy extra groceries, and also to play on the punt. That's if we were lucky enough to have any money. My brothers and I used to collect bottles to sell in a billycart made of a wooden box with pram wheels. There was one Aboriginal-owned shop on Cummera, that of Granny Nelson, which sold drinks, lollies and other small items. Only three families had motor cars; others, including my grandfather, had a horse and jinker. Those without transport depended on friends. Sometimes the red mission truck would go to Echuca and we would all travel on the back tray. The truck would return to Cummera, but on occasions we

would stay for the pictures and then walk home along the short road following the river.

Many social activities were held at Cummera, including regular dances where the women wore evening gowns, concerts and an annual procession with floats. Many white people from surrounding districts would attend the functions. Uncle Eddie Atkinson, who was in charge of the concert party, had a trailer with seats attached to his car. Some would sit in the car and the rest of us, plus the organ that Auntie Helen played, would ride in the trailer. One wonders what would have happened if the towbar had broken.

There were the bad times, too. I had to go to school barefooted in winter, and I wasn't the only one. When our rations ran out all we had to eat was bread and fat. All my clothes were second-hand. Mrs Payne, a pastor's wife from Echuca, used to bring parcels of old clothes to the people whenever she came to Cummera to take part in church services. There used to be a scramble for the parcels and whenever I did get a new dress I thought it was Christmas. And during my childhood the policy was to remove girls forcibly from the reserve and take them to Cootamundra Girls Home where they would be trained as domestics and apprenticed out to work for white people. I remember the Welfare coming to Cummera and taking the girls away. They never returned.

Church services were held regularly. We had our own Aboriginal pastor, Uncle Eddie Atkinson, and Pastor William Payne from Echuca would visit. Both were Church of Christ. The people had beautiful voices and the Cummeroogunja choir became famous around the countryside.

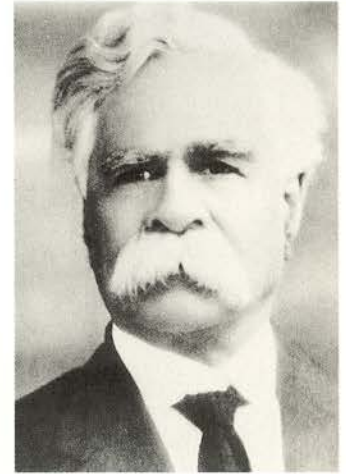
Across the river was a thriving community of some 150 people who had previously lived at Cummera. These people preferred not to live on a government reserve. There were three standard cottages, but all the other families lived in tin huts they had erected themselves, with earth floors and walls lined with newspaper and whitewashed. Although the huts were humble they were spotless. This community had its own Australian Inland Mission church, and three missionaries, Miss Presnell and brother and sister Mr and Miss Galter, lived in a small cottage next to the church. Many of the families living on Cummera would attend the Inland Mission church services by rowing across the river, although the missionaries would also hold services at Cummera. Most families on both sides of the river had their own boat. If not, someone would row them across. There was no bridge across the Murray, only a punt pulled by a hand winch, but it would stop at 9 pm nightly, and sometimes it was out of order. Sometimes people crossed to the Victorian side to live. As they moved off the manager had their houses pulled down.



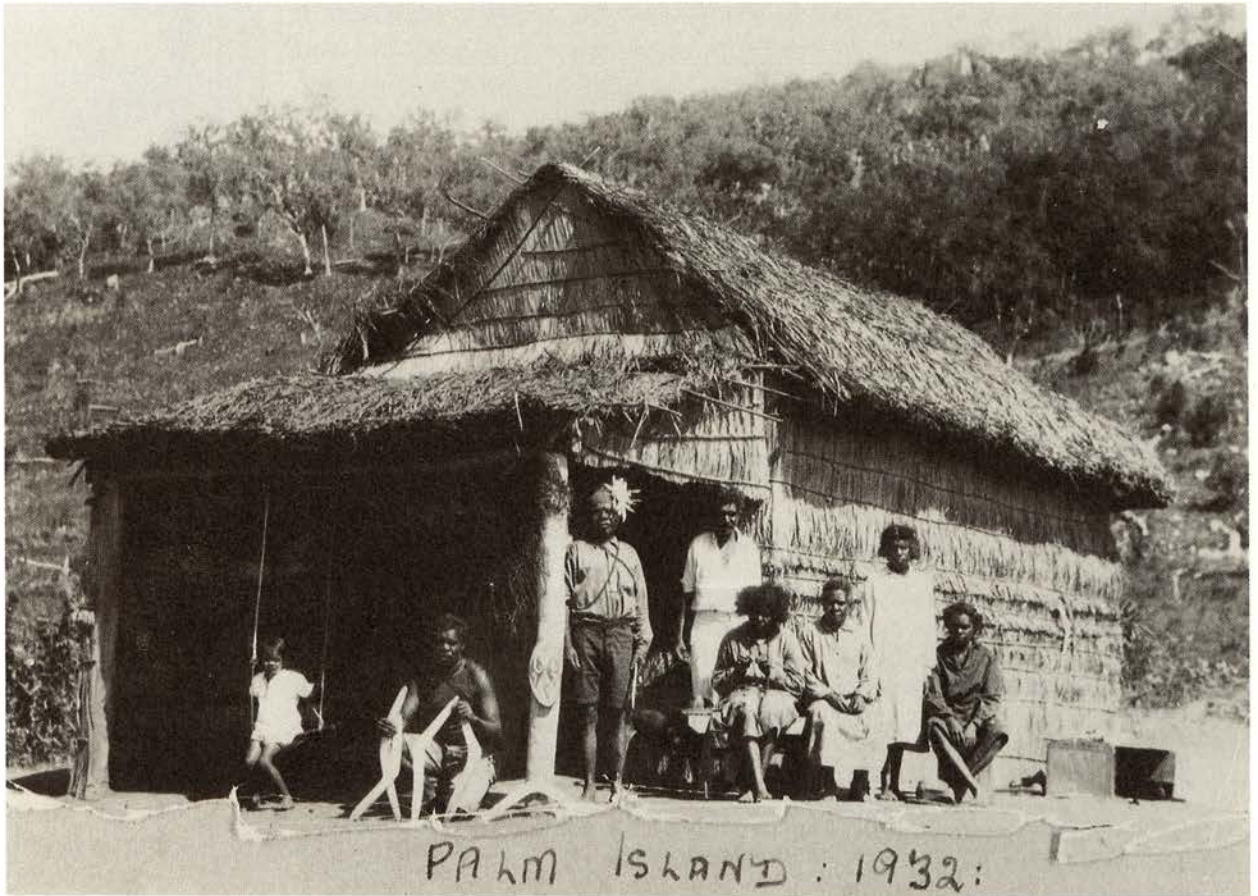
### 'A FAIR DEAL FOR THE DARK RACE'

1. The manager and the matron call all the married women only by their christian names . . .
2. Natives are not allowed under any circumstances to travel in the cab of the station truck. This rule is never varied, no matter what the weather, even with convalescents returning from the hospital . . .
3. The houses near the river do not get sanitary clearances though they are but a short distance from the centre of the township. The occupants bury the nightsoil. When the River rises over the land this nightsoil is disturbed and the water of the river is polluted.
4. The meat issued to the natives is from sheep so badly conditioned as to [be] fit only for boiling down. The carcasses average only 20 to 25 lbs in weight. The meat is secured from the Echuca Freezer and is starving stock. It is unfit for human consumption and much is thrown to the dogs.
5. Many of those to whom clothing was issued under previous administrations do not now receive it . . .
6. The manner of Mrs. McQuiggan to the women is most offensive. She goes to the homes when she likes and says what she likes. If things don't suit her she bounces the women. If they pick her up for the way she speaks the rations are stopped or, if they are old people, their curry and pepper are stopped.

Six of the ten complaints which William Cooper, secretary of the Australian Aborigines' League, made in November 1938 to the chairman of the Aborigines' Protection Board of New South Wales on behalf of Cummeroogunja residents. The letter was ignored, but the names of residents who had signed a petition supporting the complaints were posted at Cummeroogunja and they were invited to withdraw. Instead many crossed to Murray to Barmah in Victoria. On 20 February 1939 Cooper wrote to the premier of New South Wales about Cummeroogunja, asking again that the grievances be investigated, stating that the manager went about with a rifle, and pointing out that six adults and seventeen children had died on the reserve in recent months [from a population of 250]. 'We are not an enemy people, and we are not in Nazi concentration camps', he said, 'Why should we then be treated as though we were?'. This letter was also ignored.



*William Cooper.*



*House on Palm Island, 1932. Built of plaited coconut fronds, probably by Jack Madigan, an island leader, it was just behind St Anne's Mission in 'Madigan's Camp'.*

AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE OF ABORIGINAL STUDIES