



Aunty Fay Carter

I was born on the first of January 1935. My mother was living on Cummeragunja mission when I was born. In those days most of the babies were brought into the world by the old Aunties on the mission, but if there were any medical problems they were taken to the Echuca Hospital. My mum did have some medical problems in her pregnancy with me, so they took her into the hospital. But in those days they didn't take the Aboriginal women into the wards with the non-Aboriginal women, so I was born on the verandah of the Echuca Hospital.

When I was about 16 I started working at the hospital, and my mum was working there as well. And I can remember the day I started, she said "Fifi, come along and I'll show you a special place". And she took me to that verandah. She said "That's where you were born, right there". I got a shock, and I said, "What, out here on the verandah?". And she said, "Yeah!". She didn't think there was anything wrong with that, she thought that was okay. In those days they just accepted the way they were treated, and it was just part of their life.

But by then, at that age, I was very much aware of discrimination against our people.

My mother was Iris Bereniecc Nelson, then she was Johnson and then she was Atkinson. She was born in 1913. She was 22 when I was born in 1935. When my daughter Wendy was born I called her Wendy Bereniecc after my mother, but we never took much notice where that word came from. We found out later that Bereniecc is a Dja Dja Wurrung word that means "little birds drinking water out of a fork in a tree". When my mother's father named her that he was using language, so he passed that language name down in sort of a secret way.

My mum was married to a non-Aboriginal man, Albert Johnson, and she had my eldest brother Dimpsey, who's passed now, and me. They separated while mummy was pregnant with me, and she was living on the Cummeragunja mission when I was born. I don't know how they separated or why, or where he went to. I didn't meet my Dad till I was about 14 or 15 when Nanny brought Dimpsey and me down to Melbourne to meet him, but we never connected. After I was born my mum married an Aboriginal man, Clive Atkinson, and they had five more children - Clive, Wayne, Marlene, Veronica and Graham.

I was only four when they moved off Cummeragunja. But hearing the old people talk about it, they just loved that place. It was like a mother to them. As a matter of fact, when my mum used to talk about Cummera, you'd swear she was talking about a human being! She used to talk about Cummera like it was a mother. "Oh, poor old Cummera. Oh, she was lovely, Cummera was". The place, not the treatment. The place, and the community feeling, that's what she missed.

I really don't remember actually living on Cummera, but I remember going there quite often. We'd go there for funerals. In those days they used to keep the body in the home and people could sit there day and night with them. I remember quite often going to those scenes, and the grief that was shown in those days was so outpouring. I remember the wailing, and the relief of releasing that. Even to the point of having the branches and feeling a bit of pain, bringing the pain out. You see people today at funerals and it's almost like they don't want people to see them crying.

Our people walked off Cummeragunja because of the way they were treated. They weren't allowed to practice any of their culture, weren't allowed to speak their language, and they were penalized if they were caught by reducing their rations or taking things off them that they valued.

They were forced to believe that practicing culture was a sinful thing. They were told, "You've got to read the bible, you've got to practice the white man's religion, all that other stuff's just pagan stuff". As a result of that, my grandmother was very religious - she'd almost walk around with the Bible under her arm. A lot of the old people of her age were like that. I think it was easy for our people to adopt the white man's religion, because they were already very spiritual people.

I actually believe our people were taught to be welfare recipients on the missions. Taught to be dependent - ring the bell, line up for your rations. The conditions on the missions were so welfare oriented and destructive to their culture.

Most of the people that moved off Cummera camped across the Barmah side of the river to start with. I think they were more or less choofed from there, trying to force them to go back, but they kept going to the Flats.



A B

A: The Nelson family at Cummeragunja, circa 1914. Back row L-R (two girls standing) Margaret Nelson and Priscilla Nelson (nee James). Front row L-R: Bill Onus, Granny Maggie Nelson, on her lap is Iris Atkinson (nee Nelson), Ruby Near (nee Muir), George Nelson, Grandpa Henry Harmony Nelson.

B: Henry Harmony Nelson at the age of around ten, at Coranderrk c.1865.

A

A: Auntie Fay with Auntie Nora Charles (nee Nicholls) in 1980.



We used to hear little stories of the mission. An Uncle was like the scout on the mission, he'd ride his horse around and look for any problems or danger.

B

B: Auntie Fay with Uncle Sir Doug Nicholls at a NAIDOC function during the early 1980s.

The Flats is down off the highway between Mooroopna and Shepparton. They built houses out of makeshift materials, cutting down the small, straight trees for the frames of the houses, sewing hessian bags together for the walls, flattening out old kerosene tins for the roofs and the chimneys. They built really solid houses.

Mostly they were dirt floors. I can remember an Aunt who had a dirt floor that she used to scrub with sand soap and a scrubbing brush, and she scrubbed it so much that it was set like concrete!

Across the highway from the Flat was Daisch's paddock. It was a tip. Our people used to be over there quite often, picking up different things that they could make workable, chairs and frames of cupboards and things like that.

One time an old Aunt and Nanny went over there to Daisch's paddock to the tip, and they came back with a big role of old lino! They dragged it between them, across from Daisch's paddock, across the highway, down to the Flats. Which is a fair hike! And I can see them now, rolling out that old lino and cutting it in half with a knife, and they took half each. Nanny laid her half on the dirt in her main room of the camp, and Auntie did the same with her piece. And, oh they thought they were so flash with this lino! People from the other camps used to come and say, "Oh, look at this! Isn't that great?".

People referred to them as humpies, but they were real homes. Nanny used to cut doilies out of newspaper, and put them along the shelf and on the table! And she'd pick the fresh baby gum leaves and put them in milk bottles of water around the place. The outside loo was just a hole in the ground with a seat on top, but Nanny used to cut the newspapers up into squares and thread them with a packing needle onto string, and hang them in the loo for us to use.

Our people were very clean, too. Of a morning, my grandmother used to disinfect. She'd pour out the phenyle into water, and the water would go white and milky. And she'd go and splash all around the camp on the ground. And then she used to make brooms out of the gum leaf branches, and then she'd sweep all around. That's how clean they were. Sometimes I can still smell it, that disinfectant!

People talk about how our cultural practices haven't been passed on to us properly, but one of the things that has been passed down, and I believe we've maintained very strongly, is the value of family and extended family and community. I believe the extended family networks that we had in my days growing up were what helped us survive. It's because we really cared about one another, and we really shared what we had. Without question. I can remember kids running to different places and, "Mummy wants a cup of sugar", or "Nanny wants some flour". And it was just given, not expecting to get it back. It was just given.

All the Aunties around mummy's age and my grandmother's age were wonderful old cooks – they learnt from being farmed out to non-Aboriginal properties. Nanny was a fantastic cook. She'd send us up the street to get her two shillings worth of "pieces", which was offcuts of meat and bones from the butcher. So we'd get a big bag of pieces and she'd cook that up and make a meal out of it, of soup or stew or curry. Or damper and fat! I remember when we came home from school if we were hungry, that's what we had to fill our bellies until supper time, was a piece of damper with fat and pepper and salt on it!

I remember my grandfather Papa MacKray, Nanny's second husband, was a great shearer. He'd be out at the sheds for three or four weeks shearing, and he'd bring a sheep home and kill it. And there wasn't a thing on that sheep that he did not use, apart from the hoofs maybe. He'd skin it and hang the skin out on the suckers to dry and then sell it. And he'd cut the sheep up and we'd eat everything on it. All the offal, we used to have curly guts fried up, the tripe, everything.

I started school at Mooroopna State School. It was a good walk from the Flats to the state school, but it was walkable. School was good in that all the kids stuck together, we didn't feel isolated like some Aboriginal kids do today. We had that sense of togetherness, all going to the school together and giving support to one another. Hyllus Maris was our protector – if anything went wrong at the school or if we were upset about something, we'd go to Hyllus and she'd fix it for us, she'd solve it, she'd do something about it for us. Having all the kids together was a real support, because in those days there was so much discrimination against our people.

We used to be called dirty blacks, that was the name for us. Dirty blacks from down the Flats. Now, I'm a real cleaner – over the top sometimes! And I think psychologically it goes back to my childhood. Nobody is ever going to call me a dirty black again.

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I can remember very clearly going shopping with Nanny and some of the old Aunties, and our people were made to stand along the wall, to be called forward to be served when there were no non-Aboriginal people left in the shop. And even if they were serving one of our people and a non-Aboriginal person walked in, they'd stop serving them to serve that non-Aboriginal person. The same thing would happen in the hospitals, the doctors, the dentist, whatever. They were always treated as second class, second rate people that had to wait. Had to wait to be served, had to keep their place.

The old people never used to talk to us about cultural business. They talked fluently amongst themselves, just not in front of us kids. I can remember coming across a couple of the old people, like my Nanny with Auntie Teresa. They quietly talked in language to one another, but we'd be choofed away. It was because they felt as though, for the young people to survive, they had to practice the white man's way. They were made to feel that they weren't going to get anywhere by practicing culture. I think they were protecting the young people against being penalized, like they were penalized. I think if we'd asked Nanny about cultural business then, she'd have told us to mind our own business! They were so protective of us.

They would drop words sometimes though. "Dhomanyini-yalga", that's one word that they used quite often, openly, to greet you. It means my dear, or precious, or darling child. "Djitiga" is meat, or then they'd say things like "no batjelan", "no money". So you picked up language with them just dropping things like that. And you never seem to have forgotten those words.

We've got a tape of my grandmother speaking her language, but she never spoke her language to us. She speaks differently when she's speaking language on the tape. When she was talking English she'd be real bossy, but then when I hear her speak the language it's just this different way of saying the words. It was beautiful and soft, it touches you.

A writer interviewed some of the old people some years back to try to extract some of their cultural knowledge. And my grandmother told a story that had never been passed on to us – I don't think it had even been passed on to my mother. She told this story about how the children at Cummeragunja used to beat the possum skin drums when the old people would go into the bush to have a ceremony. And then the missionaries wouldn't let them make the possum skin drums, so the kids used to get pillows and roll them up real tight and put them between their legs, and they'd beat the pillows.

We used to hear little stories of the mission. An Uncle was like the scout on the mission, he'd ride his horse around and look for any problems or danger. The old people always said, "Uncle used to watch for the welfare, the big black car". If he saw the welfare coming, he'd ride his horse through the mission and call out, "barramandain coming, barramandain coming", that means the police, the welfare. And then the kids would run, and they'd swim the children across the river and hide them.

There were other things too, like wattle. We weren't allowed to pick wattle or bring wattle inside, because it's a death flower. We used it for funerals and sorry business. I remember sitting at a meeting a few years ago and somebody walked in with this big armful of wattle and started putting sprigs in front of everybody. I nearly went berserk! My son Rodney was the next one she was going to hand it to, and I said "Don't you give my son any of that! You get that out of here!". Of course, she didn't know about it at the time, she was quite sincere in what she was doing, so I explained to her about it. But oh, it just absolutely freaked me out, the wattle's a no-no unless you want to pick it to take to a funeral.

And then I suppose there was the bush foods. Mummy used to cook turtle in the oven, she loved her turtle. Of course, it had to be a short-necked turtle because mummy's clan was Wollithica and the Yorta Yorta totem is the long-necked turtle. They'd drop things like that, "Don't you eat the long-necked turtle, cos that's our totem". And you just accepted that, you didn't question it. They'd cook it in ashes if they had a campfire, but just cook it whole in the shell. And then when it's cooked and you open the shell its innards ball together, and you just have to take that ball out and you can eat the flesh.

She used to take us witchetty grubbing in the Barmah Forest too, and showed us how to look for the witchetty grubs. You see the sawdust at the bottom of the tree, and you just look up the tree and you'll find the hole. In traditional times they used the reeds, but mummy used to take a wire with a bend on the end, and she'd just thread the wire in the hole till she could feel the witchetty grub. They're beautiful too, witchetty grubs, sort of peanutty, buttery. When you cook them, the inside sets like a scrambled egg.

And mummy used to take us through the Barmah forest, that was sort of the central area of the Yorta Yorta people, and she'd pick plants. She'd tell you not to touch that one, or you can eat that one. I can remember one day, we were walking through and she leaned down and picked a couple of berries off this bush, and she just threw them in her mouth and was munching away. I was trailing along behind her, and I thought, "Oh, they must taste nice". So I picked one and threw it in my mouth, and oh my god! It nearly burnt my mouth out! And I reckon that's why, from that day on I've never liked hot stuff with chillies!

And then we used to climb up the trees and get the gum, that was like lollies for us! If you get the nice young stuff, you can lick it like syrup. Or once it was older and had set, we could suck on that for ages, it was like a gobstopper!

They were real clever fishermen, too. They could tell by just looking at the water where a good area to fish was. "Oh, no, no. This is no good, we'll go up around the bend. Oh yeah, this area's good". I remember the colour of the river was one of the things they'd look for. The dark spots were where the deep pools were, where the fish hide. Some of the old fellows, like papa Henry Atkinson, used to make fishing traps. That continued on for quite some years, making those nets, but then the white man's rules of the nets being illegal sort of threw that out.

The very best fisherman, or fisherwoman, was Aunt Ruby! Gosh, she would catch fish like nobody! I can remember fishing at the Barmah Lakes with her and Dimpsey. Dimpsey was sitting only about five or six feet away from her, and she was pulling in one after another, and he wasn't even getting a bite. So he was gradually moving closer and closer to her. And I can remember her saying to him, "Do you want to sit on my lap, Dimpsey?!" She just had a knack of catching fish.

In those days the grandmothers and the old Aunties did most of the rearing of the kids, because after they came off the mission and became fringe dwellers, the mothers and fathers had to go out and look for work. So the old people reared the children – my grandmother

raised nineteen kids. And it was all while keeping the kids away from the welfare, protecting us, because welfare used to come around checking.

And she did that so well. She used to save the tins of used spaghetti or beetroot or tinned fruit, and she'd fill them up with dirt and put the lid back on, and put them back on the shelf so that when the welfare came they thought she had lots of different food! She was a wonderful old woman, she was so strong.

We used to travel to Leeton a lot, particularly when the floods came down the Flats. Two of mum's sisters, Auntie Lulla and Auntie Markie, married New South Wales Aboriginal men and settled in New South Wales on a place just outside Leeton. It was a fringe dwelling situation just like the Flats, it was called Wattle Hill. And so when the floods came up, Nanny'd pack us up and we'd go by train up to Leeton and stay with Auntie Markie or Auntie Lulla on Wattle Hill.

Leeton had a big cannery called Letona, and next to it was a tip where they used to throw out the tins that had faults. The cans were good, they were just dented, or the old labels wouldn't go on or whatever. But Nanny used to know everything that was in those cans by the number printed on the bottom. When we used to walk from Wattle Hill into town to school, which was about eight or nine miles, we'd have to pass that cannery. So my grandmother used to write us a little list! She'd say, "Now on your way home, call into the tip at the cannery and get three C21, two B30".

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And when you look at it, it was still hunting and gathering. Still being independent, still being resourceful. The old people knew how to do that in a legal way.

There were a lot of people who lived on Cummeragunja, including Grandfather Nelson, who were from different tribes. And the old people would say, "They're not from here". That's how they described it, "No, they're not from here". But they wouldn't go into anything that might be private to those people, or be disturbing to them if they told their story. And that's something that was very much revered, was not telling other people stories, not talking about other people's business. So it was only later on that we started to hear the stories, and that we were able to talk about Dja Dja Wurrung business.

I got a lot of stories from Aunty Cissy Smith. I was very privileged to have a lot of time with Aunty Cissy when I was running ACES, the Aboriginal Community Elders Services, because she spent her last few years in the ACES aged care complex. Her mother was Maude Nelson so she was a granddaughter of Grandfather Henry Harmony Nelson and Granny Mag, and they reared her. Because of that, she was able to tell me quite a bit about Grandfather Henry Harmony.

She always said, "Oh, he talked beautifully in his language", which was Dja Dja Wurrung. She used to refer to Grandfather Henry as a "clever man", which is a traditional description for an important Aboriginal man. She always said, "Oh, he was a clever man, yeah".

He had an old horse which he was so close to, and he used to talk language to that horse. And Aunty Cissy said the horse knew exactly what he was talking about! She told about how they were always going off somewhere camping. Grandfather Henry died at one of those camps, and of course they used to travel in horse and cart in those days. And that horse wouldn't pull the cart with grandfather's body in it. They were going to bring him back to Cummeragunja, and they had to go and get another horse to pull the cart because that horse wouldn't pull him.

And he also had a friend, a goanna, that used to come to his camp quite often. He used to talk to the goanna in the language. And when they buried Grandfather Henry, that goanna came to the graveside.

Granny Mag was Waveroo, that's where she was born. She was dropped off at Coranderrk mission when she was very young by a non-Aboriginal family. They said her mother had passed away, could they leave her there, and they'd pick her up on the way back from wherever they were going. But they never came back to pick her up, and so she was reared there at Coranderrk.

Grandfather Henry and Grannie Mag grew up together at Coranderrk, and later on they got married there. But Grandfather Henry was at so many different missions. He was at Lake Tyers, he was at Condah, he was at Framlingham – they had two children at Framlingham who died in an early age, and they're buried at Framlingham. Eventually he and Granny Mag ended up at Cummeragunja for many years. Sometimes you get the feeling that he used to hide out, sort of. It's like he used to try and get back on Country. But they were always shunted off again.

Grandfather Henry and Grannie Mag had seven children – Maude, Arthur, Henry, Daniel, Margaret, George and Robert. Their eldest daughter Maude was Aunty Cissy's mother. Their younger daughter, Margaret, was taken away from the family and sent to Cootamundra, which was a "domestic training home" for Aboriginal girls. Granny Mag and Grandfather Henry were living on Cummeragunja when she was taken, she would have been about 16 or 17. One day they got information that she could come home for a holiday. Aunty Cissy was only a little girl then, but she remembered getting in the horse and gig with Granny Mag and Grandfather Henry to go and meet Aunty Margaret at the train station in Echuca. The train pulled in and they waited, but she didn't get off the train. They noticed her bag being put on the station platform, though. It turned out that Margaret had died. They'd buried her at Cootamundra, and they never even let her family know. They never even found out what happened to their daughter. That's something that always disturbs me, where is she?

Grandfather Henry and Grannie Mag's second youngest boy, George, was my grandfather. He married my grandmother Nanny Priscilla James, who was born on Maloga, which was the mission before Cummeragunja started up. Grandfather George had a tractor accident at Cummera and septicaemia set in after that accident and he passed away. After his death, my grandmother was left with six children to feed – Uncle George, my mother Iris, Uncle Keith, Aunty Lulla, Aunty Markie and Aunty Bay. So Nanny had to leave them in the care of Granny Mag and Grandfather Henry, and she went off to work at the shearing sheds, cooking for the workers with her sister, Aunty Louise. So mummy and her siblings were reared by



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C: From left: Auntie Markie Saunders (nee Nelson), Auntie Clare Moulton (nee Murray), Aunty Iris Atkinson (nee Nelson), Aunty Ruby Near (nee Muir) circa early 1950s, at Mooroopna Mechanics Hall.

D: Auntie Fay with Uncle Jim Berg and Auntie Alma Thorpe receiving NAIDOC Elder Awards in 2002.

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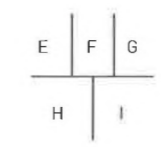
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D: Auntie Fay with Uncle Jim Berg and Auntie Alma Thorpe receiving NAIDOC Elder Awards in 2002.



E: Auntie Fay congratulating Rodney who did very well during his time in Little Athletics, circa late 1970s.
F: Uncle Jack Charles (Boonwurrung and Wiradjeri) and Auntie Fay Carter (Dja Dja Wurrung and Yorta Yorta) in a photograph taken for the 'First Peoples' exhibition at the Melbourne Museum's Bunjilaka Aboriginal Cultural Centre.
G: Auntie Fay speaking at the Yapenya, 2013.
H: Auntie Fay's grandchildren: (back L-R) Drew and Joshua, (front L-R) Rodney Jnr., Natasha and Neane in 2009.
I: Auntie Fay at her induction into the Victorian Indigenous Honour Roll 2013. L-R: Natasha Carter, The Hon Jeanette Powell MP, Auntie Fay Carter, The Hon Dr Dennis Napthine MP and Wendy Berick.

Grandfather Henry and Granny Mag, while Nanny Priscilla had to go off to work and send money back for them.

That's where she met her second husband, Papa MacKray. He was an Aboriginal man from South Australia and he was working in one of those shearing sheds where she was cooking. When she came back to Cummeragunja he followed later on, and they got married and he helped her raise the children then.

They also raised another daughter, Aunty Ruby. We always thought she was the oldest sister in the family. I was married when I found out she wasn't my mum's elder sister. They never talked about it, she was just accepted as belonging to Nanny and Grandfather George.

We found out later on that she came from another tribe, but we never knew the story of how she came to be with my grandmother. Just before she died, she asked us the question, why did my mother give me away? By that time she was in her 90s. So a niece of hers, her brother Uncle Charlie's granddaughter Kerry, researched it for her. And she found out that Aunty Ruby came from Paakantji (Barkindji) Country, up Renmark way.

The story goes that they were brought to Cummeragunja when they were little kids, Aunty Ruby and two of her brothers, Uncle Charlie Muir and Uncle Billy Muir. There had been a massacre of Aunty Ruby's tribe, and their mother was murdered. Aunty Ruby, Uncle Charlie and Uncle Billy were found by the police, hiding in an old water tank. And they took them and put them on the boat to bring them up the river to be cared for at Cummeragunja. But the old grandmother had been watching, and she walked along the bank for miles and miles, following the kids up the river. Eventually the captain of the boat pulled over and let her come onboard.

When we heard this story that Kerry had researched, I said to Lillian Tamiru, "We must go and tell Aunty Ruby her story". By that time she was in the nursing home in Mooroopna, and they'd been in touch with us to say that she was getting very low and she was passing away. We got to the nursing home and we said to the sister, "We've got a story to tell Aunty Ruby, do you think that'll be okay?" The sister said, "Look, she's unconscious, but we don't know enough about that, she might hear what you're saying."

And let me tell you, she heard us. She was lying on her side with the blankets right up under her chin. We told her the whole story. When we finished, she put her hand out and just touched me on my arm. Never said a word, but it was like she knew and she was thanking us for telling her story.

Aunty Ruby never had children, but she just absolutely adored kids. I can remember when my daughter Wendy was little, and she was so fussy, she was really hard to feed! We'd have vegies or something on the plate and she'd be sticking her nose up, and Aunty Ruby would get up and say "Maybe I'll boil her a little egg", or "Maybe I'll grill her a little chop." She was a beautiful woman.

I believe that we can't talk about reconnecting with our culture and Country unless we first talk about disconnection. What happened to our ancestors, how they were disconnected from their Country, from their culture. Because they were dispersed off Country so early and so quickly, they had to adapt. Our people are the most adaptable people in the world, I'd say!

Particularly Dja Dja Wurrung, more than any other tribe in Victoria. Franklinford was the only mission on Dja Dja Wurrung Country, and it was only open for eight years before they even choofed our people off there and dispersed them all over the place and split them up from each other. Even now, a lot of the missions are still available to go back to, but Franklinford was never available for Dja Dja Wurrung people. They just wiped it off the map. I've never been able to find out why they closed Franklinford, but I believe it's just because of the richness of Dja Dja Wurrung Country. Our people were moved off because of the gold.

So you've got to go through that sad part of disconnection before you come to how we reconnect now. That's why we cherish so much every little thing that's been found. Even a tree with a scar on it, gosh. It's a relic, it's something precious.

And it's strange, I guess it's a spiritual thing, but we find with most Aboriginal people that you can walk Country and you can spiritually read it. It's like walking in the footsteps of the ancestors.



J

K

J: Iris Atkinson [nee Nelson] with Marlene and Veronica in 1969.

K: Aunty Fay at her work desk at the Aborigines Advancement League in the early 1980s.

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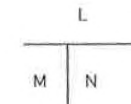
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J: Iris Atkinson (nee Nelson) with Marlene and
Veronica in 1969.
K: Aunty Fay at her work desk at the Aborigines
Advancement League in the early 1980s.



L: View across the Murray River of
Cummeragunja, 1895.
M: Aunties at Aunty Fay's wedding in
1954. L-R: Aunty Lulla Grant (nee
Nelson), Nanny Priscilla MacKray
(nee Nelson), Aunty Clare Moulton,
Aunty Becky Murray (nee James),
Aunty Marke Saunders (nee Nelson),
Aunty Bay Atkinson (nee Nelson).
N: Uncles at Aunty Fay's wedding in
1954. L-R: Uncle Les Saunders, Don
Howe, Uncle Geoff Atkinson, Papa
MacKray, Uncle Henry Charles, and
young Murray Moulton.



0: Aboriginal Ball 1947. Back row L-R: Muriel Atkinson, Frances Briggs, Hyllus Briggs, Elsie Cooper. Middle row L-R: Agnes Charles, Leah Briggs. Front: Fay Carter doing the splits.

If you go to some of those significant areas you can picture the activity in the air, you can feel the spiritual significance of that area. There's a spot in the Barmah Forest that Wayne took us to one day, a mound where our people used to cook. And you could sit there and close your eyes, and you could almost see the whole scene, of what was cooking and what was going on. You could feel it, you could close your eyes and see it.

One of the most emotional things I've been involved in was helping to repatriate the Jaara baby. She was a little baby girl, about two or three years old when she died. She must've been very special, from all the burial goods that were with her. Our people had buried her high up in a tree on Dja Dja Wurrung Country. In around 1901 somebody chopped the tree down, and she fell out. She was handed into the police and the police took her to the museum. She'd been there for nearly a hundred years, just left in a drawer.

A few years ago they let us repatriate her to Country. I was part of rewrapping her, with the late Nora Murray and Lillian Tamiru. It was the most emotional thing. It was amazing just how well kept she was, you could still see her little finger nails and her toe nails. All the little gifts, burial goods, were still with her. There were emu feather bundles, woven fish nets, native beeswax, wooden pegs for drying out skins, kangaroo tooth jewelry, and kangaroo, possum and wallaby sinews. And then there were some European items as well, there was a little white leather booty, and a steel axe. And she was wrapped up in a woman's linen dress, and then a possum skin cloak around that. We had to do another possum skin because the one that she was wrapped in was falling to bits.

We rewrapped her and had a ceremony to take her away from the museum. We took her up to Country and we reburied her in a tree and had a ceremony for her. It was wonderful.

Everything that we do today is to repay our old people. To do something for them because they didn't have a voice, because they weren't able to do anything about what was happening to them. Of course, there were times when our people did fight to stand up for themselves, but it was against something that was just too strong for them. I think what I've done with the native title negotiating team for those couple of years made me feel as though I was contributing to rectify the past.

I've worked in Aboriginal affairs for over 40 years, and working in welfare is such a heavy load. You get into a survival mode, and you aren't able to practice your culture because you're too busy trying to survive. I think that's how our old people were as well. They concentrated so much on surviving and protecting their young, that practicing their culture wasn't in the forefront. So our people have been caught up in this survival mode, trying to live in both worlds, and they haven't had the opportunity to do the cultural business and fight for justice properly. And here we are, 2014, and our people are still in this situation.

Sometimes I think to myself, "Gosh, we are the kindest people, to be able to know what happened to our people, and still survive". And I think it's because of that cultural practice that we have maintained, of the family, the extended family, and the community spirit. And of not wanting to forget our past. You can't forget your past. That's your future, that's your being, that's your reason for going on. To remember. It doesn't matter how painful it is, to remember that past is remembering who you are.

It's not a case of blame, it's a case of acknowledging and recognizing it. Don't try and bury it somewhere like it didn't happen. Because you're burying our past, you're burying our ancestors without a thought.

When you look at the policies they've put in place over the years to try to make us go away, I think it must have really annoyed and amazed them that we're still here! Like removing our children, or trying to breed out the colour, or sending our men away from the missions and trying to split up the family units that way. So many things that they've done to try and make us go away. It must be a very sore point! Because there's one thing for sure, we'll never go away. We will never go away.