Living Aboriginal History of Victoria

Stories in the Oral Tradition

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It was good growing up on The Flat because we stuck together. I was born on The Flat and I am proud of the fact that the address on my birth certificate is ‘the river bank’. It was where our people regrouped after they left Cummeragunja. There was a sense of unity there.

Men could find seasonal work in the Goulburn Valley, picking fruit, and women found work in the canneries. Aboriginal people provided the backbone of the fruit industry.

There was a sense of freedom there. You could wander around, you could visit your relations, then you could go into the bush and get a bit of bush tucker. Some of the old people taught us how to find bush tucker. They taught us how to find wigigery grubs in the trees. We would bring them back and cook them on the coals. We would get the odd rabbit and sometimes a kangaroo and there was plenty of fish, because we were right on the edge of the Goulburn River.

One of the characters who stands out in my mind was Alf Bull. I always remember him when he was sitting around the fire. He used to smoke cigarettes and, when he wanted a light, he used to put his foot into the fire and get a coal with his foot, lift it up and light his cigarette. He never wore shoes. He was an amazing fellow.

Another character was Auntie Nugget Harrison. She lived on The Flat for the whole period of its existence. She was always helping other people. When The Flat closed — in 1957 I think it was — and they rehoused people at Rumbalara, she always talked about the loss of freedom that she experienced. A lot of people felt that sense of freedom when they were living on The Flat. Then, when they moved up to Rumbalara and into houses, they felt that their freedom was sort of lost, more controlled.

The Flat was an amazing place. All the houses were made of bush timber and any sort of resources that people could find. There were the four children plus my parents, plus my grandparents — eight people — living in our place. And sometimes you have your cousins coming and going, so it could be anything from eight to twelve people living in a humpie the size of a lounge room in a modern house.

It would be partitioned for sleeping and living quarters. We slept in small beds. Sometimes there would be two or three in the one bed, sleeping head to foot. The floors were just hard dirt but it was a clean, tidy place.
A typical dwelling on The Flat.

Thought to be 'Aunty' Nora Charles and grandchildren on The Flat, Mooroopna.

Fay's uncle, Geoff Atkinson, making tomato boxes.
The women used to sweep the floors, always out dusting down, stripping down the yard and sweeping them with gum leaves. The kids from The Flat went to the local school. We did experience racism but some of the teachers were very good and tried to understand the plight of Aboriginal people at the time. There was also a degree of respect for Koori people because we knew how to look after ourselves in a fight and we were good at sport. So, on the one hand, there was racism but, on the other hand, there was some respect for Aboriginal people.

I was between eight and ten years old when we moved to Echuca in the early '50s. Like my grandfather and great grandfather, my father was a shearer. So I suppose they were able to find a bit more work. Dad bought a couple of small house blocks, south of Echuca. At that time, my grandmother and grandfather were camping near the bridge at Cummeragunja. He wanted to set up house and bring them over to Echuca.

I decided to leave school and go out and work to help support the family. I started working in the shearing sheds with my father. Shearing was a tradition in our family and my father wanted me to carry it on but I had other interests at the time. I worked around factories and drove trucks and had about 12 or 14 years experience in the work force before I started to think a bit more about my future and about my Aboriginality and what sort of contribution was expected of me in terms of the Aboriginal cause.

I was in my early thirties when I decided to do further education. I wanted to learn more about Koori history and culture, but I found that most of the text books weren't providing the answers. I knew there was an untapped source of information in the stories from our own people and I started to visit elders and record our history as they experienced it.

This eventually led me to my present position as Koori Historian with the Koori Oral History Program. I believe our history should be recorded from the Aboriginal viewpoint so that it can be kept for the future. When we first started, it was hard to get acceptance and recognition for oral history, but now we find it has been a major growth area. After all, Kooris have a rich oral history which has been passed on to them and it is just as valid as any other source of knowledge.

Wayne is currently the Manager of the Koori Oral History Program at the State Library of Victoria.
Wayne Atkinson interviewing Albert Mullett for the Koori Oral History Program.

A deputation preparing to visit the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs protesting about housing conditions at Rumbalara, c. 1964.