

Part 2 Tracing the History

Chapter 7 Western Australia

In many things the white people mean well, but they have so little understanding. My experience has convinced me that, psychologically, the Native Department is working on wrong lines ... The same law that applies to the white race should apply to the native races in that particular. I think that is most essential. Our native mothers have all the natural feelings of mothers the world over, and to many of them the administration of the Native Department, by men only, is stark tragedy (Gladys Prosser, a Noongar mother, in an interview to Perth's Sunday Times, later quoted in a speech to the Legislative Council by Hon. H Seddon Hansard 22 November 1938 page 2246).

Initial contact

Following the founding of the Swan River Colony in 1829 relations between the British settlers and local Indigenous peoples in Western Australia became characterised by conflict. As a result of fierce fighting,

... on the Swan and Canning Rivers all opposition by the Aborigines had ceased by 1832, while the Murray River tribe gave no further trouble after it had been decimated by posses of settlers and soldiers in what became known as the battle of Pinjarra (Biskup 1973).

Following the report of the 1837 British Select Committee into the condition of 'natives' in all British colonies, protectors were appointed in Perth and York. By 1850 the protectors had become firmly aligned with the colonists against the Aboriginal population. So successful were they in securing the settlers' interests that the office of protector was abolished and not revived until 1886. In the interim police and magistrates were assigned the protective role. In reality settlers took the law into their own hands.

From the 1860s the pastoral frontier expanded northwards and eastwards, with the Kimberley region reached in the 1880s. A ban on the employment of convicts north of the Murchison River made pastoralists dependent upon Indigenous labour for which rations were provided instead of wages. In the south, the pattern was different. Indigenous communities developed in camps on the outskirts of towns and supported themselves by hunting and working casually for local farmers and businesses. Some became farmers themselves until their properties were resumed in the early twentieth century.

In the 1840s several church-run schools for Indigenous children opened with government financial assistance. By 1847 all but one had closed because of financial constraints and because children had been reclaimed by their parents following the deaths of some pupils from disease. The remaining school was at the Roman Catholic mission at New Norcia where Indigenous families settled near the mission while their children were housed in dormitories within the mission complex.

In the late nineteenth century two institutions opened in the south for Indigenous children. Although they were run as orphanages, many of the children sent there had living parents. The children were schooled and trained for domestic and farm work. Under the *Industrial Schools Act 1874* children who were voluntarily surrendered to a school, orphanage or institution would remain under its authority until the age of 21 regardless of the parents' wishes. The manager of the institution could apprentice children over the age of 12.

Responding to atrocities committed against Indigenous people in Western Australia the British Parliament passed the *Aborigines Protection Act 1886* establishing the Aborigines Protection Board. Among the Board's functions was 'the care, custody and education of Aboriginal children'. Resident Magistrates, acting on the Board's instructions, were empowered to apprentice any Aboriginal or 'half-caste' child of a 'suitable age'. Under the 1874 Act applying to non-Indigenous children the minimum age at which children could be apprenticed was 12 years.

In reducing the age of Aborigines against whom contracts shall have force, your committee considers that ten years is not too young, as Aboriginal children mature so much more quickly than civilised ones, and it is at that age that habits of thrift and honesty are most easily inculcated. Should they be at liberty to roam about without employment until 16 they would be useless afterwards (comments of the Parliamentary Select Committee which reviewed the Bill prior to its enactment).

Concern about the treatment of Indigenous people in WA led the British Government to retain control of Aboriginal affairs until 1897 when the *Aborigines Act 1897* was passed. This Act created the Aborigines Department with the same functions as the Board. Henry Prinsep, who had experience in colonial administration in India, was appointed Chief Protector.

Prinsep believed that Aboriginal children of mixed descent who grew up with their Aboriginal families would become 'vagrants and outcasts' and 'not only a disgrace, but a menace to society'. Lacking any legislative power to forcibly remove these children to the existing institutions and missions (which were not under his control), he endeavoured to 'persuade' the parents to part with their children. In a circular letter to all Protectors and Government Residents in WA dated February 1902 Prinsep requested information on any

'half-caste' children in their districts who could be induced to enter one of the existing institutions for their care and education.

Not surprisingly, most mothers refused to part with their children. For the few that agreed, hasty arrangements were made for the child's removal in case the mother changed her mind. Referring to his very limited success in this exercise, Prinsep complained in 1902 that 'the natural affections of the mothers ... stood much in the way' (Aborigines Department Annual Report 1902).

Prinsep proposed the extension of his powers to enable him to remove children forcibly and without parental consent.

The 1905 Act

In 1904 the WA Government established an inquiry into Aboriginal administration headed by Dr W E Roth, the Chief Protector of Aborigines in Queensland. Although he was asked to inquire into 'the treatment of the aboriginal and half-caste inhabitants of the State' as well as the administration of Aboriginal affairs generally, he limited his inquiry to conditions in the north-west and far north. His findings of 'a most brutal and outrageous state of affairs' in which Aboriginal people were exploited, brutally controlled and malnourished caused a public furor. He recommended 'proper legislation, combined with firm departmental supervision'.

Although Roth did not investigate conditions in the south-west he supported Prinsep's concerns about the increasing numbers of 'half-castes' there, then numbering about 750. He noted that pastoralists who fathered 'half-caste' children made little attempt to educate or support them. The appropriate course, according to Roth, was for the Chief Protector to assume guardianship of these children, to remove them from their Aboriginal families and place them in institutions. To prevent the problem arising again in the future there should be prohibitions against 'mixed marriages' and 'miscegenation'.

Roth's recommendations were implemented by the *Aborigines Act 1905* making the Chief Protector the legal guardian of 'every Aboriginal and half-caste child' under 16 years.

[A] half-caste, who possesses few of the virtues and nearly all of the vices of whites, grows up to be a mischievous and very immoral subject ... it may appear to be a cruel thing to tear an Aborigine child from its mother, but it is necessary in some cases to be cruel to be kind (J M Drew, WA Parliamentary Debates 1904).

It was claimed that it was 'wrong, unjust and a disgrace to the State' to leave children to be cared for by their mothers. More generally, the 1905 Act

... laid the basis for the development of repressive and coercive state control over the state's Aboriginal population. It set up the necessary bureaucratic and legal mechanisms to control all their contacts with the wider community, and to enforce the assimilation of their children and to determine the most personal aspects of their lives (Haebich 1988 page 83).

Missions

In the north of WA a Catholic mission was established at Beagle Bay in 1890. Another four followed in the next 20 years with the help of government subsidies. The missions shared Prinsep's objectives of removing the children from their families.

As soon as possible, children can be removed from the adult camp and the nomadic ways of their parents, and be housed in dormitories on mission premises to be educated at school and in trades (Father George Walter, Superior at Beagle Bay, 1906).

In 1906 the Pallottines at Beagle Bay requested that the police round up the Indigenous children living in and around the north-west towns, now wards of the Chief Protector, and send them to the mission.

If the police sent me only the most obvious cases, the number of children on the mission would be about 200 (Father George Walter, Superior at Beagle Bay, 1906 letter to Chief Protector).

The local protector, James Isdell, supported the mission's concern to rescue 'waifs and strays from the bad contaminating influence of natives' camps'.

The half-caste is intellectually above the aborigine, and it is the duty of the State that they be given a chance to lead a better life than their mothers. I would not hesitate for one moment to separate any half-caste from its aboriginal mother, no matter how frantic her momentary grief might be at the time. They soon forget their offspring.

In the south of the State little use of the removal power was made before 1909. In that year a regulation dispensed with the need for the Chief Protector's permission to remove any mixed descent child under the age of eight. The number of forcible removals increased and the children were taken to New Norcia, the Swan Native and Half-Caste Home and the Dulhi Gunyah Orphanage in Perth. To put pressure on parents to send their children to the missions the Aborigines Department refused to assist orphaned or needy children away from the missions.

'Native settlements'

Protests from non-Indigenous people in the south about the presence of Aboriginal camps on the edges of towns led the government to revise its approach. The new plan was to establish isolated self-contained 'native settlements' run by the government. Chief Protector A O Neville who was appointed in 1915 and who remained in the position until 1940, was firmly committed to the new plan.

Neville saw the settlements as a means of integrating children of mixed descent into the non-Indigenous society. They were to be physically separated from their families on the settlements, receive a European education, be trained in domestic and stock work and then sent out to approved work situations. Between jobs they would return to the settlements. Neville theorised that this process would lead to their acceptance by non-Indigenous people and their own loss of identification as Indigenous people.

My [wife's] father died when she was eleven, so Rose was left an orphan, and was placed in the New Norcia home for Aboriginal girls ... Rose left her life in New Norcia mission when she turned fourteen, to work as a housemaid. But before she could go out to work, she had to come to the Moore River Native Settlement ... Rose had no trouble being placed in service to a white woman. In between she had to return to the settlement ... All those who went out to work had to return to Moore River when their terms of employment were finished: to do otherwise meant to be hounded by the authorities and made to return. Again, no options! No choice!

Neville began by taking control of the mission at Carrolup and expanding its size to be self-supporting. In 1918 a second settlement was opened, at Moore River. In the north, too, Neville wanted to take control of the missions and turn them into self-supporting cattle stations. Moola Bulla in the Kimberley was his model. It had opened in 1910 as a ration depot and government-run cattle station. It was intended to be an alternative to the more expensive option of imprisoning large numbers of Aboriginal people for cattle spearing as well as 'raising beef to feed them and ... training men for work on the stations'.

There would be considerable savings to the government, as it would no longer have to subsidise the missions.

Generally the recommendations are made on the score of economy, combined with the knowledge that the Missions are not performing the useful work which might be expected of them. A large number of natives and half-castes are growing up in idleness instead of being employed on the various stations in the Northern portions of the State ... scores of the children are growing up without any prospect of a future before them, being alienated from their old bush life, and rendered more or less

useless for the condition of life being forced upon them (A O Neville).

Two former pastoral stations were acquired: Munja in 1926 and Violet Valley in 1935. On purchasing Munja Neville commented that 'the purpose of establishing the stations was to pacify the natives and accustom them to white man's ways and thus enable further settlement' (quoted by Kimberley Land Council submission 345 on page 11). Although no other missions were established in the north during Neville's time in office the United Aborigines Mission founded a mission at Mount Margaret in the Goldfields in 1921.

Indigenous families did not willingly move to these settlements. In the south most were able to find employment in their local area, receiving wages which were preferred to the payment in kind offered at settlements. The living conditions at the settlements were not significantly better yet they were highly regulated. The parents rightly feared that their children would be placed in segregated dormitories if the family moved to a settlement.

We were locked up at night. All the boys, young girls. Married girls and women what had no husbands and babies, they had one room. Another dormitory was for young girls had no babies. But we was opposite side of that, see? The boys' dormitory. I'm not going to complain about it because, you know, I survived. A lot of kids died. Depression time it was pretty hard.

The missions attracted families whose children would otherwise be taken from them.

Even when at the mission the children still took every precaution. The women discussed in the raffia room what to do with their children if the police should take them on the hop. Where could they hide them? – inside the cupboard perhaps? ... The children however took matters into their own hands. They continually kept their ears cocked for horses' hooves.

[In 1926] came a visit from A.J. Neale, new manager of Moore River Settlement, representing the Aborigines Department. Dicky Wingulu, Doris's tribal father, talked to Mr Neale and pleaded for his little girls that they not be sent away to Moore River. Finally he persuaded Mr Neale that Mount Margaret would be a good place to send them, as he had heard they were starting a school.

As in the past, to compel people to move the Aborigines Department refused rations or other assistance to people living away from the settlements. In response to complaints from local police about the camps on the outskirts of non-Indigenous towns, Indigenous people were 'rounded up' by police and sent to the settlements. Aborigines convicted of alcohol related offences were

also sent to Moore River for their 'rehabilitation'. Between 1915 and 1920 at least 500 people, about a quarter of the Indigenous population in the south, had been removed to settlements. Moore River expanded quickly. In January 1919 there were 19 inmates at Moore River, in June 1919 93 inmates, by June 1927 330 inmates and by 1932 500.

In the north, travelling inspectors kept a watch for mixed descent children on pastoral stations and in communities. Warrants were then prepared for their forcible removal to the government settlements in the north or far south to Moore River.

When I was about twelve or thirteen years old I was taken to Moola Bulla. That's where I lost my Aboriginal ways. The Police came one day from Halls Creek when they were going on patrol to Lansdowne and found me, a half-caste child. The manager ... took me down to Fitzroy Crossing to wait for the mail truck from Derby to take me to Moola Bulla. When [the manager's wife] told my people, mum and dad, that they were taking me to Fitzroy Crossing for a trip, they told her 'you make sure you bring her back'. They did not know that I would never see them again.

X

The welfare just grabbed you where they found you. They'd take them in threes and fours, whatever. The Native Welfare blokes used to come to every station and see where our half caste kids were. They used to drive right down to Port Hedland. Our people would hide us, paint us with charcoal. I was taken to Moola Bulla. The Welfare bloke ... sent his son ... to pick up me and Colin Swift. We were about 5-6 years old, and my mother was allowed to come with us in the manager's car and then he took her away.

Work placements

At the age of 14 children of mixed descent were sent out from the settlements to work. A large proportion of the young women returned pregnant. Though annoyed that the burden of maintaining these children fell upon the government, Neville did not feel that the high rate of pregnancies reflected adversely on his department's policies.

The child is taken away from the mother and sometimes never sees her again. Thus these children grow up as whites, knowing nothing of their own environment. At the expiration of the period of two years the mother goes back into service so that it doesn't really matter if she has half a dozen children.

'Biological absorption'

By the 1930s Neville had refined his ideas of integrating Indigenous people into non-Indigenous society. His model was a biological one of 'absorption' or 'assimilation', argued in the language of genetics. Unlike the ideology of racial purity that emerged in Germany from eugenics, according to which 'impure races' had to be prevented from 'contaminating' the pure Aryan race, Neville argued the advantages of 'miscegenation' between Aboriginal and white people.

The key issue to Neville was skin colour. Once 'half-castes' were sufficiently white in colour they would become like white people. After two or three generations the process of acceptance in the non-Indigenous community would be complete, the older generations would have died and the settlements could be closed.

Neville claimed that the settlements prepared Indigenous children to be 'absorbed' into non-Indigenous society. He argued that for the absorption process to work properly his powers needed to be extended to all children with any Indigenous background. The grandiose nature of his 'vision' contrasted starkly with the reality of life in the chronically under-funded settlements.

I visited the Moore River Settlement several times [in the 1930s]. The setting was a poor one with no advantage for anyone except isolation. The facilities were limited and some of them were makeshift. The staff were inadequate both in numbers and qualification. The inmates disliked the place. It held no promise of a future for any of them and they had little or no satisfaction in the present. It was a dump.

Opposition and dissent

Public reaction to Neville's ideas was mixed. The segregation of Aboriginal people had been actively supported by non-Indigenous people. Neville's support for 'miscegenation' was in a different category. '[A] variety of harsh words were expressed about the Chief Protector's outrageous suggestion that marriages between black and white (because if it was out in the open it would have to be marriage) should be condoned'.

In the early 1930s allegations of slavery, mistreatment of Aborigines and abuse of Aboriginal women appeared in the local and international press. Among them was a series of articles by Mary Bennett attacking the administration of Aboriginal affairs. The pressure of this publicity forced the government to establish a Royal Commission into the conditions of Aborigines, headed by a Perth magistrate, H D Moseley. In evidence to the Commission, Bennett attacked the practice of removing children from their mothers.

They are captured at all ages, as infants in arms, perhaps not until they are grown up, they are not safe until they are dead.

Bessie Rischbieth also gave evidence to the Moseley Commission arguing that 'neglect' was not a justification for removing Aboriginal children to the settlements. 'In most instances I should prefer to see the children left with their parents ... the system of dealing with the parents should be improved in order that they might keep their children.' (quoted by Paisley 1995 on page 266). In her opinion government administrations were forcibly removing children 'because it was cheaper than providing the same system of support which operated for neglected white children'.

Aboriginal women from Broome sent a petition to the Commission in which they asked 'would you like to think that when you send your children to school that you would never see them again?'

Neville's response to these attacks on his policies was to argue that removal was in the best interests of children.

I say emphatically there are scores of children in the bush camps who should be taken away from whoever is looking after them and placed in a settlement ... If we are going to fit and train such children for the future they cannot be left as they are ... I want to give these children a chance ... Unless those children are removed, social conditions in those places will go from bad to worse ... I want to teach them right from wrong. How are the children to fight against these conditions? The conditions in the absence of teaching, are going to become infinitely worse than they are now.

Moseley was sufficiently impressed by Neville's views to recommend the extension of his powers to all people of Aboriginal descent. The *Native Administration Act 1936* defined 'natives' to include nearly all people of full and part descent regardless of their lifestyle and expanded restrictions on movement and lifestyle.

Virtually any child of Aboriginal descent could now be taken forcibly from his or her family and placed in a government institution to be trained in the ways of 'white civilisation' and 'society'. The Commissioner of Native Affairs, not their parents, had total control over their lives until they reached the age of twenty-one. From this age any person of 'quarter-caste' or less was prohibited by law from associating with persons deemed to be 'natives'. In this way they were to be forced to live in the white community, although no measures were introduced to force white people to accept them.

Sister Kate's

In the early 1930s Kate Clutterbuck, an Anglican nun, offered to open a home in Perth for 'half-caste' children if government funding were provided. She informed Neville that 'we should of course like to have the poorest and most neglected children not those who have mothers who love and care for them, but those who are most unwanted in the State'. Neville took advantage of the offer to put his ideas into practice. Once the home commenced operations in 1933 he began to supply Sister Kate with the lightest skinned children.

Some kids who were brought to Moola Bulla and who were too white would be sent to Sister Kate's in Perth and some of them who were too dark for Sister Kate's were sent to Moola Bulla. There was a half-caste boy who was at Moola Bulla, his mother was half-caste and his father white, and I suppose they couldn't bear to see him down the camp with all these Aboriginal people so they sent him to Sister Kate's.

Sister Kate's Home operated until 1974 with an average of 85 children staying there at any one.

Assimilation

In 1940 Neville retired. He was succeeded by Francis Bray and then, in 1948, by Stanley Middleton. Just prior to Middleton taking office, an inquiry by F E A Bateman had recommended the abandonment of the policy of government settlements. By then, the language of 'welfare' and 'social assimilation' had started to replace that of 'absorption' and 'miscegenation'.

In Middleton's view, isolating children of mixed descent on run-down government settlements was not the way to achieve assimilation. In 1951 Carrolup (Marribank) and Moore River (Mogumber) were transferred to mission control, followed by Sister Kate's Home in 1956, and financial arrangements were made with them for the placement of removed children.

In the north financial support was offered to the existing missions and whole communities were forced to move, sometimes several times, as the smaller missions were closed. In 1955 Moola Bulla was sold. Although it was a condition of the sale that the new owners would look after the interests of the Aboriginal inhabitants of the area, the new owners arranged for the Department of Native Affairs to transport them to Fitzroy Crossing and Halls Creek.

I can't remember anything much about the day we were evicted from Moola Bulla [in July 1955] because they just came and told us to go. There was no explanation, we don't know what happened. We were stunned. There were four kids and no

money to feed them. A transport contractor took all the people into Halls Creek.

X

We camped around the race course for a few days, whilst asking for jobs on other stations ... The welfare gave us some rations, that's all. It was July and pretty cold and we camped, waiting, just like a refugee camp.

X

We were brought to Moola Bulla as children without our consent nor our mother's and the later kicked off the land after living there for so long. It caused us a lot of pain inside. We were displaced and lost with no sense of belonging.

Another aspect of the assimilation policy was that Indigenous children were to be accepted into the state schools. From the early 1950s the schools were opened to them. Children in the north were encouraged to attend schools in Derby, Wyndham and Broome while they stayed in government and mission-run educational hostels for most of the year. They were allowed home during holidays if they had a 'suitable home' to go to.

In the Kimberley, during this period, a 'suitable home' was difficult to provide for people who had limited employment opportunities, no housing and limited access to Welfare services. In any case, not all parents could afford to pay for airfares or other means for their children to travel long distances across the Kimberley.

As in other remote regions of Australia, Indigenous children were effectively separated for very long periods from their families, communities and cultures by their need to relocate for schooling. In 1958 it was estimated that 25% of Kimberley children were living in missions (Dr Anna Haebich).

'The welfare'

From 1951 in WA Aboriginal children were more likely to be removed under the *Child Welfare Act 1947* by the Child Welfare Department than by the Department of Native Welfare acting under the 1936 Act. This practice was formalised when the *Native Welfare Act 1954* was passed revoking the removal power of the Commissioner for Native Affairs. The Commissioner remained the legal guardian of all Aboriginal children except State wards until the *Native Welfare Act 1963* was passed.

Although the child welfare legislation required a court to be satisfied that the child was destitute or neglected, the requirement made little impact on the numbers removed in practice. The definition of destitution could be applied to

the situation of many Aboriginal families with few material resources whose lifestyle was the subject of constant surveillance by government officials.

... all of a sudden the Welfare just came and took them, they didn't say anything to me, just picked up the boys coming back from the shop and the Welfare made them wards of the State. I used to work at the hospital nursing, keeping my little family together. If the Welfare wanted to help they could have given money every fortnight like they do now ... They weren't helping taking [them] away or splitting us up, that was the most terrible thing that they done to my family, my sons and myself.

[mother of two boys removed in the late 1950s]

A thorough examination was not made as the father was not present. From what I saw however, I am satisfied that the children are 'neglected', if for no other reason than the shack they live in (welfare officer's file note dated 11 January 1968).

The definition of neglect was also interpreted in a climate of assimilation which denigrated the worth of Aboriginal lifestyles. Aboriginal families who had moved to towns and cities following the closure of some of the missions and settlements and had to re-establish themselves were particularly vulnerable to action under the 1947 Act.

In 1958 the Special Committee on Native Matters warned that 'removal of a child from his mother at an early age can cause serious psychological and mental disturbances'. This warning was ignored. Between 1958 and 1961 the number of Aboriginal children committed to government care more than doubled.

In 1966 the award for pastoral workers was extended to Aboriginal people, meaning that from 1968 Aboriginal workers in the pastoral industry were entitled to equal pay. This decision led to the eviction of whole communities from pastoral stations. These families settled on the outskirts of towns in conditions of dire poverty and were extremely vulnerable to intervention by 'the welfare'.

During this period Native Welfare Department publications increasingly stressed the need to keep families together. However, as records on the numbers of Aboriginal children in care were not kept, it is almost impossible to assess the impact of this change in emphasis. Overall the number of children committed to care between 1971 and 1973 halved and over half of those committed were returned home or placed with their extended family.

Towards self-management

In 1972 the Department of Native Welfare was abolished and its welfare responsibilities were absorbed by the Department of Community Welfare. At

the time there were 3,099 Aboriginal people in institutions, almost one in every ten Aboriginal people in the State. The majority of these people were children.

The *Child Welfare Act 1947* was amended in 1976 to repeal 'destitution' and 'neglect' as grounds for removal and to introduce the concept of being 'in need of care and protection'. Aboriginal children, however, remained dramatically over-represented among WA children in State care. In the period 1979-81 57% of children in care were Aboriginal and 66% of them had been placed with non-Indigenous families (*Children in Limbo* 1981 page 157).

In 1980 an Aboriginal Child Care Agency was established in Perth. It was replaced in 1991 by the Yorganop Child Care Corporation.

The Aboriginal Child Placement Principle became the policy of the Department of Community Services in 1985. A review of the department in 1989 showed that there had been a 58% reduction over the previous five years in the number of Aboriginal children in departmentally subsidised foster care and that most Aboriginal children were placed with Aboriginal caregivers, including 66% with relatives.

I never received any money from my employers or the Protection Board. I did not know what money was.

[Queensland: child removed at 3 years in 1915]

When anybody come to pick up a worker they used to line us up and they'd make you flex your muscles. If you were big and strong they'd pick you – like a slave market. I was sent out at 11. I worked there for seven and a half years, never got paid anything, all that time. We used to bring the cattle in ... we didn't get nothing. So I had to join the army to survive.

[Northern Territory: man removed in the 1930s]

Millicent

At the age of four, I was taken away from my family and placed in Sister Kate's Home – Western Australia where I was kept as a ward of the state until I was eighteen years old. I was forbidden to see any of my family or know of their whereabouts. Five of us D. children were all taken and placed in different institutions in WA. The Protector of Aborigines and the Child Welfare Department in their 'Almighty Wisdom' said we would have a better life and future brought up as whitefellas away from our parents in a good religious environment. All they contributed to our upbringing and future was an unrepairable scar of loneliness, mistrust, hatred and bitterness. Fears that have been with me all of life. The empty dark and lonely existence was so full of many hurtful and unforgivable events, that I cannot escape from no matter how hard I try. Being deprived of the most cherished and valuable thing in life as an

Aboriginal Child – love and family bonds. I would like to tell my story of my life in Sister Kate's home – WA.

My name is Millicent D. I was born at Wonthella WA in 1945. My parents were CD and MP, both 'half-caste' Aborigines. I was one of seven children, our family lived in the sandhills at the back of the Geraldton Hospital. There was a lot of families living there happy and harmonious. It was like we were all part of one big happy family.

In 1949 the Protector of Aborigines with the Native Welfare Department visited the sandhill camps. All the families living there were to be moved to other campsites or to the Moore River Aboriginal Settlement. Because my parents were fair in complexion, the authorities decided us kids could pass as whitefellas. I was four years old and that was the last time I was to see my parents again. Because my sisters were older than me they were taken to the Government receiving home at Mount Lawley. My brother Kevin was taken to the boys home in Kenwick. Colin and I were taken to the Sister Kate's Home. We were put in separate accommodation and hardly ever saw each other. I was so afraid and unhappy and didn't understand what was happening.

We were told Sundays was visiting day when parents and relatives came and spent the day. For Colin and I that was a patch of lies because our family were not allowed to visit. We spent each Sunday crying and comforting each other as we waited for our family. Each time it was the same – no one came. That night we would cry ourselves to sleep and wonder why. We were too young to understand we were not allowed family visits.

A couple of years passed and I started primary school.

It had been such a long time since I had seen my brother Colin. I was so helpless and alone. My brother had been taken away to the boys' home in Kenwick and now I was by myself. I became more withdrawn and shy and lived in a little world of my own hoping one day Mum would come and take me out of that dreadful place. As the years passed I realised that I would never see my family again.

They told me that my family didn't care or want me and I had to forget them. They said it was very degrading to belong to an Aboriginal family and that I should be ashamed of myself, I was inferior to whitefellas. They tried to make us act like white kids but at the same time we had to give up our seat for a whitefella because an Aboriginal never sits down when a white person is present.

Then the religion began. We had church three times a day, before breakfast, lunchtime and after school. If we were naughty or got home from school late we had to kneel at the altar for hours and polish all the floors and brass in the church. We had religion rammed down our throats from hypocrites who didn't know the meaning of the word. We

used to get whipped with a wet ironing cord and sometimes had to hold other children (naked) while they were whipped, and if we didn't hold them we got another whipping. To wake us up in the morning we were sprayed up the backside with an old fashioned pump fly spray. If we complained we got more. Hurt and humiliation was a part of our every day life and we had to learn to live with it.

Several more years passed and I still had no contact with my family, I didn't know what they looked like or how I could ever find them. By this time I was old enough to go to High School. This meant I didn't have to look after several of the younger kids as I had previously done, bathing, feeding and putting them on the potty and then off to bed, chopping wood before school and housework which all of us kids done and the housemothers sat back and collected wages – for doing nothing. My life was miserable, and I felt I was a nobody and things couldn't get any worse. But I was wrong.

The worst was yet to come.

While I was in first year high school I was sent out to work on a farm as a domestic. I thought it would be great to get away from the home for a while. At first it was. I was made welcome and treated with kindness. The four shillings I was payed went to the home. I wasn't allowed to keep it, I didn't care. I was never payed for the work I did at Sister Kate's so you don't miss what you didn't get, pocket money etc.

The first time I was sent to the farm for only a few weeks and then back to school. In the next holidays I had to go back. This time it was a terrifying experience, the man of the house used to come into my room at night and force me to have sex. I tried to fight him off but he was too strong.

When I returned to the home I was feeling so used and unwanted. I went to the Matron and told her what happened. She washed my mouth out with soap and boxed my ears and told me that awful things would happen to me if I told any of the other kids. I was so scared and wanted to die. When the next school holidays came I begged not to be sent to that farm again. But they would not listen and said I had to.

I ran away from the home, I was going to try to find my family. It was impossible, I didn't even know where to go. The only thing was to go back. I got a good belting and had to kneel at the altar everyday after school for two weeks. Then I had to go back to that farm to work. The anguish and humiliation of being sent back was bad enough but the worse was yet to come.

This time I was raped, bashed and slashed with a razor blade on both of my arms and legs because I would not stop struggling and screaming. The farmer and one of his workers raped me several times. I wanted to die, I wanted my mother to take me home where I would be

safe and wanted. Because I was bruised and in a state of shock I didn't have to do any work but wasn't allowed to leave the property.

When they returned me to the home I once again went to the Matron. I got a belting with a wet ironing cord, my mouth washed out with soap and put in a cottage by myself away from everyone so I couldn't talk to the other girls. They constantly told me that I was bad and a disgrace and if anyone knew it would bring shame to Sister Kate's Home. They showed me no comfort which I desperately needed. I became more and more distant from everyone and tried to block everything out of my mind but couldn't. I ate rat poison to try and kill myself but became very sick and vomited. This meant another belting.

After several weeks of being kept away from everyone I was examined by a doctor who told the Matron I was pregnant. Another belting, they blamed me for everything that had happened. I didn't care what happened to me anymore and kept to myself. All I wanted now was to have my baby and get away as far as I could and try and find my family.

My daughter was born [in 1962] at King Edward Memorial Hospital. I was so happy, I had a beautiful baby girl of my own who I could love and cherish and have with me always.

But my dreams were soon crushed: the bastards took her from me and said she would be fostered out until I was old enough to look after her. They said when I left Sister Kate's I could have my baby back. I couldn't believe what was happening. My baby was taken away from me just as I was from my mother.

Once again I approached the Matron asking for the Address of my family and address of the foster family who had my daughter. She said that it was Government Policy not to give information about family and she could not help me. I then asked again about my baby girl and was told she did not know her whereabouts. In desperation I rang the King Edward Memorial Hospital. They said there was no record of me ever giving birth or of my daughter Toni. Then I wrote to the Native Welfare Department only to be told the same thing and that there were no records of the D. family because all records were destroyed by fire.

I now had no other options but to find a job and somewhere to live. After working for a while I left Western Australia and moved to Adelaide to try and get my life together and put the past behind me. I was very alone, shy and not many friends and would break down over the simplest thing. Every time I saw a baby I used to wonder, could that be my little girl. I loved her and so desperately wanted her back. So in 1972 I returned to Western Australia and again searched for my family and child. I returned to see the Matron from Sister Kate's. This time she told me that my daughter was dead and it would be in my best interest to go back to South Australia and forget about my past and my family. I so wanted to find them, heartbroken I wandered the streets hoping for the

impossible. I soon realized that I could come face to face with a family member and wouldn't even know.

Defeated I finally returned to Adelaide. In my heart I believed that one day everything would be alright and I would be reunited with my family. My baby was dead. (That's what I was told). I didn't even get to hold her, kiss her and had no photographs, but her image would always be with me, and I would always love her. They couldn't take that away from me.

[WA woman removed in 1949]

In January 1996, Millicent received an enquiry from the South Australian welfare authorities. A woman born in 1962 was searching for her birth mother. This was Toni, Millicent's daughter. The two have since been reunited.]