

An aerial photograph of a river winding through a landscape of agricultural fields. A large, semi-transparent green rectangle with rounded corners is overlaid on the image, containing the title text. The text is white and centered within the green area.

Aboriginal Women's Heritage:
Ballina & Cabbage Tree Island



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Aboriginal readers are warned that this publication contains the names and images of Aboriginal people who have since passed away.

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Acknowledgments

A very special thank you to the twelve ladies who generously shared their stories and their own treasured photographs making this publication come to life. Their contribution will live on as a legacy for younger generations living on the lower Richmond River and surrounding areas.

Each individual story shared by the women gives a brief insight into their lives, living and growing up on Cabbage Tree Island and beyond. Many of the stories have a recurring theme of how times were hard but life was good. There were always things to do and people around, the community relationship was very strong.

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● Alstonville

● Ballina

● Pimlico Island

● Wardell

● Bagotville

● Cabbage Tree Island

● Goat Island

● Boundary Creek

● Broadwater

Twelve Aboriginal Women from Cabbage Tree Island and Ballina have contributed to this publication and taken part in a Department of Environment and Climate Change project designed to help raise the profile of the unique historical experience of Aboriginal women along the lower Richmond River. In this publication each of the women reminisce about their childhood and about their working lives as domestic servants and factory workers in the inner city suburbs of Brisbane and Sydney.

Their accounts describe the community spirit found between the various families that once lived on the island during a time when life was hard and limited for Aboriginal people. Their stories tell about how their parents protected them from the realities of the outside world, keeping them safe during a time when the Aborigines Welfare Board was a constant threat to Aboriginal families.

All the women tell about their daily lives living on the island and how, although they sometimes found life difficult, it was generally always interesting and fun. They describe their favourite places and activities and the way times have changed. Many of the women tell about how, as children, they always had something to do, they were never bored. They speak of the places where they played, where they fished and where they collected seafood to help supplement their family's diet.

In their youth, many of the women stripped sugar cane to earn pocket money to go to local events such as the Lismore Show or dances. Their joy and excitement shines through when they talk about going to these dances, about how they'd get ready, make their own clothes and purchase footwear from catalogues.

All the women have a strong connection to the area and to the people who live there. They describe the support and sense of connection that still unites the Cabbage Tree Island community. Times may have changed for these women but their memories, love and knowledge will now be passed on for all to appreciate.



Isabel Bolt

2



"It was always about sharing, providing for our families and living a happy life together."

There was only me and my brother

I was born at Box Ridge on the 11th of March 1925. I'm 82 years old. My parent's names were Linda Mercy and Walter Cowan. My father came over from Grafton and my mother was from Lismore.

They met each other and moved to the Aboriginal reserve near Lismore called Cubawee, where they lived for a number of years and then onto Coraki where they got married in a small church at Box Ridge.

My parents had only two children – me and my younger brother Rodney. Rodney passed away a few years ago at the age of seventy. He spent most of his life living in the Kempsey area where his children and family still live today.



Right: A photograph of Isabel's husband, Kenneth Bolt Senior.

Opposite: Isabel with her two sons Lionel Bolt and Kenneth Bolt Jr.

It was hard work in those days

My father did a lot of bush work, cutting and stripping trees out near Nimbin with his brother Vincent Cowan. They both were very hard workers. They would get up early every morning and travel on a horse and sulky from Lismore to Nimbin. They would never miss a day. Dad also did some odd jobs here and there for the white farmers around the area.

Mum never complained about the hard work

My mother worked at the Coraki Hospital in the laundry section for nearly fifteen years. It was hard work for her, washing baskets of laundry and ironing staff uniforms. She loved doing her work and she never once complained.



Above: Isabel with one of her granddaughters, Lynnette Buchanan at Alstonville.

Opposite: Picture of the Wardell Bridge constructed in 1960..

The old Cubawee school

I first started school at Cubawee. Before they had the school transferred over from Modenville, the teacher used to have her classes under the tree. It was only a little school, mainly for the Aboriginal kids from the reserve. I enjoyed attending school there – it was really good. I went there for a couple of years, then later on Mum and Dad decided to move to Coraki, so I changed schools and went to Coraki Public.

Food coupons from the manager

One of the managers back then used to hand out these food coupons to some of the family living on the island. It was similar to a ration pack. They were like little pamphlets with numbers on them. Each time you received one of these coupons you had to take it into town, to the grocery store and hand the food coupon to the shop keeper. He would then hand you a small pack of food supplies – the regular items: sugar, butter, tea, porridge and condensed milk. Occasionally, if you were lucky, he'd give you a top up with flour and rice, but that rarely happened.

It was really hard back then. You wouldn't survive on those ration packs today because they only lasted a couple days.

Camping during the school holidays

As kids we were always getting up to mischief, making our own fun. Sometimes after school or on the weekends, a group of us kids would go looking for bush tucker at the back of Box Ridge near the big swamps area. We'd be catching turtles and chasing birds.

I remember this old fellow, Harry Duke. He would sometimes pack up the horse and sulky and take the kids camping for a week during the school holidays along with his wife.

We'd go fishing down along the river bank and hunt for bush tucker every day. We'd catch wallabies and kangaroos and cook them on the open camp fire. They were the best feeds and his wife would cook big dampers every night. They were the good times. The old people were very smart, teaching us the various methods of how to hunt in the bush.

Always listening to our Elders

It's not the same any more. Nowadays the kids are bored and getting into trouble all the time. There's no one around to teach them the old ways. I can remember when I was young we'd sit and listen to the old people. We'd learn about the things they used to do.

I met my husband at a football game

I first met my husband at a football match at Oak's Oval in Lismore where he was playing football for the Cabbage Tree Island team against the Evans Head Air Force team. I remember that day very well because he had broken his arm during the game and his mother, Granny Bolt, had run out onto the field that day to see what was wrong with him.

We lived at Coraki for a few years and later got married in a small church at Box Ridge and had eight children. Later we decided to move to Cabbage Tree Island and live there with Kenneth's sister, Aunty Fanny Roberts, who had nine children.

All together in a three bedroom house

I remember the little three bedroom, galvanised house that we lived in with it's kitchen, veranda and open fireplace in the centre. It was hard at times, living in such a small place with all those kids but we did our best to provide for them all. We would share a lot of the duties when providing for the kids. Fanny would cook meals one night and then I would cook the next.



The most memorable thing was that the kids enjoyed each others company and never complained. They never fought – they always looked out for one another. One thing I'll never forget was their birthdays. There were nearly two or three birthdays every month, sometimes even two in the same week. We'd have a tribe of kids celebrating each birthday – the house would be packed full of kids running wild.

Kenneth worked on the island as a handyman

My husband worked as the handyman on the island for a number of years. He did a range of different jobs like collecting the toilet tins and doing the rubbish run. If people had a problem fixing something and couldn't fix it themselves, he was the person to call.

He also worked in Lismore for a number of years at Preston Wood, stacking timber onto a truck and then travelling as far as Grafton delivering truckloads of wood. He really enjoyed doing that type of work because he got to do a lot of travelling up and down the North Coast area.

Paid little money

I did some work in Lismore for a couple of years, for a solicitor by the name of Mr. Hosier. When I first started working, I was only paid one pound a week, but it was a lot of money back then because you could buy bread for only three pence in those days.

Not like today, the price of things is ridiculous. Today you have to pay three to four dollars just for a loaf of bread! Every thing was cheap back then – you'd be amazed how much you could buy with one pound. Anything from sugar, teabags, flour and butter.

I also did odd jobs down in Ballina at this boarding house doing the cooking and cleaning for a lady by the name of Miss Rivers. She was

a very nice lady who treated all of her employees well. There was me, a couple of white girls and the Ferguson girls who also worked there. Every morning we'd jump into a boat and travel across to the mainland and catch the bus to Ballina for work.

Hard working women

Back then most of the ladies on the island would find odd jobs with the local farmers, doing the cooking and cleaning, even the laundry. All the women on the island were keen workers – they'd go out looking for work. Sometimes the girls would even be out in the cane fields in the hot sun stripping cane. That was really hard work for very little money.

And not once did any of the ladies complain about the working conditions. All they were thinking about, was putting food on the table and clothes on their children's backs.





Above: Isabel with her family: (Back row left to right) Lewis, Dianne, Kenneth, Lynnette and John. (Front row) Cheryl and Isabel.

Opposite left: Isabel with her good friend and sister-in-law Edna Moran at Evans Head Art Gallery.





“I have a spiritual connection to the island. My spirit is connected here.”

Memories of Cabbage Tree Island

My name is Sandra Beryl Bolt, maiden name Ferguson. I was born on the 26 December 1945 in Coffs Harbour, NSW. My parents were Beryle Cook-Williams and Artie Ferguson.

I spent most of my childhood on Cabbage Tree Island. I remember in the early days we used to do a lot of travelling between the island and Coffs Harbour visiting my dad’s family – Nanny and Papa – Sam and Ada Ferguson and Dad’s sister’s families – Aunty Linda and Uncle Percy Craige and Aunty Bessie.

We also spent time in Currumbin, Queensland with my mum’s sister, Aunty Sissy and her husband Uncle Doug Thompson and family. Another of my relatives we spent time with, was Uncle Clive Williams and Aunty Ida at Grays Lane, Casino and Coraki.



Right: Sandra’s sisters and brothers (from left), Christine Ferguson, Mark Ferguson, and the baby, Donna Ferguson.

Opposite: Sandra with her family (from left to right), Michael, Hector Bolt (husband), Dean, Buck, Lisa, Ernie, Sean and Sandra, taken in Lismore.

I remember each time we came back to the island my dad would have to report to the manager and get his approval before the family were allowed to come on. We couldn't just arrive on the island by boat and go straight around to Granny and Papa Cook's place or to my Grandfather Walter Cook's place. We had to report to the manager first.



The old corrugated iron house

My grandfather had built a house next door to his parents, Jack and Susan Cook (Granny and Papa Cook). The house was made of corrugated iron with two doors and two windows and a big chimney which was square. My mum and dad and all of us kids shared the rest of the house.

My grandfather had a great big tool cabinet in his room where he kept the tools for his boat building. I remember watching him build boats, not traditional ones, white man's boats. He used to make sinkers for his hand lines by melting the lead and pouring the hot metal into casts of different sizes. I have a picture of my brother, Bunny, sitting beside where our grandfather used to be always busy working on his boats.

Later on we moved into this blue house at the other end of the island. It was a government house with two bedrooms and a big verandah which was converted into a bedroom and a lounge room. It also had a shower and a laundry with a built-in copper tub to boil the water for washing clothes.

The old days

There was strong community spirit on the island when I was growing up. Children were taught to respect their elders.

My grandfather Papa and his brothers used to have a vegetable garden where they grew fresh produce. They took water from this well they had dug themselves. I remember watching my grandfather drawing water from the well with a bucket or tin can tied to a piece of rope that he'd throw down and pull up full of water. Then he'd go around with a watering can (a tin with holes in it) and hand water the plants. There were no hoses and taps back then.

Left: Sandra's brother, Barry Ferguson (Bunny) as a young boy at Cabbage tree Island, 1959.



Above: 1962 – Sandra, as a domestic worker at Vacluse Sydney, with the family's daughter, Deborah Wickman.

The fresh vegetables would complement the rations that the old people used to get from the manager. Twice a week the rations came with porridge, tea, sugar, flour, fresh meat and bread.

I remember old Frank Marlowe used to milk the cows for the manager and we'd have to go around with a container to collect a billy can of fresh cow's milk.

In the early days, I remember having to wake up early in the mornings at my grandfather's house to gather firewood to start the open fire for the old people's cups of tea and porridge. I remember eating all sorts of bush tucker in the early days too. We would eat

burabi (koala), flying foxes, bandicoot, possums, carpet snakes, wallaby, kangaroo and porcupine. One day my uncle and another man got fined by the police for killing burabi. After that we never ate them again.

The river supplied us with food. As young kids we had our ways of collecting a feed so we would never go hungry. We used to haul for prawns with two people holding a hessian bag or an old sheet at each end and we'd walk around in the water near the mangrove edge where the prawns used to be. When we'd get a few prawns in the bag, there was a third person behind us who would pick up the prawns and put them in the tin. We'd do this until the tin was full and then we'd take the prawns home and cook them up in salt water. We'd catch mud crabs in homemade traps too.

Sometimes we'd sit quietly on the wharf, catching king prawns with our hands. We used to catch the prawns by quickly grabbing their whiskers when they came close to us and then we'd put them into a tin. We'd call these 'hand prawns'. When I got older I spent time sitting on the river banks at night fishing for jewfish. Another way of catching fish was what we called 'hopping'. We'd row around the island near the mangrove's roots disturbing the mullets. The paddles from the row boat would disturb the mullet and they would hop into the boat. Some nights we would get heaps, on other nights we'd only get a couple.

Boundary Creek

I recall many times out there at Boundary Creek with the old women gathering pipis and watching them fish on the beach. Each family group had their little campfires set up among the oak trees. Each had a little campfire to cook their catch and bake their dampers.

The kids would explore in the sand hills for berries and this succulent plant called pig face and they would catch turtles in the nearby lagoon. After cyclones up north, we often found coconuts washed up on the beach. The kids would get excited over seeing coconuts.



Christmas time

These were the happiest times for family gatherings. Cousins from Kempsey and Nambucca would come to visit us. The men would prepare the chooks. Papa used to make the best Christmas pudding.

Boxing day

Each year every family member would travel down to Evans Head. Mobs gathered there every year. It was something we all looked forward to. It's a ritual which still happens today.

The island school

My memories of school on the island were mostly happy ones. Some events I would rather forget. We were taught a lot about health and hygiene – each student had their own little health kit with toothbrush, soap, washer and hair brush. First thing in the morning we would march into school to the tune of the *British Grenadiers*, played on a tonette. Sometimes I got to play it.

Sports Day at Woodburn

This was the big day all the students looked forward to, because we got to leave the island and travel to Woodburn to compete against the local schools in athletics. Although our school was little, we took out many trophies and lots of our kids went on to compete in Sydney, which made us proud.

Many of the mothers would put a lot of effort into making the kids look good on the day. They would sew green and gold ribbons down seams of the white shorts. The kids would wear a white shirt with white sandshoes that would be gleaming with white shoe cleaner. All the students looked so good.

Ballina High School

We hated catching the bus to Ballina High School. Every morning we would catch the launch over to the mainland to catch the Flemming's bus and Frank Marlowe, the handyman, would ferry us across. My high school years were not so happy, as I was quite lonely and unhappy.



Above : Waiting for the school bus, from left to right is, Sandra, Eileen Moran, Christy Bolt, Bill Caldwell, and Walter Blakely (Sonia).

Above left: Cabbage Tree Island school girl's tunnel ball team – from front to back is Sandra, Yvonne Kay, Joyce Roberts, Lynette Daley, Sue Anderson and Dorothy James.

Sent away to work

Me and my sister Irene were sent to Sydney to work as domestic servants in the Eastern Suburbs. This was common practice during those days, all girls were sent away to work. There were Aboriginal girls working as domestics in a lot of the houses in the Eastern Suburbs back then and I became friends with many of them.

Working in Sydney was a real culture shock for me as I had never been in a white person's house before. The closest I got to a white person's house was the manager's house on the island. But we never, ever set a foot inside the door when we'd visited him, we'd stand outside the door and speak to him or her from there.

Then suddenly, I found myself living in this beautiful house with a piano and thick white carpets. I found cooking and cleaning for these people to be an enjoyable experience.

Recreational activities

The river was not just a place for providing food, it was also a place where a lot of recreational and other activities happened. I remember religious ceremonies were held there, people were baptised in the river. During the summer months, on the weekends and after school, swimming was what everyone did. There were areas around the island that were cleared of trees and this is where people would dive off the river banks and make swings.

There were Girl Guide activities I remember and people came up from Ballina. Keech Morris used to show movies in the hall – he'd sell hot pies, chocolates and drinks. We'd play rounders on the island – everyone would join in, young and old, girls and boys. We would play until it got dark. We also had a marching girls team called the *Amplettes* who were trained by a couple of women from Ballina. We competed with other teams in Lismore and surrounding towns.

Family totem

My dad used to tell us that the *Butcher Bird* was our totem. He said his father used to tell him stories when they lived at Boundary Creek. My dad went to school at Broadwater. Whenever someone in our family dies or if something happens to someone else who is in a close relationship to our family, the *Butcher Bird* appears or calls out.



Above : Sandra with granddaughters Cassandra and Jasmine Donnelly, taken in Watson Bay, Sydney in 1998.





“It was really good in those days we all enjoyed it and we’d always look after each other – sharing and caring.”

My name is Patricia May Cook. I was born over in MacLean on the Clarence River where we lived on Ullagundahi Island until I was about five years old. I am currently sixty six years of age and have two sons. Their names are Anthony and Michael Cook. I met my husband, Henry Bolt, here on the island in 1959. It wasn’t until we were both moved back to the Island that we decided to live together.

Dad and Mum’s little old house

My parents had ten children. I have three sisters, then me and six brothers. We all lived together in a small, two bedroom house here on the island. I can remember my father doing a lot of work cutting cane and my mother looking after us kids. She cared for us dearly.

My parents travelled around the countryside for quite a while looking for seasonal work. We lived in Coffs Harbour for a year and then moved on to Sydney for a year and a half. Then my parents decided to come back here and live on Cabbage Tree Island. I’ve been living here ever since.

I can still picture that little place down here on the southern end of the island. It was a galvanized tin shack with a couple windows. It was a cosy little place and we didn’t worry about what it looked like. As long as we had a roof over our head and kept our family together, that’s what mattered most.



Right: Patty’s grandfather, John Blakely.

Opposite: Patty with her husband Henry Bolt.

Sydney suburbs of Matraville

We lived in Sydney for a while, near the Chinese markets in Matraville. It was good because we'd always be hanging around at the markets and the Chinese people were very nice, they were always polite to us.

I also attended school at La Perouse when I was only five years old. I can remember me and my sister Fay walking to school every morning from Matraville over to La Perouse Public School. Me and Fay did that every morning for a year.

Back then I was good at sports and would go to athletic training after school at the Sydney Cricket Ground right up until I was six years old. You know, just thinking about it, I was the only Koori girl there then. I remember every time I would run in a race I'd be looking around for other Aboriginal kids in the crowd.

On the river

Nearly every Saturday we'd row the boat over to the mainland. All the boys would go and the girls too. That was good because they'd always leave the boats down on the river bank for us kids for when we were finished and ready to return home.

Our trip to Ballina

One day all us girls from the island wanted to go and see a movie. We decided to catch the bus to the Ballina picture theatre and see an Elvis movie called *Loving You*. After watching the movie we all headed outside to the bus stop to catch the bus home and sure enough, we'd missed the bus.

Below: Patty, with her older sister Fay Smith, at a function in Lismore.



We hung around to see if there was another bus heading towards Woodburn but to our luck there was not one bus travelling out of Ballina so we all decided to walk home.

There we were about eight of us walking along the Old South Ballina Road when all of a sudden it started raining. There we all were, running around looking for shelter under the trees. We even ran into the cane fields trying to have a sleep – but no good, no one could go to sleep – so we kept on walking. We walked all the way home to Cabbage Tree Island.

We made it home at sunrise the next morning. Thinking about it now makes me laugh. The old times hold good memories about when we were young girls.

Gathering water for a hot bath

In those days there were no baths inside the houses, so we had to go outside and bath in these big old copper tubs. I remember always waiting for the water to boil. We'd go and collect the water in containers from the well down the road and carry it back home. It's so much easier these days. All you have to do is turn on a tap and you have instant hot water.

We'd always be frightened of the manager. The old people would say to us, "The manager's coming to get you and take you away". The old people would scare us with that all the time.

Playing on the island

Before old Kenneth Bolt cut the long grass, a lot of the girls would play together in the paspalum grass. I can still picture it today – me and all the girls playing cubby house in the long grass. We would have little rooms with a kitchen and we used to stuff leaves with paspalum grass and roll them up into little babies.

That was just some of the things we'd get up to. It was fun, we really enjoyed ourselves playing together on the island. There was always something to do. It was either swimming, playing cubby house or running around and getting up to mischief.

Looking after the young ones

Well I reckon it was good here on the island, because everyone that was living here then, was basically looking after each other. Even if it meant watching other people's kids for the day. I remember some of the parents had to go away for work and their kids would be left here on the island, being minded, right up until their parents returned home. It didn't bother the kids much because all they were worried about was running around and playing with the rest of the kids on the island. I was always looking after kids – my relatives kids.

The island was always clean

Back then the same old fellows would work under the manager doing odd jobs here and there on the island. They were like handymen for the community. If you had a problem and you couldn't fix it, they would be the ones to call on. I remember Uncle Kenneth Bolt used to have this place spic and span. He'd be slashing once a week. He never missed cutting the grass. He'd do a number of jobs – you'd see him collecting the rubbish from the houses and taking it down to the point where they'd bury it in the sand down there.

He'd even do the toilet run, collecting the tins from out the back of the houses and taking them down to the river bank where he'd cover the waste with tar. He was a very hard worker.



Watching Uncle Frank milk the cows

Uncle Frank Marlow was also a handyman on the island. He worked for the manager. I can remember when he used to do the milk run, early every morning, in the cold, with no shoes on. There were cattle around near the manager's house. He would round the cows up and milk them one by one.

Every time he'd go and milk the cows, we'd be all sitting along the fence watching him. We had some really good times with Uncle Frank. I remember he'd see us and say, "You kids better not muck up or the manager will take you away to the Welfare Board." We'd run home after he'd say that.

***Above:** Patty with her husband Henry Bolt and Eldest son Anthony Cook.*

***Opposite:** Photograph of the island on the Richmond River where they used to row the boats to catch the bus to Ballina and walk to Boundary Creek Beach.*

Source: Ashley Moran







*“It used to be lovely you know, we would all get together and sing.
We were a real happy and loving family.”*

I was born on Cabbage Tree Island and was brought into the world by Granny Kapeen on the 16th June 1921 as Mavis Florence Combo and I'm now 85 years of age. Mum had eleven children and they were all born on the island.

Dad worked to support the family

My mother's name was Florence Mary Jane Perry and Dad's was Harry Henderson Combo. A lot of the time, Mum would stay home and look after the kids. I must say she looked after us very well. Love and kindness was shown to us all the time – a real Christian family I was raised in. It was lovely.

Before my parents moved onto the island, Dad worked on stations out near Tabulam, Casino and other places. I can remember when I was a kid, Dad would work on the cane a lot of the time and then sometimes go across to the mainland and work on banana farms.

Dad would cut and load the cane, working eight hours a day, for only six shillings a week. There was another farmer in Wardell, paying

eight shillings – that was because he couldn't get any workers. Of course a lot of men left the farmer paying six shillings and went to work for the extra two.

The work was very hard for very little money. The men would be slaving out in the hot sun all day. They'd start at seven thirty in the morning and finish in the afternoon.



Right: Men from the island stripping cane and loading it onto the barge.

Opposite: A photograph of my mother's beautiful garden with lycee tree and peach trees to the right.

Gardening

My mother was a wonderful gardener. She knew exactly when to gather all the seeds. She was always in the garden collecting and recycling her own seeds.

Mother would often let plants go to seed so she could collect them and store them in jars. I can remember, as a kid, all these jars were placed perfectly along the shelf with all these different types of seeds ready to be planted. She had all different types of pumpkin seeds, various water melon seeds and a large variety of seeds dried out. As kids we weren't allowed to touch them.

Mum would always teach us things about gardening, vegies and when's the best time to plant. We also helped her remove weeds. Me and Bill, my brother, loved spending time with Mum in the garden. She would teach us everything. My other brother and sisters were too lazy to help out in the garden. They wouldn't do a thing.

Memorable school days with Mrs. Dally

My school days were some of my most memorable days. We'd get up early every morning to get dressed for school. The school days were very long days back then. At nine o'clock we'd be ready waiting in a line at the front door of the school for Mrs. Dally to do a roll call. I can remember the manager's house was in front of the school. She'd be walking over clapping her hands. All the boys and girls would stop playing and assemble into one line for her to do a roll call. When she read out our names we'd walk up the steps and into class.

I had to leave school at the age of fourteen because Mum needed help with my baby brothers and sister at home. Before I could leave I had to get permission from the manager because of my age. You had to be fifteen to leave school back then. The manager told my parents that it was okay for me to leave and granted me permission with the condition that I had to look for work.

We lived in a house built by Dad

Dad was pretty handy, he and Uncle Jack were pretty good carpenters. They could do anything. They built their own houses. Dad built our house with a kitchen and two extra rooms. He attached a veranda at the front and back which made it a lot bigger than most of the other houses on the island. Part of our bedroom, the main part which was portioned off, was made from pine. This was part of the hallway out to the veranda. I used to have to get down and scrub it – on my knees – for Mum. Didn't think nothing of it when I did it. That was part of the work that kids had to do to help their mother.

Dad was always doing things to the house. He converted the back veranda into two rooms – one for the boys and at the other end there was a room for the girls. He even extended the kitchen out onto the back veranda.



Above: The house my father built on Cabbage Tree Island.



Above: Younger brother, Norm Combo, preparing the cane fields.

We were always doing things

Me and my sister would always have a game of cricket with my brothers. Sometimes we'd use tin drums for the wickets until one of the boys carved some stumps out of tree branches and positioned them at either end of our little pitch.

My sisters and brother would always try and get out of a job if they could. Eva, my sister, was a real scoundrel at doing that. We had to wash up every night. I had to cook and help Mum. I could make dampers and scones and do all the cooking.

The chooks and the cows

Mum always had chooks and ducks so we always had our own eggs. Dad had a couple of cows and I had to milk them. We always had plenty of milk. Mum used to make our own butter.

Rushing around on inspection days

The manager's wife would come around twice a week to do house inspections. Everybody would clean up and scrub their houses to make sure they were real clean.

The good times at Boundary Creek

Bill, my brother, would go out and fish a lot at Boundary Creek, out along Walsh's Lane. Bill would walk out with Granny Cook and Granny Bolt. They'd go out almost every day. You'd see them walking around the island with a bag on their backs, ready to go across to the main channel and walk out to the beach.

Bill loved going to Boundary Creek fishing. He was the only young fellow out there with all the Elders. I think he was about eighteen or nineteen at the time. He would always stand there in the cold water with a hand line fishing. Later in life he developed rheumatic fever which weakened him. At that time it was called arthritis.

Every Christmas Day and Boxing Day we'd go out to Boundary Creek for our holidays. Every one from the island would go out there to play games on the beach in the afternoon. They were lovely days. Mum would put a tablecloth on the ground and we would spread out all the food. Everyone would have a great feast out there. In the afternoon busloads used to come – all the friends from Casino, Coraki – everywhere.

Old Fred Fletchers lived on a property near Boundary Creek. I remember he didn't like us going through his property. We always jumped his fence and walked across the cane field to get to the beach. Most of the time Fred would lock the gate on us. There would be a big notice board saying 'Trespassers will be prosecuted'.

Leaving home to get a job

At the age of sixteen I got a job working for Dr. Lawrence at Alstonville. She was very good to me. It had to be discussed with the manager, but he was okay with it. I worked there at the surgery for twelve months. I worked for the doctor too, looking after the children and doing their house work. They had two little boys.



More or less, I had to look after the family and do the washing and cleaning. She just loved Aboriginal people. She was a very kind, loving woman. Every time they went out they'd take me. They would treat me as if I was family and not a servant.

They had a copper sink in the laundry. We would boil the sheets in it. I never had a clothes hoist. We would hang the clothes on the old lines. All these white sheets would go out, so white, flapping in the wind. Mum used to do this too.

Above: Mavis doing her painting at Lismore TAFE.

It was hard work, doing the cooking and looking after the doctor's surgery. The doctor surgery is still there today, at Alstonville. It's a heritage home now. It's just at the end of the street past the showground. It's all housing there now.

Recreation ground

I remember when they made the recreation ground straight down from our house. We dug some holes, my husband Frank and I, to play golf. We made golf sticks out of mangroves. We would make the golf sticks by pulling the mangroves roots out. These used to be

all shapes. The roots were cut and then sanded down to make them smooth. We would play all around the field, measuring our path from one hole to another. We played golf that way. We just played amongst ourselves, all the time.

Marbles

Me, my brothers and Eva were good marble players. Eva was a great shooter. She was a champ. She'd knock them clean out of the ring in one go. Mum let us sew on her machine and we each made a little dilly bag of our own to keep our marbles in.

Mum loved her ducks

Dad had a barn where we'd husk the corn. We'd pick the corn up by horse and cart and bring it up to the barn. All the kids helped with the husks, sometimes until about eleven at night. You see, to grind the husk, someone had to turn this wheel and drop the corn into this vat and then the grain would come out into a big galvanised tub. We had stopped it half way this one time and this duck decided to nest on top of the corn.

One day Mum missed this duck. She knew every chook that she owned. I hadn't seen that duck around either. She thought something had killed it, but then it turned up. One day Mum looked outside to find the duck walking down the paddock with eleven or thirteen little ducklings, all trailing along.

She loved her ducks, my mum. I remember when Fred was about two and he was playing in the paddock, well when we looked up, he was being chased by the mother duck! She was flapping her wings after him. He must have gone to pick up one of the babies. Anyway, Fred ended up on the ground, while the duck was pecking him. I went and shooed her away and grabbed him. Fred soon learnt – don't go near the young ones when the mother is around – they protect their young.



Top: Doing the maypole at the Christmas picnic. From far left, is Grace Roberts, Dicky Roberts, Collin Kapeen, Fanny Roberts, Eva Combo, Marie James, myself and my brother who is in the background sitting on the chair.

Middle: Fred Combo riding one the many draft horses on Cabbage Tree Island.

Above: The old ferry at Wardell before the bridge was constructed.



Yvonne Delsignore

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“Bush food was good because anything they’d catch was shared between the community.”

My name is Yvonne Delsignore but my maiden name was Yvonne Cook. My nickname is Aunty Ponny. They called me Ponny at an early age. I don’t know how or why I got that name or even who gave it to me.

I’m 71 years old and I was born on Cabbage Tree Island on the 4th of August 1935. I’m a Bundjalung woman. My people were called the Nambarrig clan, meaning people of the reeds.

Living in the old tin shack

I grew up on Cabbage Tree. We lived at the southern end of the island in a little house made out of galvanised iron. Uncle Henry Cook built it. He was living in it before us. It was a very small three bedroom house with a kitchen and an open fireplace. In the house, living was me, were my sisters, Dawn and Eileen, and my brother Ben. My eldest brother lived down the road with my grandparents, Pappa and Granny Cook. They lived at the northern end of the island.

It was hard work in those times. We’d collect fire wood and cook bread to eat because we couldn’t go to the shop and buy a loaf of bread. I remember we had to go down to Wardell and get a 25 pound bag of flour. That was my job of course.

Opposite: Yvonne with her oldest daughter Kim when they were living in Sydney.

From school to school

I started school when I was about eight years old and left when I was fifteen. I’d only just started at high school down in Ballina when I had to leave. But I didn’t only go to just that school, my parents did a lot of travelling around, looking for seasonal work and wherever they found work, that’s where we’d go to school. I’ve been to Catholic and Public schools in Coffs Harbour. I even attended school in Nambucca Heads. We always travelled around so I didn’t have that much education. What I know now, I taught myself.

Always doing things as a kid

When we moved to Nambucca Heads we’d go with Val Smith catching worms. Then we’d sell the worms just to make a few bob. Those times you couldn’t just go and ask your parents for money to go to the movies or to the shop. We did the little things to get pocket money. We’d go around picking up them old cordial bottles and selling them and we’d even cut paspalum grass.

We all had to do our chores to help out our parents. We'd help with the cooking and I'd bring in the milk after milking the cow we had. When my parents went fishing I had to go around and sell the fish. We'd catch prawns with a net my father made. Mostly everyone on the island had a boat. Sometimes we'd get those ration packs from the manager, like sugar, tea and a bit of flour.

Opposite: Frank and Yvonne on their wedding day.

Below right: (From left) Son Sean with his cousins Jill, Loweena, Barry and Clayton ready to eat some mud crabs.

Below: (From left) Husband Frank, son Sean, Yvonne and Jenny.



Sharing and caring

The men would go out and hunt. They'd go out to Bungawalbyn Swamp and they'd bring back all this wild bush food. All the food they'd catch was shared between the community on the island. Our people shared everything. We were taught about sharing and caring for one another.

Always listening to the Elders

What I can remember most about the Elders was obedience, respect and sharing. They'd go hunting goannas, snakes and turtle right up towards Bungawalbyn Swamp. They'd bring it back and share it amongst everyone. Even when they went fishing, they caught mullet and that was shared.

That's what I liked about the old days, people really did care for each other. When Elders spoke to you, you never back answered, you listened. And if you didn't do what they asked, you'd get a clout across the ear.

Papa Cook would always say, "If someone comes to your house, you give them a bed and food. You never turn anyone away." I think that's why a lot of the elderly people today never turn anyone away.





Going to the beach during the holidays

We'd always look forward to going to Boundary Creek, getting pipis and camping out there on the beach. That was when they didn't have any cars. Back then, we'd walk out to Boundary – we used to walk every where. It was mostly at Easter and Christmas time that we'd go out there. That was good – we'd have a lot of fun out there. I can remember the shoreline had so much driftwood – there was heaps of driftwood – all the the kids would collect it to make the fires on the beach at night. There was plenty of fish at that time.

In the shade near the lagoon

I can remember a freshwater lake at Boundary Creek too. We'd be catching turtle, catfish and mullet. What a beautiful lagoon! It was full of life but now it's all covered with weeds and polluted by the cane farmers with all their drainage running into it.

Then I met my husband

Frank worked in the area at the time near Broadwater but I didn't meet him up here. He worked at Broadwater cutting cane. It wasn't until later when I moved to Sydney that I met Frank. We used to drink at the same water hole, the Paddington Hotel.

After seeing each other for a while we decided to move in together. We found a small little place at Edgecliff in Sydney. A few months later I fell pregnant with my first child, Kim. During those days jobs were getting hard to find so Frank decided to go and find some work on the Warragamba Dam near Sydney. Myself being pregnant, I decided to head home back to Cabbage Tree Island and every now and then Frank would support me by sending me money. He supported me well. After Kim was born, Frank finished up working on the dam and came home. Kim was six months old. We were staying at the Railway Hotel for a while until we found a unit to live in.

With the manager's permission

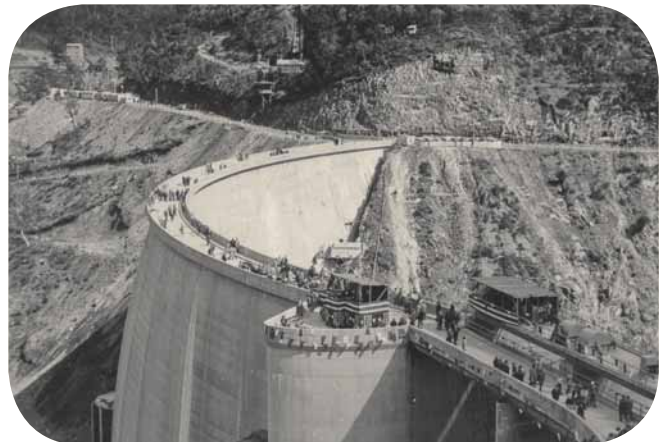
We'd always have to ask the manger for permission when we left the island. We had to tell him where we were going and even what we were doing so he could grant us leave. We were a bit like sheep, I suppose.

He'd try to stop my husband from coming onto the island because my husband is white and so he didn't want him staying on the island. I can remember that happening to quite a few people back then. You always had to report to the manager.

We'd have dances on the island

They'd have bush dances on the island. They were great! They'd have dances to raise money for the hospital and for the ambulance down in Ballina. I can remember Alan Marlow going out bush and bringing back lots of palm leaves to decorate the old hall.

Victor Moran and Roy Cameron would play the gum leaf. Someone played the piano accordion and Uncle Doug Anderson was on the violin. We used to really look forward to those dances.



It was shared amongst the families

I can remember Papa and Granny Cook had a macadamia tree growing outside their house. They'd collect all the nuts and put them away. They'd store them, putting them away until they had enough to share amongst everyone.



Above: Yvonne with her husband Frank

Top: Yvonne, with her granddaughters Nalini and Laurin, celebrating NAIDOC week in Ballina.

Right: Yvonne's oldest daughter Kim standing outside the Woodburn Church after her Christening.

Left: The Warragamba Dam where Frank had once worked.

Everything was shared then, you know. But the main thing I liked was the respect. Respect for your elders. Today you're not allowed to hit your own children. We'd get hit all the time. We didn't like it of course, but we still had to put up with it. I think it builds character when you get the stick and you're told what to do. That builds your character. I'd go through all that again if I had to.





Lexie James



“We used to have to wash our school clothes each day if they got dirty.”

I was born in 1932 on Cabbage Tree Island as Lexie James and I'm 74 years old. My mother's name is Amauley Dorothy Kapeen. She was born and raised here on the island. My father was Morris Hamilton James. He was born on Ullagundahi Island, over on the Maclean River. He met my mother when they were very young and then later moved here to live on Cabbage Tree Island.

My parents supported us well

Dad was a cane cutter, all the men used to do that kind of work back in those days. Dad worked for the white farmers along the *Back Channel Road*, cane cutting and doing odd jobs here on the island for the manager. My mother stayed at home a lot of the time, looking after us kids. My parents had seven children – I have three brothers and three sisters. We all grew up on the island together. I have some wonderful memories of my family growing up – some funny stories too. I tell some of the younger kids today about what we used to get up to on the island back then.

Working in Ballina

I used to work for a couple at Ballina, mainly cleaning. The lady was pregnant and so was I. I have two children now, Peter, my son and Narelle, my daughter. While I was in hospital at Ballina having Narelle, the lady I was working for was having her baby at the same time. She always asks about Narelle to this very day. I tell them we will call in sometime when Narelle is home.

Our house

We had a three bedroom house. It had a front and back veranda. The manager used to come down to do inspections, to make sure the house was clean. He used to go right through the house. The manager's name back then was Mr. Ridgeway.

It was Jimmy Ridgeway's (the bloke who used to sing those Country and Western songs) parents who were the managers. He was appointed by the Aboriginal Welfare Board and the Aboriginal Protection Board. He was an Aboriginal man.

My school days

I went to school on the island with my brothers and sisters. The school was down at the bottom of the island. I think we had a teacher named Mr. Howard. School was a bit strict but it was okay. We used to have to wash our school clothes each day if they got dirty. We would wash them by hand using a bucket and then hang them out to dry for school the next day.

A very funny thing happened to me this one time when I was young. There was a bunch of us kids fishing down on the river one day and we were all just about to throw our lines into the water, when one of my friends hooked me! Got me right on the back of the head! It was aching let me tell you. We had to go and get help to get the hook out of my head. The hook was clipped and the manager scraped the rest out and put these band aids all over it. I can laugh now but at the time – gee it hurt!! We all remember that day, that's for sure.

Boundary Creek and fishing

I remember we used to go over to Boundary Creek. We would make a fire out there, not very far from this white fellow's place. He would go crazy if we started a fire. We made sure the fire was looked after. Once we were finished, we put it out. When we used to go out to Boundary Creek, we'd collect pipis and cook them on the fire.

I remember we used to go fishing and go down to the bank hopping logs and looking for cobra. It's like a worm that lives in rotting wood in the swampy areas, it's a delicacy. We used to go hunting too. We went fishing all the time. We would go straight down the banks and throw in our lines. We fished up and down the shore line, even down to the point.

We would go out in the boat at night and the mullet would be jumping, they would jump right into the boat. We'd always get a feed.

We made our own fun

We had chores to do. We used to go out in the bushes looking for bush lemons and things like that. It was a good life. We made our own fun. We went swimming and jumping off boats. Sometimes we'd go into the picture theatre. We also had a hall on the island and we would go to the dances there.

Travel to the Lismore Show

Sometimes we'd go to the Lismore Show. Those were good days and exciting times for the kids. Some of the show workers knew the family from the island and would give the kids free rides and free tickets. That was so long ago but I think they still do it today. Back then all the parents and their kids would sit in one location on the hill side. Every Aboriginal family that attended the Lismore Show would sit there. It was like a meeting or gathering place – that one spot every year.

Picking fruit on the South Coast

As a young girl I would often travel to Nowra on the South Coast and stay with some of my relatives. I'd go there every Christmas holidays and stay with Johnny Williams and his family. I loved going there so much that I decided to live there for three years. I found a lot of work during the fruit picking season.

They were strict rules back then

The old people were pretty strict with us kids. Kids weren't allowed to go mucking around the house or anything like that. The old people used to have their sticks handy and they would threaten us if we misbehaved. But Christmas was always nice. Dad had a garden where he grew lots of watermelon. I remember how we used to make puddings and there would be enough for everyone, ready for Christmas Day.

Travelling to Ballina or Wardell

I remember the Cooks used to go into town, by getting pulled across the river in their boat. They would tie the boat near the road, then go up to Wardell or into Ballina. There was once a ferry at Wardell where the bridge is today.

When we wanted to go to Ballina on the bus, we would first have to go over by boat from the island and catch the bus on the other side, where the school was. When old Frank Marlow was alive, he would run us over in the launch. He was the handyman on the island and was a good man. He used to do things for the manager on the island.

My first job

My very first job was stripping cane here along Back Channel Road for white farmers. I did that for a while just to have some pocket money for whenever I wanted to go somewhere. Later on I found a job working for a young police officer down at the Wardell Police Station. I worked there for quite a while. They were very nice people and treated me well.

Below: Lexie with her younger brother Dock at a recent 'Back to Boundary Creek' celebration.





Some of my duties were to clean the house, making sure the washing was done every day and even baby sit their kids. When I got tired the policemen would let me go for a rest in the girl's room. They were lovely to me.

I remember when I looked after a family in Ballina, they used to try and get me to sleep over, but I never did. I used to have to go into town to meet up with my friends, Jimmy and Milo, because they were working in town cleaning the pub. We worked all the time, because we had to.

Visit from the past

The other day, a couple of kids that I used to care for came by to visit me. They left a message at the Wardell Police Station to say they couldn't catch up this time but would love to meet up the next time they came through the area. That was really nice of them, its good when you're remembered and I appreciated that.

Shop ration packs

In the old days there used to be a shop on the island over near the old church there. Back then you could book things up if you were running short on food for the week. You would pay the money later. There was a lot of sharing and caring in the community back then. Families looked out for one another in every way possible, even sharing a loaf of bread.

That would happen often with families – running out of food. Every week on a Friday, the ration packs would be ready to be collected from the manager's house. One ration pack per household. The manager would tick off each family's name as they collected the pack. We would take our little containers for our sugar and tea.

Above left: Ullagundahi Island on the Clarence River, MacLean.

Opposite: Mangroves along south Ballina. Source: Ashley Moran.







*“You’d get visitors all hours of the night.
That was part of the caring and sharing for each other.”*

My name is Bertha Elizabeth Rosina Kapeen. I was born in 1935 on Cabbage Tree Island and I am 70 years old. You can still see the tree where I was born. I am the ninth child from a family of thirteen.

Mum and Dad

My dad was Robert Bolt and my mother was Florence Bolt. My mother came from Queensland. She was separated from her mum who lived at Cherbourg. Mother was removed from her family because she was the fairest in skin colour. It was common practice at that time – the removal of children from Aboriginal families.

My grandfather was a tracker with the police in Lismore. Mother eventually found her father and moved to Cabbage Tree Island with him. This is where Mother met Dad and they married at the church in Lismore. Unfortunately we didn't have the support and guidance

Right: In the co-operative store on Cabbage Tree Island (from left to right) is Mr. H. J. Jeffrey, Manager of the Aboriginal Welfare Board Station, Mr. A. Landa, Minister for Housing, Mr. A. J. Mockler, Mr. Bob Bolt, Chairman of Numbahging Co-operative, Mr. Ian Robinson and Mr. R. McCrohon, Cabbage Tree Island school teacher.

Opposite: A family gathering at Ballina.

of our mother because she died at a young age. My mother never told us anything about herself because she said she didn't like to talk about that part of their life. So at the age of 70, I'm still trying to find out information about my mother's side of the family.

Dad was very much involved with the Cabbage Tree Island football team and with the co-op, when it first opened in 1962. Dad played an active role on Cabbage Tree Island. He was heavily involved in community activities.



My parents were strict

My parents had rules – you had to be home at a certain time each night, you couldn't stay out late and you had to tell them what you were doing. Mum and Dad laid the law down and we obeyed.

Family totem

My family totem is the goanna. We belong to the Bundjalung Tribe.

We all cared about each other

The island was a lovely place to live. Back in those days, everybody was friendly. There was not a lot of alcohol. We all cared about each other and we all shared with each other. That's what made the island a good place – the caring and sharing.

During the Christmas period we would always be visiting each other's houses to see what presents the kids got. You'd get visitors at all hours of the night. Kids would be coming and going.

Regular inspection by the manager

Every Friday the manager would visit our house to check that it was clean. There was no exception, even if you had a doctor's appointment, you had to change it. The manager would bring his assistant for the inspections. You had to stand at the front door while she went through the house. The manager looked in the bedrooms and under the beds. Blankets were pulled back to see if the sheets were clean. Cupboards were all checked and she would run her hand across them to see if there was any dust. The manager checked everything, even the toilet.

Top right: Bertha's family: Back row left to right: Bertha, Hazel and Margaret. Front row: Ernest on the left and Charley getting ready to catch Leeson's bus to Lismore.

Right: Bertha and family taken at her granddaughter Rhonda's Debutante Ball. In the front is George and Rhonda, and in the back row is Bertha, Denise, Ernest, Julie and Monica.





Above: Bertha, celebrating her sixtieth birthday with her sisters – Hazel Rhodes on her left and Nancy Walke on her right.

The manager would record the inspection and if it was okay, you got a tick, but if you got three crosses, it wasn't good. The manager could remove your children on the basis that if your house was not clean, you were considered to be a dirty woman thus neglecting your kids. Everyday you had to live with the threat of your kids being removed. My kids aren't very old, so that wasn't even that long ago.

I have never forgiven or forgotten the Australian Government for allowing this to happen during those times. It still saddens me to talk about it sometimes.

Church rallies

As teenagers we went to church rallies a lot. They were fun, entertaining and they kept us busy. I believe our strict upbringing and our parents dedication to going to church has helped us grow into good people.

We would jump on the bus and go to Tabulam, to Tweed and over to Fingal to spend the weekend there at church rallies. During these visits we would have time to do teenage stuff. We made many friends at these different places.

Working in Sydney

As young girls we were sent to Sydney to work. I had arranged to work for a Sydney doctor in Vaucluse. I was housekeeper there. I was about fifteen at the time. Then I came back home and worked over at Tweed Heads for a while doing cleaning.

From then we worked on the cane – we would strip the sugarcane. There was a big crew of us, five or six young girls and we'd go and strip the sugarcane for the farmers at Wardell. At the time that was the only work for girls, stripping sugarcane or domestic work. That was all that was available up here for Aboriginal women.

Schooling

I lived on the island until I was about four years old. Every morning we'd travel by train to attend Cubawee Aboriginal School. I remember one morning I missed the train and after that Mum wouldn't send me to Cubawee any more. From then on I went to North Lismore Public School. Then my parents moved into Lismore and I ended up finishing school at the age of fourteen.

We would visit the island every weekend

My best memories from my childhood are from when we'd visit the island every weekend. But before we visited, we had to get permission from the manager of the island. When we wanted to visit our grandmother, we would ring the manager and ask for permission first.

He would say yes, and then we would have to report to him when we arrived and tell him when we were going to leave. Then, if you didn't leave on time you would get a fine! The fine was about twenty pounds which was a lot of money back then.

We would all go camping out at Boundary Creek – all the younger ones and all the families. We'd cook damper and fish over the coals. The kids played and collected pipis. The elders would tell us stories around the camp fire.

My family moved to Ballina

I have four boys and four girls. I have about 25 grandchildren and about 21 great grandchildren – the last time I counted.

From Lismore, I moved to Ballina and the one thing I missed most was the close community contact found on Cabbage Tree Island.

Whilst living in Ballina the kids had no-one to look after them and they would roam around. At the island there was always someone who would look after the kids for you if you had to go somewhere. I really missed that when I moved to Ballina.

All the ladies would get together in the afternoon, before the kids came home. We would sit around and yarn about what was happening in our lives. So, when I moved to Ballina it was hard because I didn't have the ladies to talk to and I really missed that.

Aboriginal education

I started getting involved in education when I was in my 20s and I started having a family around that time too. I have been attending the Aboriginal Education Consulting Group (AECG) meetings for about 30-35 years now. My biggest focus back in those days was education because I believed that Aboriginal kids weren't getting a fair go. I am proud of my involvement and my participation in helping to write the policy for Aboriginal education.

I was asked to take on a new role with the Department of Education as an Aboriginal Liaison Officer. At that time there were no Aboriginal people working within education. I worked on a trial basis – I would travel all around from Taree to Tweed Heads and to Woodenbong promoting the importance and awareness of Aboriginal education.



Above: Bertha's sister, Hazel with Bertha at the Back to Boundary Creek Celebration.

Right: Graduation at Southern Cross University with (from left) Eric Walker, Bertha, son David Kapeen, and Una Walker.

Far right: Bertha at a dinner in Sydney with special guest, Rugby League legend, Arthur Beetson.

My presence and dedication to Aboriginal education has opened many doors for my people. Now we have lots of Aboriginal people working in the Department of Education. I have been with the Education Department for many years on a voluntary basis, working on special programs for Aboriginal kids. I would go to schools to run programs, which meant I did a lot of travelling and lots of liaison. I'm basically still doing the same work today.

Cultural awareness

I am currently running a Cultural Awareness Program with a group of doctors at Southern Cross University, three times a year. The doctors travel up from Sydney. Part of the Awareness Program is about the history of Aboriginal people – the treatment of Aboriginal people and the issues Aboriginal people face today. I am also involved in cultural tours and doing official Elders business like *Welcome To Country* at many different events. I have been doing a lot of Elders work around Ballina.

I'm very proud of who I am and I want people to recognise and respect my people and my culture. This is why I am so active in the community. I will continue to promote my culture, to try and bring about change because I believe there are many people out there who don't know much about Aboriginal heritage.



Telling the kids stories

Back in the eighties I wrote a book about myself and it was published. Currently I am working on two other books that I'm also trying to get published. 'Henry the Mullet' is the name of one story. It is about mullets because the mullet is a very important fish to my people.

At Fox Street Preschool I sometimes go in with the little ones and read stories. I decided to write my own story because there wasn't any Aboriginal story that was relevant to this area. I've been going into Fox Street Preschool for about 30 years. I still go in, read stories and do some Bundjalung language with the kids.

Mullet hopping

Mullet hopping would take place during certain times in the year. A torch was used. We'd paddle close up to the reeds and shine our torch into the reeds. The mullet would get a fright and hop into the boat. That's why its called *hopping for mullet* – they'd just hop into your boat.

Sometimes you'd get a couple of boatloads of fish. In the early days you just brought them back to the island and told everybody to come and help themselves. We shared them all. Yvonne Delsignore and Julia Paden and I always talk about mullet hopping. Maybe one day we might have a reunion at Cabbage Tree Island and go hopping again.

A part of my Cultural Awareness training, is talking about the *mullet hopping* and people are always amazed about this.



Above right: Bertha at her book launch with two of her granddaughters.

Right: Bertha and Gloria Kelly working in the shop at Cabbage Tree Island.

Opposite: An Alstonville Tibouchina shrub on Cabbage Tree Island.







“What I remember most about growing up on Cabbage Tree Island was the kinship, caring and sharing.”

My name is Gloria Dawn Kelly, nee Kapeen. I'm 65 years of age. I was born at Maclean on the Clarence River. I spent time as a child on Ullagundahi Island. I'm the youngest out of seven children – five boys and two girls. I was married in 1961 on Cabbage Tree Island in the old church. I think we were the first couple to get married there. I have six children – two girls and four boys. I grew up on two islands. My younger years were on Ullagundahi Island and my later years were here, on Cabbage Tree Island.

My mother was a Yagle woman and my father was a Bundjulong man

My mother came from the Clarence River. She's a Yagle woman. She worked as a domestic, cleaning for the white families at Maclean. My parents had decided to move from Ullagundahi Island because of the floods and the houses weren't in good condition, so they packed up and moved to Cabbage Tree Island. This is where my father's mother had lived. We moved when I was about ten years old.

My father was from the Richmond River area. He was a Bundjulong man. He did a lot of work for the local farmers and out at Bungawalbin way, cutting cane.

My family totem

I always thought the little bird called the Willy Wagtail was our totem. He'd come around and just stayed around. Some say he brings bad news.



Above: Working for the Co-op during cane cutting season on the Island.

Opposite: Gloria and Walter with their grandchildren.

Looking after each other

What I remember most about growing up on Cabbage Tree Island was the kinship, caring and sharing. Everyone knew everyone's problems. Because the community was so close, people on the island cared for each other. People would help each other through the good and bad times. When a relative passed away, the community would pull together and support the family.

At a young age

Every morning I would go and get the milk, come home and then wash the clothes. I would always help my mother wash my father's cane-cutting clothes. We had to soak them in water as they were very hard and stiff because of the juice from the cane.

There was always something to do in the house for us kids, especially after meals. Someone would be in the kitchen washing up, another would be drying up, even sweeping and mopping the floor. At certain times I'd go with my mother around to the manager's house to collect food – the ration packs – we'd get flour, sugar, porridge, rice, and meat. There wasn't much to live on in those days. You made do with what you got.

The first house we lived in was made out of tin. It was a very small place without a fridge and TV. All we had was the one wireless and a gramophone. If you wanted to have a hot bath, you had to boil the water in those old kerosene tins and wash yourself in that.

Every Friday the manager would come around and do a house inspection. You'd always see someone walking around the island cadging (asking to borrow) a broom and mop and then rushing around to clean their homes before the manager came.

Above right: *Gloria and family at older son Terry's wedding day. Back row from left to right: Steven, Laurence, Walter Kelly (husband) and Harry. Front row from left to right: Doreen, Gloria, Terry and Carmel.*



I really enjoyed school

I first went to Ulgundahi Island, then to Cabbage Tree Island and then to Ballina High for school. I started school at the age of six. It was just a one teacher school back then at Ulgundahi Island. The one thing that really sticks in my mind is when it came to recess time, each student had their own little cups for milk. We had to wait for the teacher to finish milking the cow for a drink of the milk – and that was our recess – a cup of milk every day.

Mr. Harris was a very good teacher, he was good to all the kids attending school at Cabbage Tree Island. At Ballina High School there was a sports master. He was a pretty good teacher to all of the Aboriginal students. I think this was because he knew that a lot of the Koori kids were good at athletics. I only completed third year at high school (Year 9). Later on, when I turned fifteen, I left school. Back in those days, us young kids didn't get any encouragement to stay on at school, to go further with our education, or to think about aiming for a good job. All we knew was that we had to go to school and that was that.

Starting work

You know, you couldn't be idle when you got out of school. The manager back then would arrange work for you and would send you away, because you weren't allowed to stay on the island if you didn't have a job. I first started work at a convent place. A convent of all things. I wasn't Catholic. Basically, we were sent to do domestic things like polishing the floor and helping with meals. We also had to go to Mass with the family we worked for. I worked at All Hallows Convent, in Brisbane, for about twelve months.

The only thing that kept me at the convent was Aunty Pat and Irene Randall. They worked and lived at a suburb called Sandgate. The ladies would call me up and we'd arrange a time to meet up with each other. Sometimes I would go to Sandgate and sometimes they would come up to Brisbane sometimes to visit me. There were only four of us, as far as I knew, who were working in the area. On Saturday afternoons we'd go to the pictures. That was our enjoyment.

I was also sent to Sydney to work for some high society people at Double Bay. Their names were McCawley Powers. The Powers were always in the papers because of their status. I would cut out the newspaper clippings and send the articles back home to Mum. When they had guests for dinner, I had to prepare the table and help with cooking and cleaning the dishes. I had to wear a uniform all the time when I worked for the family. Towards the end of the dinner, they'd slip some money in my pocket. It was only a couple of bob. They were very nice people to work for.

At times it wasn't easy. Just imagine being sixteen years of age, fretting for your family, working in the big city.

Right: Gloria receiving a certificate for community work from the Department of Education.

In 1959 the Co-op was under way

In 1959, the Co-op opened on the island with the 24 members who had requested a shop and a post office be based on the island for the community. I remember when my friend, Bertha and I were sent down to Cessnock to do some training to gain experience in shop work. We stayed there for a week. We were taught how to stack the shelves, customer services and how to handle money – things like that.

There was a bridge built on the island because of the Co-op. At the same, time sugarcane was being planted on the island which meant there was more work for the men. Things were slowly beginning to happen here. The Co-op made a big difference.

The road around the island used to be an old dirt road. The men had to get all the tea tree branches and put them down on the road and then put the dirt on top of that to make it usable. Back then we'd walk around the island when it was all boggy and slippery.

Then finally the road was fixed – it was good – a new bitumen road.



Granny Kapeen's cooking

When we were kids, a group of us would go around to Granny Kapeen's house just to see what she was cooking. Someone would always stick their fingers in the food. We couldn't resist the temptation. Granny Kapeen knew what we were like so she would always have her walking stick ready. She'd use the stick to chase us kids out of the house. We'd climb up a tree and hide from her and she'd tell us to get down.

My grandmother had a garden near the school. It was a lovely garden, filled with fruit trees.

The kids would always listen to their elders

I can remember one of my uncles went to war and when he came back, he lived in an old tin shack just near our house. He came back with a nerve problem and we sort of kept our distance. For some reason, as young kids, you always took notice of the elders.

Catching the bus at Christmas time

I always think about travelling on those old roads, especially the road from Maclean to Woodburn. At Christmas time we'd catch the Flemmings company bus going to Ballina.

My father would always leave early in the morning, a week before us and believe it or not, he would walk back to Cabbage Tree Island on his own. People these days wouldn't believe you if you told them, they wouldn't understand. He'd already be there at home when we arrived off the bus at Christmas time.

Remembering the holidays

On one holiday when we went to Cabbage Tree Island, Mum said to us, "Make sure and look out for that Ballina bus or you'll miss it". We had to keep a look out for the bus and wait on one side of the road near the park. If there was no-one standing in the spot, the driver wouldn't wait – he'd leave immediately.

This one time, we had to go to the shop and the next minute, when we came out, the Flemmings bus was gone. There we were, not knowing what to do, so we started blaming each other. "See, it was your fault – no, it was your fault – you wanted to go in the shop." We were stuck, we had no other way to get back to the island. One of us thought of the police. This was the only time we had contact with the police. The policeman put us on a truck and took us all the way to the island. The policeman had to ring the manager to get someone to come and pick us up. He also had to tell the manager how we came to miss the bus.

The manager got the handyman to come across in the boat. I always remember that time and laugh about it now, although it wasn't a laughing matter at the time.



Above: Gloria and Bertha Kapeen working in the shop.



Always mucking around

Me and my sister were playing this one day, near where they used to tar the boats. The boats that have holes in them were repaired with tar and then left on the bank to dry. While we were mucking around near the boats, we got tar all over us. We knew we were going to get a hit, so up the tree we went to hide. You see, Mum would go and get a branch from the peach tree. We knew we'd get hit and a branch from a peach tree hurts the most because it's the hardest. Mum would always say, "I've got all day waiting till you come down. You'll get hungry, you'll come". No sooner did we come down than we got our hit.

When we were kids we'd swim across the back channel of Cabbage Tree Island to buy iceblocks from the local dairy farmer who also grew sugarcane. We'd always get a piece of sugarcane whenever we came near any cane fields.

Above: Gloria, in training as an Aboriginal health worker with the Health Department at the Coraki Training Centre.

Right: Gloria with her husband, Walter Kelly, in Lismore.

Working with the Health Department

After having a family, I worked for twelve months at the Lismore Base Hospital as a Trainee Nurse's Aid and then I was fortunate to get a full time job with the Health Department in the early '70s.

The job involved going around to local Aboriginal communities, transporting people to hospitals, doctors and dentists and making sure people had access to health services. It was a very good job. I would speak to a lot of people in the area and provide support for them by listening to their problems and helping them with health issues. The hospital would supply cars during the times I needed to travel to communities.

We also attended a block release training course as part of the job. We'd study at Cumberland College, Lidcombe, Sydney. It was theory orientated training – you were given work to do and you had to complete your assignments to receive your certificates or diploma. In 1985, I completed my training and received a Certificate for Community Health and then later, I received a Diploma in Health Promotion.

I retired from the Health Department in 1996. I had worked there for 20 years.





The memories stay with you forever

All the kids on the island never got bored. In the early days, there was always things to do, even if you knew you'd get into trouble for it. Kids back then would do things – just to see what would happen. A lot of the time, when we got into trouble, we'd laugh about it.

The memories of what we did when we were young stay in my mind. These days I tell my grandkids the funny stories of what we did and how much fun we had. My sister and I still talk about the things that happened and we have a good laugh.

Racism when I was young

Racism wasn't a word we knew in those days. Not like now – you come to hear of it – but I never experienced it. If my family did, they never spoke about it, they kept it to themselves. I think you just had to do as you were told.

Above: Gloria's brother, Rex Kapeen, at the Back to Boundary Creek Celebration, 2004.

Right: Gloria at her graduation day at Cumberland College.

Opposite: Mouth of the Richmond River North and South Wall. Source: Ashley Moran.







Eileen Lopic



***“That’s where the memories are, both the good and the bad.
Cabbage Tree Island will always be home.”***

I’m 60 years old and I was born on the 7th May 1946 in Ballina Hospital. My father’s name was Robert Moran and my mother’s name was Edna Moran. Her maiden name was Bolt. They were both born and raised on Cabbage Tree Island. I have five brothers and three sisters. My mother raised us all, there in a three bedroom house on Cabbage Tree Island. I was married in 1969 and had five girls. The oldest is Kristina, then Natajsia, Donna, Radojka and the youngest, Joanne. I have five beautiful grandkids.

Little school on the hill

I went to school on Cabbage Tree Island. It was only a little school then. I liked going to school there. In those days the teacher used to give us milk at school. Someone would be nominated to make our sandwiches and whoever the person was, who was making them, would put more on their own special sandwich. That was always fun to do. School was great back then because we would do a lot of arts and crafts as well. That was a really fun time for us all.



Right: Grandparents Edward Moran and Elizabeth Bray Moran on Cabbage Tree Island.

Opposite: From the left is Eileen, then sister Marlene, oldest brother Bobby and sister Laurel at the ‘Back to Boundary Creek Celebration, 2004’.

My mother was a very strong woman

I come from a very loving family. My mother was a very strong woman. She had lost her husband early and raised all of her kids as a single parent. She raised nine children. She never drank alcohol, she just cared for her kids. My mother was always doing something to provide for us. She was a really hard worker. I like to think in our family, the Moran family, that we're all very close.

Brothers and sisters

I am proud of my brothers and my sisters, because of the way they brought their families up and for being good parents. They raised all their kids and never let one of them down. Laurel, my younger sister, she raised her three girls all by herself and what wonderful girls they turned out to be! There is always that closeness there because of my girls and my brother's and sister's kids – that family bond.

A very special place

Even though I don't get up to the island much, that's where the happy memories are, the good and the bad. It will always be home. Even though, I live in Ballina now, I will always have a place in my heart for the island. Cabbage Tree Island is a very special place to me.

At the point

We would all go swimming at the point up past the Andersons. There used to be a sandy section along the river bank where all the kids would meet to go swimming. Our favourite game was collecting the pipi shells, throwing them into the water and having turns diving for them on the bottom. The water was really nice and clear with sand along the banks. I don't think there is any sand there today. That's just across from the point. I don't know about now, but then, it used to get all sandy at low tide. We'd row or swim across, to dig up red worms for fishing. I remember going in the boat with Auntie Rose Marlow and Auntie Fanny Roberts, fishing up and down the river.

Attending Ballina High School

School for me was good. I liked attending Ballina High School. I'd really look forward to the cooking and sewing classes. They were great fun.

I was a very shy girl so I didn't mix in very well with the other students. I used to keep to myself. I remember this one day, going to school with my brother Benny, who was responsible for collecting our pocket money from Mum and taking it to school for our lunches. Once, when it came to lunch time, I went up to him to get my money but he had been in such a hurry to catch the bus that morning, he didn't look to see how much money he'd taken. All he had in his pocket were pennies!



Above: A night out in Surfers Paradise with friends.

All the girls dressed up

I remember when we went to the dances, we'd go to the ball there in Woodburn. We'd all make our own clothes. We'd go stripping cane or picking peas, doing things like that to earn our pocket money. I think I would have been about fifteen or sixteen at the time.

We'd go down to Wardell on the bus. All the girls would be dressed up in their ball gowns. In those days we used to send away for our shoes and everything from catalogues.

Trips to Boundary Creek

I loved Boundary Creek. I remember we'd take our wooden billy cart, load everything on it and out we'd go. Aunty Fanny with her kids and us with Mummy, would pull the cart all the way out to Boundary Creek and stay out there all day collecting pipis, cooking and fishing.

Sometimes, we'd take a tent and we'd camp out there. That was fun. Whatever we caught, we'd cook there. Later on, as we got older, I would go to Boundary Creek with Sandra Bolt and Joyce Roberts. We would go out and make our own little barbecue and fish.



Above: Eileen with Liz Johnston at Lismore TAFE.

Sunday school in the old hall

We always went to Sunday school. We looked forward to it every weekend. It was a big thing back then on the island. Sunday school was so much fun because of the music and having picnics. There was always something nice, excursions in the local area, or going to the Maloney's at Woodburn.

The Maloneys had a lovely place on the hill. We'd go out there and have picnics. Sunday school was always held in the old church and sometimes in the hall. Sunday school was big. All the kids would turn up for it.

One day we went on an excursion and all the kids from the island got on the bus. I can remember this clearly because I got a new doll for Christmas. It was like one of those porcelain dolls. I was sitting on the bus with the doll in my bag and it was really hot, so hot, that the doll melted on me. I remember that day very clearly. My poor doll. I cried and cried on that bus trip home.

Hard work for little money

I think my first job was stripping cane and picking peas. I might have been about fourteen. We'd work on the Melano's and Garret's properties, along the Back Channel Road. Working hard for extra pocket money so we could go to the shows or whatever. I didn't like that job, I wouldn't do it now, walking up and down the rows picking peas and beans.

Later on I did some house cleaning. That's when I moved to Surfers Paradise. My eldest sister Jonnie had got me the job as she was working as a cleaner. I worked during the week and travelled home on the bus every weekend. This worked out well because I was closer to home. I lived in Surfers Paradise for about a year and then later I moved to Sydney and did the same kind of work down there.

Domestic work

A lot of the girls from Cabbage Tree Island did domestic work. Violet Williams and Sandra Bolt from the island worked at Bondi. We were all working in the same area. It was something the manager did. He'd find work for the girls away from the area. Many of the girls liked it and a few didn't and couldn't wait to go home.

I worked for a very good family, they were good people. I liked them. They were a Lebanese family and they owned a little shop. I remember that because I was living in a room on the top of it. The one thing that sticks in my mind about living with this family was, when their baby got christened, they walked around with these incense sticks. I can still remember that smell today.

When I got days off work I would meet up with Sandra Bolt in the city. This is where I first met Violet Williams, we later became very good friends.

Later on I moved out and got a job in one of the factories – me, Joyce Roberts and Jenny Cook – we'd stay with Aunty Jean Marlow in Alexandra and sometimes with Aunty Phillis down in Everleigh Street, at Redfern. There was this little shop around the corner from where she lived. I remember because when we were paying board, we'd go around and get two eggs, and one tomato every morning for breakfast.





Above: From the left, Eileen's daughters – Joe, Donna and Radajka, her sister, Laurel with her daughters, Naomi and Yaroona, her mother Edna (centre), with younger sister Marlene, and her niece Edith.

Right: Eileen's dad, Robert Moran (fourth from the right) boxing at the Lismore Show with the Jimmy Sharman Boxing tent.

Left: Eileen's grandfather Edward seated on a motor bike with men from the island loading cane on the barge.







“As kids we were happy with whatever our parents could provide us with, we never complained.”

My name is Julia Paden, nee Rhodes, I was born on the 24th of March in 1938 at the Ballina hospital. As a young girl I spent most of my childhood and teenage years growing up on Cabbage Tree Island. The island will always be a part of me because that's where my parents brought us up.

My parents raised ten children

My father's name was Tim Rhodes and he came to Cabbage Tree Island at a very young age. He was born over near Grafton on a small Aboriginal reserve called Kangee near Nymboida. He was a very respected man within the Bundjalung Nation because of his hard work within the local Aboriginal community.

My mother's name is Ethel Kapeen. She was born and raised on Cabbage Tree Island and that's where she spent most of her life. Our family was a very large family. My parents had ten children and I'm the eldest girl. They raised us all in a nice, big, two bedroom timber house on the southern end of Cabbage Tree Island. As kids we were happy with whatever our parents could provide us. It was good living and growing up on the island and we never complained.

Right: Julia as a teenager at her parent's house on Cabbage Tree Island.

Opposite: Julia with her three eldest children, Katty, Virginia and George, at their home in Ballina.



Our parents did a lot of hard work

Dad was a very hard worker. He did a lot of cane cutting in the Richmond area. Mum did a lot of the work around the house looking after us kids. She would do the cooking and cleaning. I'd watch her washing in one of those tubs – the one with the big handles on both ends – she would boil the water for the wash. They had to pump the water up from a well. Luckily for us, Daddy had a horse and a slide. Nobby was its name, it would drag the water from the well to the house, up to a little tank we used.

The manager's daughter used to teach us

The manager used to teach us when I first started attending school on the island. His name was Mr. Howard. We were taught in the old school building down near the river bank.

I can remember his eldest daughter – she would sometimes teach the kids – her name was Patsy Howard. She was a wonderful young lady and she was mainly involved in teaching us younger ones at school. I remember that clearly because she would take us outside and teach us underneath the trees. We really enjoyed that, having classes outside.

Later on we had another two teachers who came to our school and their names were Mr. Harris and Mr. Cronen. All the kids enjoyed school. We'd always be playing games during lunch time, playing our favourite childhood games, hopscotch and marbles.

A wet shopping trip

The funniest thing I remember is when I was young, I went to Wardell to get the groceries. I went with Aunty Beryl Ferguson and Noreen Cameron. On the way home it was pouring down rain so we decided to call a taxi to drive us home. He dropped us off, close by a lane, so we had to walk the rest of the way.

I can remember Aunty Beryl had this little torch because it was just getting dark. So we started walking along the road in the dark with our bags full of food and then all of a sudden Noreen went missing from behind us. We couldn't see her anywhere so we decided to go back and look for her to see where she was. We found her, she had fallen into the drain, with her shopping bags, covered in water, still holding tightly onto her bags. We couldn't do a thing but stand there and laugh. That was the funniest thing, seeing her still holding onto the groceries.



Playing softball in Ballina

One year we had a girl's softball team from the island. Every Saturday we'd go and play other teams from around the Richmond River area. Aunty Jean Marlow and Aunty Phyllis would always organise a team to play on the weekends. We'd travel to Ballina to play softball.

Old Luke Clenkovich was a farmer on Back Channel Road. He used to bring us to Ballina on the back of his truck. All us girls would be sitting in the back, dressed in our sports clothes. We'd be dressed in white shirts and shorts with the green and yellow strips down the side of the shorts, ready to play. That happened every Saturday – we never missed. In the team there was Fay Cook, Joyce Roberts, Evelyn James, Vivienne Simpson, Gloria Kelly, Patricia Cook, Margaret Bolt, Merle Bolt and Dawn Sines. It was always great fun playing softball against other teams.



Above: At the Elders Olympics at Wardell in 2002 with Joyce Kapeen on the left, Julia in the middle and brother, Jack Rhodes on the right.

Left: Julia with her daughter Katty in Ballina.

Living away from the island

I moved away from the island in my early 20s and married my husband, 45 years ago now. He is Croatian and I met him when he was cane cutting, down on the Richmond River. After we got married we moved to Wollongong where my husband got a job in a Steelwork factory and I went down there for a while.

I didn't like Wollongong so we moved to Sydney and stayed there. My husband worked at the Opera House. After a while I wanted to come back home, so we did. Sometimes my husband would go tobacco picking at Mole River up near Tenterfield.

We'd take the boat

We used to go by boat across to old Bill Anderson's place when we were on our way to the beach. He had a little shop on the side of the road. We could buy drinks and pineapples, bananas and apples – things like that. We'd eat them on the beach. To keep our drinks cool, we'd dig a hole in the sand and put our drink bottles in the damp.

We always had things to do

Living on the island was good. We always had things to do. We'd play rounders, go fishing, look for pipis or go fruit hunting for guavas. During summer we used to go out in the bush looking for mangos, when the season was on, walking out to Bagotville. There were no cars then so we had to walk through the bush. Sometimes we'd go and watch the football. They had a bus going to the games.

Ration day

It wasn't much, but ration day was every Thursday. We'd collect rice, flour, tea leaves and porridge – things like that. The meat came in separately, on the bus. Some people had ice boxes – you know, but my grandmother used to store her meat in one of those cooler things that she would hang outside.

The big flood of 1954

I remember the big flood of 1954 when the water came up so high that we had to be evacuated from the island and taken away in boats to Wardell. We had a couple of those big floods. I remember one time there was Joyce Roberts, Aggie Kapeen, myself and Dickie. Dickie nearly fell into the water, the current was running really fast and we nearly lost him. That was scary!

I loved the fried scones my mum made

Mum would make damper bread over the fuel fire. I used to love the fried scones she made. We rarely ate bread from the baker because Mum made her own. The butcher would come up if anyone had ordered meat. The butcher from Wardell was named Blue Atherton. We used to buy our vegies off some of the white farmers around here. Things like tomatoes and eggs. One old lady used to make iceblocks and we'd go and buy them off her. All sorts of flavours she used to sell.



Working for pocket money

Living on the island was good, we were never bored. We were always doing things to keep ourselves occupied. You just couldn't sit around and watch TV or play video games. When it came to work, we were always keen to do things. Sometimes we'd even do odd jobs for the white cane farmers along Back Channel Road. We'd be stripping cane for Mr. Phillip and Mr. Flick, even picking peas for Joey Leggie.

Back then if you wanted pocket money to buy things, or money to spend at the show, you had to work for it. We'd always go in a group when going to the show. There was Bertha Kapeen, Lexie James, Yvonne Delsignore, Fay Smith, Rene Ferguson and myself. We would always go working before the show came to town around September or October.



Cleaning the water tank

On the side of our old house there was one of those big water tanks and frogs used to get trapped in it all the time during the rain. I remember that very well because I was always the one who had to get inside and clean them out.

After cleaning the tank, I would then pour kerosene into it to purify the water so we could use it for drinking water. I remember telling my youngest son one day about me cleaning the water tank and he said, “Ugh! Mum, how could you drink the water again?” I said to him, “What else were we going to drink?” That’s what we had to do to survive. They’d always get me to do that job – every time – but I didn’t mind, it just had to be done.



Above: Julia with her sister Kathleen and brother Jack at a party in Wardell Hall.

Right: Julia with her youngest grandson at a family gathering.

Left: Julia’s sister Kathleen and brother Jack at the front of their parent’s house on Cabbage Tree Island.

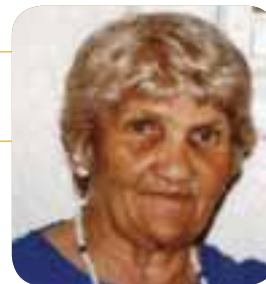
Far left: Brother Jack, as a youngster at home on Cabbage Tree Island, mowing the lawn.





Fanny Roberts

66



“Our life was a good life because we never worried about a thing. We just got on with it.”

Born on the Reserve

My name is Fanny Roberts, nee Bolt. I was born on Cabbage Tree Island in June 1919 and I'm 87 years old. My father's name was Ben Bolt and my mother's name was Lizzie Lune.

I have two sisters and seven brothers and we all grew up on Cabbage Tree Island. The old house that we lived in was a half tin, half board shack with two rooms and a kitchen. That's where my mother raised all of her kids.

My father's health wasn't real good when I was young, which left Mum doing a lot of the work caring for her kids. Dad couldn't do too much because of his illness. My brothers helped out. They did a lot of work growing and cutting cane around the Richmond River area. You know, I raised all my kids on the island, nine of them in the one house. It was hard for me too.

Right: Photograph of the hall and palm where Fanny once lived.

Opposite: Fanny standing with her sister Edna with her new bike.

Living under the stars

There weren't too many people living on the island in my time. Mother said when she first came to Cabbage Tree Island it was covered with cabbage tree palms and gooseberries. She said that when they first came here they lived under the stars in humpies made from cabbage palms. Later on, down the track, little shacks were built for us to live in.

Near where the hall is built today, there used to be a coral tree. That's where our old place used to be. We had a good time and we all got along well. We'd do our own thing. Our life was a good life because we never worried about a thing. We just got on with it.



Growing up on the island

It was great growing up on the island. I did a lot of work for the white manager. I did that for quite a while. I also did some work on a farm along the Back Channel road near Wardell. It was only a dirt track back then. The owner was a dairy and cane farmer. Every morning from the island here, I'd row the boat across the river and walk to work. I worked on the farm for nine years and earned five pound a week. My job was to wash, scrub, cook and do everything. I'd even babysit for Mr. and Mrs. Ford's kids. The Fords were very good people and they treated me well.

My sisters, Edna and Roslyn, grew up on the island. We all grew up together and lived on the island for most of our lives. My sister Edna, she went somewhere else to work. I can't remember... Roslyn, the eldest sister, she worked up at Broadwater in the old hotel up there. She did domestic cleaning for a while. Me, my sisters and mother would sometimes go and visit old Granny Cook. She was an older sister of my mother's. We'd always go down to her place for a yarn.

I remember walking to Wardell to get our groceries. We'd walk all the way back to the Island with our food and bags of flour. I'd do that every time for my mother. She was always cooking, mostly bread over the hot ashes. We never had a stove, she used this big old pot, like a camp oven. We lived in a nice little place, it was home to us and we enjoyed it.

Collecting water and wood

The main job we had to do, was to go and collect the drinking water. We also had a boat, so we'd row the boat over to the mainland to an old white fellow's place. He had a lovely well on his property, a bricked circle well, which is where we collected our water from. I can also remember another well, along the side of the old road beside the fence. That's where we'd go and wash our dirty clothes.



You know, we'd carry loads and loads of drinking water in buckets, from down at the river bank, up to the house. We were always carrying things from the river to home. I would go with my mother to collect firewood in the bush. We'd carry bags and bags of it home. It was hard work but it didn't worry us at the time. It was good fun. We really enjoyed doing all that kind of stuff. Mother would always worry about us when we were out doing things in the bush. That's why we stayed close to each other.



My brother built the church

Leo ,my brother, went away to the Tweed River. That's where he met his wife, Aunty Kitty. They married and came back to live here on the island. He later became a Pastor. That's when he decided to build a church on the island. The old church is still there today, but I think it might have to be pulled down soon. When they do pull it down, I'll put a plaque there somewhere.

Travelling around

Travelling around was lots of fun. I remember catching the river boat. It would go up to Lismore, passing Woodburn and Coraki. The majority of the time we would travel on a horse and sulky, a spring cart they called it. My sister's partner owned a light spring cart. We'd even travel over to Casino in it for the Casino show. At night we'd pull up at the side of the road to sleep, then travel again early the next morning. I can remember doing that every year.

Above: Fanny's old house on Cabbage Tree Island.

Above left: Fanny with her husband, Richard (Dicky) Roberts Snr., at the South Lismore Rugby League Presentation night.

Bushwalking with my mother

We never used to wonder around much. If we had to go for wood, mother would say, "Come on, let's go out to the bush for a walk". It was fun going walking in the bush with Mum. She'd show us bush foods like yams and different types of fruit that we could and couldn't eat. We'd go walking right up to Uralba Hill on the way to Ballina. We'd pack our lunch for the day and we'd have a big feed and then walk back in the afternoons. In those days people never worried about anyone walking through their properties. Although they might say something to you now!

Surviving on little food

It was hard for us, gathering the drinking water and walking to Wardell for our groceries. We'd even stop in at the old butcher shop to buy cheap cuts of meat. In those days there was no bridge built at Wardell. There was only a ferry at the end of the point which would take you across to the town centre.

School on the hill

I attended school at Cabbage Tree Island. I have good memories of that little school on the hill. We used to do a lot of sport. I can remember how I'd look forward to doing the maypole dance (see photo on page 24) in the school playground. You know, my son Kevin used to go away a lot for sports. He was a very good runner. Some of the kids from the island would go to the big sports carnival in Woodburn. The kids that never went, would stay behind and play their own games.

Cricket and tennis was played by all on the old tennis court down behind the school. Some kids would travel up from Ballina and play cricket against the young boys. A nice day of cricket was always good to watch. Back then, the white manager employed Frank Marlow. He was my sister's husband. He'd bring the people onto the island in a motor boat.

We didn't have to go anywhere from here to have a good time because we had everything on the island. In the afternoons we'd play the biggest game of rounders. Everyone would join in. They'd come from everywhere to play. You used to hit the ball and run around to each mat. They call it baseball now.

Rowing to Broadwater

Whenever we wanted to go to Broadwater, the boys from the island would row me and Edna across in a boat. You see, it was during the wartime and there would be movies showing in the old picture theatre in the town hall, so we'd go up there nearly every weekend.

Going to the dances

There were a lot of dances happening on the island back then and they were lovely to watch. Everyone would come along. We really enjoyed them. Sometimes we'd even go out to other people's places. To go to other area dances, we had to get permission notices from the other missions - just so we could attend their dance. It was great we really enjoyed it. Mother wouldn't let us go alone, so we always had to go with our brother and sisters.

There was no hall on the island during that time, so we mostly danced at old Timmy Rhodes' place, out on his big veranda. We had our own music. You know the men from the island used to play a lot of the music at the time.

As kids we went fishing and prawning

Sometimes we'd go prawning up the river. I remember walking in the water with this hessian bag, up and down the river bank. You see, we'd catch the prawns in hessian bags, then we'd cook them in a kerosene tin.

At night we'd go *hopping* for fish in the boat. As we rowed along, fish would hop into the boat. Someone would do the rowing and another



person would hold a lamp or torch. The mullet would jump into the boat because the light blinded them. We would catch heaps of fish. If we had too many to take home, we'd give some to our relatives and to other people living on the island. You could fish anywhere in those days, no one stopped you. It's a lot different these days.

You know, we'd go hunting in the bush for different types of bush food. We enjoyed eating bush food. I don't eat as much nowadays, but that's mainly what we survived on back then. I remember when I was a little girl, going to Wardell and one day a young white boy came up to me and said, "What are you doing over there? Are you people still eating snakes?" I didn't know what sort of snake he was talking about, so I said, "You mean carpet snakes? Yeah," I said, "they taste really good too. They're just like chicken."

Turning flour bags into sheets

Mother had cared for us kids all on her own. Gee, they were really hard times! I remember when we'd get flour bags and wash them in a big cream can. After washing them, mother would sew them up with her own two hands, making them into bedsheets and pillowcases. Back then we didn't have much money to buy a lot of things. But it was good. We survived.

Above: Fanny's son Kevin and Doug Anderson cutting cane.

Dad lived on his own

I can't remember too much about my father. He was sick so he lived on his own away from us. You see, we had too many people living in our little house and he was a very sick man. But he didn't live far away. He just preferred to live on his own and that was only after he got really sick.

Walking to Boundary Creek

Many times we'd go out to Boundary Creek. We'd row out there in the boats when it was low tide. We'd leave the boat to drain just there near Walsh's Lane and we'd walk out. There, near the Pacific Highway. Mum had a big old pram, a real old pram. She'd pack the kids into it and off we'd go.

She'd pack all our things and we'd stay out there for the whole day, fishing and swimming. While we were there, we'd go and have a look at the lagoon behind the sand dunes. When it was time to go home we'd be too frightened to come back across the sand because it was just so hot – burning our feet. I can remember putting rags on our feet and running. That was the only hard part about going out there. We loved it! I loved fishing and collecting pipis.



Above: The Neptune on the Richmond River passing Cabbage Tree Island.

They were the good old days

I enjoyed living at Cabbage Tree Island when we were young. It was good, really good, growing up there. Sometimes I lay down and think about the old days and how we all lived together. I can picture the houses, the old people, the good times and the bad times. I can still see all those old homes that used to be around the island.

You know, the men went out working and the women had to stay at home looking after their kids and doing household duties until their daughters and sons were old enough to go out working. The men would work mostly on the cane farms cutting and stripping cane. The work was hard for the men, as they would have to travel out towards Bungawalbyn and back again. They were out there cutting cane with the white fellows.

Cabbage Tree Island was a good place to live and it is still a good place today. It will never be as good as the old days but everything is more convenient now. It was hard back then but it was good.



Above: Fanny with her grandkids, Alicia and Daniel.



GOVERNMENT HANDOUT

RATION DAY... SACRIFICE TREE IS

Vivienne Simpson

72



“Back then, families who found it hard at times, always had help from others living on the island.”

I'm the eldest in my family

My name is Vivien Simpson and I'm 67 years old, I was born in Ballina Hospital in 1937. I have three brothers and three sisters. I'm the eldest. My parents had seven children and we were all raised here on Cabbage Tree Island. My father's name was Robert Anderson and my mother's name was Winnie Cook.



Above: Vivienne with good friends, Cynthia Moran and Merlyn Bolt in Sydney.

Opposite: Vivienne's artwork.

Living on the river bank

I can remember the old house we used to live in. It was down near the river bank on the southern end of the bridge, on your right when coming onto the island. It was a small little, two bedroom house with a kitchen and an open fireplace. The house was no bigger than the kitchen I have today, so you can imagine how big it was.

The house has a couple of windows but most of the time they would have this black cloth pulled over them because of the war. The Japanese were planning to invade Australia's coastline so the manager ordered everyone living on the island to darken their windows with black cloth.

One of my favourite memories is of Mum's garden. It was out the back of the house. It was a wonderful garden. My brother and sisters would help our mum with planting and weeding. We had a variety of fruit and vegies growing in the garden – things like tomato, pumpkin, watermelon and even strawberries. If you couldn't find Mum in the house, you would sure enough find her in the garden on her hands and knees weeding or watering the plants.



Above: Vivienne (left) with her father, Bob Anderson, at her best friend Cynthia Moran's (right) wedding day.

Mum and Dad worked hard to provide for us

My mother was a very hard worker. She would do a lot of the household duties, washing clothes and cleaning the house, ready for the manager's inspection every Friday of the week. She'd always be near the fireplace preparing and cooking meals for the family. Mum would bake the best dampers and scones.

Dad did a lot of work, cutting cane in the area for some white farmers along Back Channel Road. There was plenty of work for him cutting cane. A farmer by the name of Mr. Dory would often ask Dad to work for him on his tomato farm, picking and packing tomatoes over on the mainland. I can remember how me and my sister Sally, would sometimes go to work with Dad and help him by sorting and packing tomatoes. That was good and we enjoyed doing it. Dad also did a lot of work for the manager here on the island, although it wasn't very good money.

The manager's ration pack

My grandfather would always collect the ration pack from the manager's house, one day every week. In the pack you would receive small amounts of sugar, tea, flour, sometimes rice and syrup. This would last you through to the following week. It wasn't much to survive on if you had a very large family to support. Back then families who found it hard, always had help from others on the island. That was good because everyone was supportive and caring and made sure that you had enough food to feed your family.

I can remember, in our house we would have these tin cans to put things in and my grandfather would store the food in them and place them on a shelf away from the kids. Then every fortnight, on a Tuesday, meat would be delivered to the island by boat and handed out to the Elders.

Doing the milk run

One of my favourite jobs was collecting the milk every morning around near the manager's house. He had an old shed there, near the house. Every morning you had to be there to collect the milk.

He was a very strict man when it came to being on time. He made sure that anyone who wanted milk was there first thing in the morning. I remember I would grab our old tin cans and walk around ready to milk the cow. That was always good to do.

Odd jobs around the house

Every day we would go and collect wood for the fireplace for Mum. We'd collect water in one of those big old tin buckets from the well here on the island. You know, the well was directly in front of my house here, right between the road and the cane paddock.

I can still picture it today. It had a picket fence around it to keep the kids away. It even had steps so you could walk down near the water and tie a rope to your bucket so you could pull the water up. Once or twice a week Mum or Dad would ask one of us to go and collect two buckets of water from the old well.

It was hard work but it didn't bother us because we enjoyed doing it and we always wanted to do things around the house to help out. We always kept ourselves occupied just helping Mum out, because Dad would leave early every morning to go to work cutting cane for some farmers in the local area.



Right: Vivienne with her son Willy on his wedding day.

Going to school

I attended school here on the island. It was a good school back then and I loved going. Our favourite day was always on Fridays, because it was sports day and sometimes when it got hot, the teachers, Mr. Willis and Mr. Harris would take us swimming down near the point on the eastern end of the island. I can remember this wonderful, sandy swimming spot, on the river bank, down there near the point.

Mr. Willis was a very good teacher. All the kids at school liked him because he was into sports and not a lot of education. So then one day the manager decided to remove him from our school saying he wasn't doing his job properly. It was a very sad day, to see Mr. Willis removed from our school. I remember the kids weren't looking forward to that.

Sports carnivals at Woodburn

The sports carnival was a big event for a lot of the schools in the local area, especially our school. We would always travel across to Woodburn and participate in the sports carnivals. We'd be all dressed up in our sports uniforms – white with green and yellow stripes down the side of our shorts. We'd even march down the main street of Woodburn and then onto the oval, displaying the Cabbage Tree Island school banner.

For a small school, we'd always do well in our races and won a lot of trophies. We'd always do very well at the carnival, winning the girl's tunnel ball. Some of the boys and girls would do well in the individual athletic races.

At the end of the day the main event for the afternoon was the girls and boys school relay races. I can remember all the kids in their school groups seated along the race track waving their school banner and cheering them on. They really were the good old days back then.



Stripping cane was my first job

I remember my first job. It was stripping cane along Back Channel Road for one of the white farmers. It was only a small amount of money back then. I can't remember how much we were paid but it was just enough to go to the pictures in Lismore. You had to put in the hard work if you wanted money to buy things or to go to special events. We never really depended on our parents much for pocket money.

Later on I spent a bit of time working in Brisbane in one of those convent churches where I would clean the sleeping quarters for the nuns and priests. I used to do that every day, making sure their rooms were clean and the sheets were washed.

The dances during cane cutting season

When the cane cutting season was on, they would hold dances every fortnight in the old hall on the island. I can remember years ago when I was a young girl, they used to have dances in an old tin house owned by Auntie Kathy Bolt, my father's sister.

It was sort of like a big community gathering with very strict rules. No alcohol was allowed on the premises. I still remember the old ladies getting up and dancing. There was Granny Moran, Granny Webb, Granny Kapeen and all the other old people living on the island. Everyone would come along and have a really good time.

Sometimes, some of us older kids would sit down, clapping our hands to the music when they were dancing. They would dance 'til late at night. When I think about it today, it was a fun time to see the old people really enjoying themselves.

I moved around a lot when living in Sydney

As I got older I decided to move to Sydney to work. I had just left school and the manager was arranging work for some of the young girls on the island as domestic servants for rich white families in the outer suburbs of Sydney.

I think I was pretty lucky because I worked for some very lovely people. They treated me well and looked after me very well. They were Mr. and Mrs. Rosen – very nice people. They sometimes found me extra work, if I wanted it, even on some occasions leaving me a list of jobs to do when they'd go out on the weekends.

I met my husband in Sydney and lived in the city for a number of years where I raised eight children. We moved around a bit at first. We lived at Surrey Hills, then moved into Eveleigh Street, Redfern. After living in Redfern for a while we decided to move out to Liverpool where we lived and worked for most of our time in the city.

A few years later, me and my husband decided to pack up and move home to Cabbage Tree Island so I could be closer to my family. You know, thinking back on it now, it was always on my mind to move home to the island and my husband was really supportive of us living here as well. We just thought it was time to move out of Sydney. It definitely was the right move as our kids really love living here and they're all still living here today, raising their own families.

Right: Vivienne's Art Award.

Above left: A sketch by Vivienne in her school days at Cabbage Tree Island.


Overleaf: Family photo with (back row from left to right) Edward, Willy, Paul, Dean, Jeannie, Lynette, Cheryl, and Kerrie. (Front row) Percy Simpson (husband) and Vivienne.

Helping each other

The island was a wonderful place to live. All the families living here looked after one another, supporting each other in any way possible. Whether it be helping with food, clothing, or even giving someone a bed for the night. The community looked after each other and made sure that each family didn't do without. We lived a simple life back then. We didn't have to worry about the kids much because you could always keep an eye on them when they were running around and playing on the island. When you lived here there was a good community spirit.







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