

# 1. Beginnings

## Betsy and George

My Mum Rebecca 'Betsy' Clements was born at Brungle Mission near Tumut in 1912. Her Dad was Ernest Clements, a Wiradjuri man, and her Mum Kitty Atkinson, was a Yorta Yorta woman. Granny Kitty had five children <sup>1</sup> including Edith, Watson, Violet, my mum Rebecca 'Betsy' and Lilian 'Lily'. Mum told me that when she was about ten years old living at Brungle with her Mum and Dad, her father went to Granny Kitty one day with a magnificent idea, or so he thought. He decided that if they sent my Mum (and her sisters) to Cootamundra Girls Home, and their brother Watson to a boys home in Sydney, they would get some solid 'training' which would set them up for life. Granny Kitty agreed, although with some trepidation and off they went, thinking they were doing a really good deed. Sadly, they were wrong and poor old Mum told me later that she used to have 'the boniest knees goin from all the time I spent scrubbin floors on my hands n knees there'. That was all the so called 'training' she ever got. Eventually Granny Kitty went and took Mum <sup>2</sup> out of the girls' home and returned with her to live at Moonahcullah Mission ('Moonah') near Deniliquin in New South Wales. At last, Mum was 'home' and able to start 'living' again amongst family and community where she spent her time helping her Mum around the house.

## A Moonah Wedding

Then one day a tall dark man walked into Moonah. He was up there working in the shearing sheds nearby and it didn't take long before they locked eyes and were smitten. There was a quick courtship and they were married there on the Mission in 1932. She was a tiny woman and a beautiful bride, dressed in a stunning lace dress and veil. Her marriage gave her hope of a new life with her very handsome new husband and so the new Mr and Mrs George Nelson headed on their new adventure to live at Cummeragunga dreaming of their new life, home and family, together.

My Dad was George Nelson the second and he came from a closeknit family who lived and laughed together, taking care of each other and working really hard for what they had. His parents were Priscilla Mackray (Nanny Pris) and

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<sup>1</sup> Linkup NSW.

<sup>2</sup> Whilst I understand that Mum's siblings were also sent away, I have been unable to obtain records, or any other information about their stories so I will now only comment on my mother's story here.

George Nelson. He grew up mostly on Cummera with his brothers and sisters, Iris, Keith, Lulla (Grant), Bay (Atkinson), Margaret (Saunders) and Ruby (Muir/Near). Aunty Ruby Near was adopted into the family after she arrived at Cummera following a long journey with her brothers Billy and Charlie Muir and their Grandma (Granny Benson) from up Wentworth way, near Mildura. This is yet another incredible story that I hope someday someone will tell.



**Dad and Mum, best man Dicky Hamilton from Moonahcullah, flower girls: Lorna Cooper and Aunty Lily Clements (Mum's sister).**

Source: GBRN Collection.



**Keith, Ruby (Near), my father George, Bay (Atkinson) and in front centre, their mother Priscilla Nelson (nee James).**

Source: GBRN Collection.

## Cummeragunga

Cummera was a beautiful place with tree-lined streets, lovely little homes and picket fences. Our little community was set on the banks of the Murray River near Barmah and it was a thriving community at one time. Our people had such pride in how they dressed with white clothes looking whiter than you would ever think possible from the river water. There were always kids playing and running in the streets laughing with that deep rich throaty innocent laugh and running in and out of each other's homes.

But Mum and Dad weren't up at Cummera for long. Dad's work took them down to camp in a canvas tent at Barmah Lakes and that's where they lived over the next couple of years during which time Keith and I were born. Whilst we never really lived at Cummera because of Dad's work, we regularly stayed there with family and friends on weekends and were always coming and going, visiting our mob.

## Priscilla and George

Grandfather George's parents were Grandfather Henry Harmony Nelson and Granny Maggie Stone McDonald (Granny Mag). They came from the Dja Dja

Wurrung and Yorta Yorta/Waywurru peoples respectively. Records show that Grandfather George was born at Cummera, but I am not entirely clear on that, because other records<sup>3</sup> show that the family hadn't moved to Cummera until just after his birth.



**Granny Maggie Nelson and her baby son George Nelson the first.**

Source: GBRN Collection.

Nanny Pris' family came from Yorta Yorta and Indian heritage. This is a very rich and wonderful heritage of which Dad and his family were and are proud. Her parents were Grampa Thomas Shadrach James and Granny Ada Cooper. Nanny was born at Maloga Mission around 1887, just before Cummera was established. So I imagine that she was just a new born bub when the family made the move to Cummera.



## Maggie and Henry

Dad and Nanny Pris used to tell me stories about Grandfather George's parents – Grandfather Henry and Granny Mag. Apparently they had met at the Bogong Moth harvest at Mt Beauty in around 1872.<sup>4</sup> He was approximately 16 and she 11. Then they just happened to meet up again at Coranderrk Mission near Healesville, a few years later and they were married there in 1880.<sup>5</sup>



**Granny Maggie Stone McDonald (Nelson) as a girl.**

Source: GBRN Collection and State Library of Victoria.

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<sup>4</sup> Circa 1872–1874.

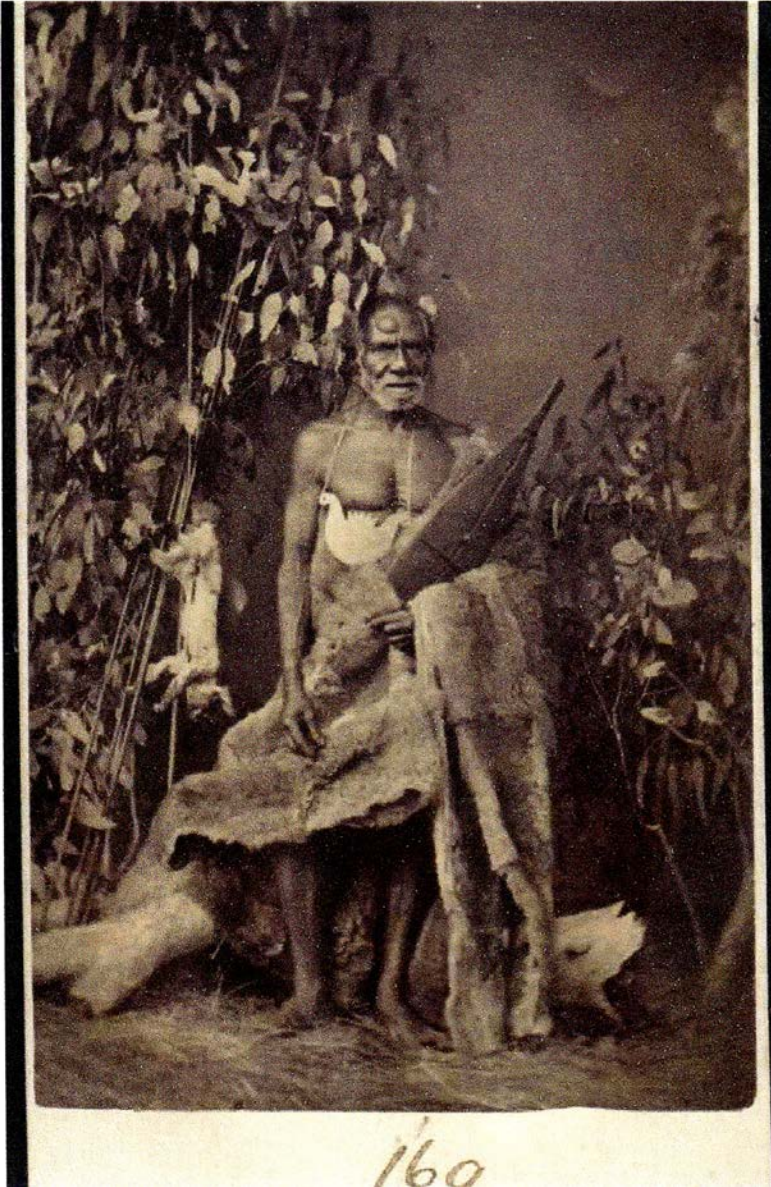
<sup>5</sup> Henry Nelson and Maggie Stone McDonald marriage certificate 15–9–1880, Museum Victoria.



**Grandfather Henry Harmony Nelson as a boy.**

Source: GBRN Collection.

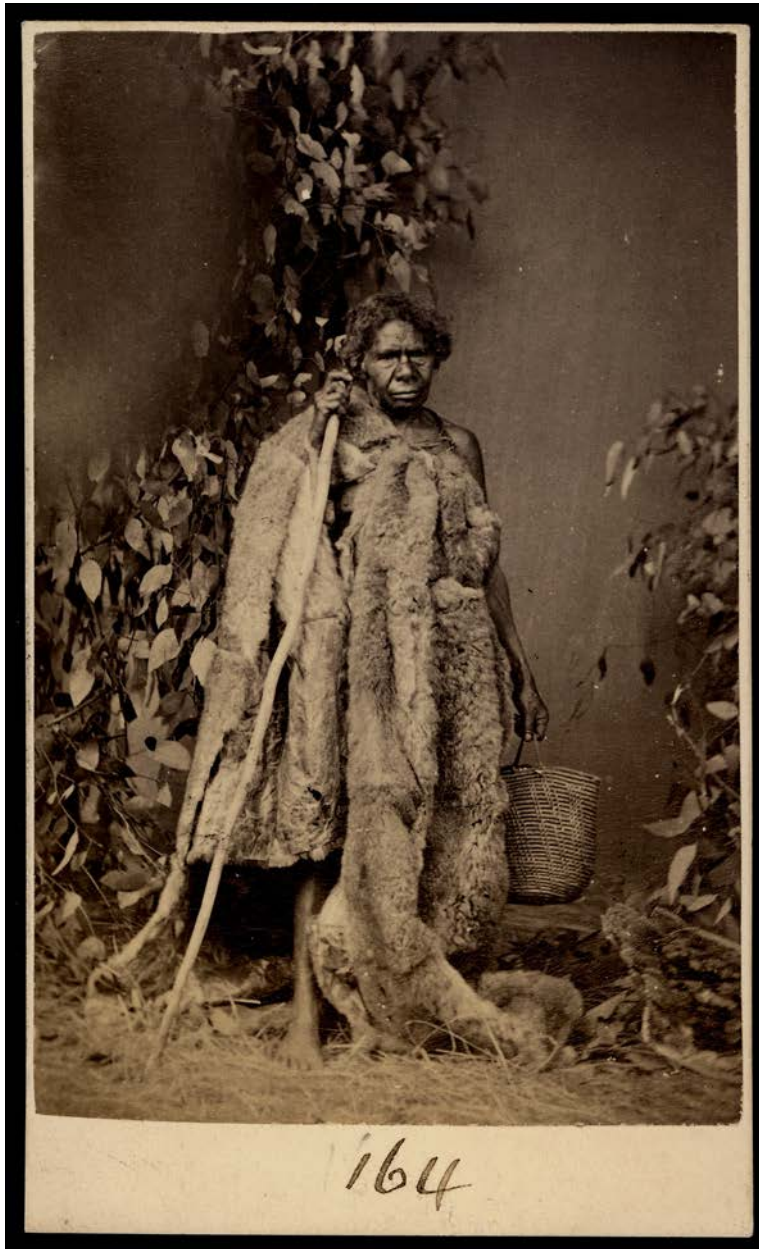
Granny Mag was born at Corryong with both Waywurru and Yorta Yorta heritage; and her name was Maggie Stone McDonald, although I don't know where the name Stone came from, but Nanny Pris told me that Granny Mag's father was a shopkeeper named Bill McDonald, in Wangaratta. Her mother died in childbirth and her father wasn't really on the scene, so she was raised by her grandparents Billy and Mary (named King Billy and Queen Mary by white men). Nanny Pris said that Granny Mag grew up across Waywurru country between Corryong, Wangaratta and Mt Beauty and eventually settled on Yorta Yorta country with her husband Henry and their family.



**Grandfather Billy of the Waywurru.**

Source: State Library of Victoria.





**Grandmother Mary of the Waywurru.**

Source: State Library of Victoria.

## Soup Angels

Nanny Pris told me that during the influenza epidemic in 1919, Granny Mag and Grandfather Henry Harmony became widely known as 'the Soup Angels' of both Coranderrk station and again at Cummeragunga Mission, after they moved there.



They were given this name because during the Great Influenza Epidemic they would regularly cook a camp oven full of soup then they would pour the soup into a 4 gallon kerosene tin bucket and go around the houses on Cummeragunga. At each house they would feed the people who were too sick to cook food for themselves.

## Midwife and Shop Owner

Dad's sisters Aunty Bay and Aunty Ruby once told me that Granny Mag was a midwife on Cummera delivering many of our Aboriginal babies there. They said that she went on to train Aunty Norah Charles, who eventually took over from her. Then Grandfather Henry and his sons built a shop onto the front of their house at Cummera so that Granny Mag could start selling whatever families at Cummera needed that the standard mission rations didn't supply. A lot of business was done by 'trade' whereby people might trade all sorts of wares, veggies and other products with Granny Mag for the food and other items they needed. She was even selling her homemade icecream in the store in the early 1900s – she was definitely way ahead of her time.



**Granny Maggie Nelson with her son-in-law Bill Onus Snr.**

Source: Uncle Bill Onus, GBRN Collection.

My father-in-law Ron Morgan describes the rations at Cummeragunga:

All children and many of the adult population received rations. Meat was issued once daily for the Station raised both its own cattle and sheep. They had a milking herd and on an average milked from twenty to thirty cows, there being a regular daily supply of milk. (Morgan 1952)

Sometime circa 1922-25 Grandfather Henry Harmony, reminiscing about his childhood years, decided he wanted to travel back home to his birth country at Majorca (near Maryborough in Victoria) for a visit. So off he and Granny Mag went on their horse and cart, on a trip that would have taken a few days. They were both quite elderly by now, but he was determined to make the trip. When they finally got there, Grandfather Henry passed away very suddenly. This was very traumatic for Granny Mag, and all she could do was get him back up into the cart, and drive home with him again. He was buried on the hill at Cummeragunga cemetery. However to this day I haven't been able to locate a death certificate for him, so I can only assume that when he arrived home for burial, no doctor or certificate was forthcoming.



**Grandfather Henry Harmony Nelson, Priscilla Nelson-Mackray (nee James, daughter-in-law of Henry), Margaret Nelson (Henry's youngest daughter), front row (kids): George Nelson (My father), Auntie Ruby Near (nee Muir), Iris Atkinson (nee Nelson), right: Billy Onus Jnr (boy), Granny Maggie Nelson (nee Stone McDonald).**

Granny Mag lived for another 20 years and was a strong and big presence in our lives and on Cummeragunga, and, later, down the Flat at Mooroopna, where one of the bridges was named 'Nelson's Bridge'<sup>6</sup> after her and her son Bob, because they lived just up from the bridge. She eventually died in Echuca Hospital in 1952 and the local newspaper wrote about her death with the headline 'Death of Oldest Native Resident in District'. She would have been over 90 years of age then.

**DEATH OF OLDEST *Baptist*  
NATIVE  
RESIDENT OF DISTRICT**

Probably the oldest Native in the district passed away at the Echuca District Hospital last week end. She was Mrs Margaret Nelson, late of Cummerooogunga.

Over 90 years of age, she retained a keen interest, up to the time she entered the hospital, about five week's ago.

For many years she conducted a small sweets shop at Cummerooogunga.

About 10 years ago, she left the Station and went to Mooroopna to live. She is about the first of the old people, who shifted from Mealonga, where Cummerooogunga was founded.

Her funeral took place on Sunday. A service was conducted in the Church of Christ at which Pastor Atkinson, of the Mooroopna Native Church delivered an address.

About 70 Native people from Mooroopna, Cummerooogunga, Echuca and Melbourne attended the service. Mr W. B. Payne conducted the service at the grave side, at the Echuca Cemetery, which was very largely attended by Native people.

*RIVERINE HERALD 26/4/52*

**Riverine Herald news article regarding Granny Mag's death.**

Source: GBRN Collection.

<sup>6</sup> Now named Boolbadah Bridge.

## Mary Jane and Harry

Grandfather Henry Harmony's father Harry Karrakom Gorraakkum<sup>7</sup> Nelson was born to the Wongarrergerr gundidj clan<sup>8</sup> near St Arnaud in 1830 and he was a spokesman in his community.<sup>9</sup> This is a clan of the Loddon Tribe, part of the Dja Dja Wurrung people. Grandfather Henry's mother was Mary Jane Tegurrk<sup>10</sup> but little is known about her except for the record of her death in 1864 at Hard Hills near Creswick; mention of her being connected to the Mr Franklin area for some time; and the record of the inquest into her death at which Grandfather Harry gave the following statement:

I am a native of Australia born near the Lodden. Deceased is my wife. We have been married 15 years.<sup>11</sup> We have had two children. Our little girl died when very young. And Henry is 10 years old. Deceased has been bad for 2 years with a cough, no medical attention ... always moving about until last few days. Has been in mia mia lying on a blanket, has had plenty to eat, no spirits.

The inquest record shows that she died of pulmonary consumption, or tuberculosis, better known as TB.

## Ada and Thomas

Nanny Pris' mother Granny Ada was the daughter of Kitty Atkinson and granddaughter of old Maria (pronounced Mariah), who along with Ada's big brother Jacky arrived at Maloga in canoes back in 1874 (Cato 1976). And then there was Grampa Thomas Shadrach James. Grampa was an Indian from the island of Mauritius, who had found his way to Yorta Yorta country from the other side of the Indian Ocean. There he made a life for himself with Granny Ada and their eight children, being Miriam, Priscilla 'Pris', Shadrach 'Shady', Rebecca 'Becky', Louisa 'Louie', Garfield 'Garchy', Ivy, and Carey but I will tell you more about them later. His children called him 'Dada' while his grandchildren, students and many of our Aboriginal community knew him affectionately as 'Grampa'.

Grampa came to Maloga Mission after meeting Daniel Matthews and a group of Maloga residents at the Maloga Revival Church Camp at Brighton Beach in 1881.

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7 Name is spelt in many varied ways in records.

8 John Tully, Dunolly 1995.

9 Museum Victoria records.

10 Aka Judy, surname also spelt Tigorook. Name is spelt in many varied ways in records.

11 This means they were married in 1849.



I have learnt this both from the stories told to me by his daughter Nanny Pris, and from Nancy Cato's book *Mr Maloga*. He became the school teacher, church minister, herbalist, doctor (first aider), dentist, truancy officer, electoral officer, social worker, surgeon (minor), friend and confidante, to our people at Maloga Mission, Cummeragunga Mission and to so many in the broader community. He also established and ran the Dispensary there.

His children were educated by him, and several, including Nanny Pris, Shadrach (Shady), Rebecca and Miriam, became his teaching assistants under his guidance. Grampa's son Garfield passed his teaching exams at the young age of 16 or 17 with the intention of teaching with his father as well, but as fate would have it, he would never get to follow that dream. At the age of 17 he was killed in a fatal horse riding accident.

I had spent some of my early years growing up around Grampa and saw how loved and respected he was and how highly everyone spoke of him. I heard many stories from the Elders around me about the wonderful man he was, teaching Aboriginal children at Maloga and Cummera Missions for 41 years, to a standard well above that of third grade which was the level expected by the Aborigines Protection Board (APB) and NSW Education Department from the early 1900s. They also talked about how loving, gentle and selfless he was. As I got older I even heard Dad, his brothers and sisters and other family members, speaking of how Grampa's teaching had led to the creation of wonderful leaders in our community.

Now, for me as a little boy and then a young man, these stories about Grampa were all very mysterious, fascinating, intriguing and yet, seemed surreal to me. As a five- to seven-year-old kid, in the years after Grampa retired from teaching at Cummeragunga, I would be in and out of his home at Mooroopna, watching him sitting quietly reading his bible day after day; or see the many people both black and white, coming to his door, seeking his counsel, or renowned herbal treatments.

So as I got older, I started to wonder, how could this quiet, distinguished elderly Indian man, living in the back streets of Mooroopna in the late 1930s, early '40s, have had such an impact, as the stories say? I was determined to find out. I thought I would stop playing outside for a few minutes, go and ask the adults a few questions, and return to playing, with all the answers in hand. Little did I know it would take me 73 years to find the answers to my questions.



**Grampa James, Granny Ada, their daughter Miriam, her son Theo Morgan and his son Theo.**

Source: GBRN Collection and Courtesy of Julie Best.

## Maloga – Cummeragunga

The Maloga Mission was started in 1873 by non-sectarian missionaries Daniel and Janet Matthews who, with Daniel's brother Richard, had selected 800 acres of river frontage land in 1870 from Moira pastoral property on the NSW side of the Murray River near Echuca. The Matthews established a school for Aboriginal children at which Janet taught in 1874. Many Yorta Yorta and other Aboriginal people settled there, while at the same time trying independently to gain secure tenure to some of their traditional lands. Some were related to the Aboriginal community at Coranderrk further south, who had already been petitioning to gain secure tenure over their land. The NSW government took over all church-run 'missions' in 1883 when they established the APB and installed government-employed managers on what were officially called 'stations' but which Aboriginal people have universally continued to call 'Missions'. Daniel Matthews supported the petition of Aboriginal people to have 1800 acres (728 ha) of adjacent river frontage set aside in 1883 as Cummeragunja Station but was reluctant to bring the Mission under government control. Ultimately most of the Aboriginal residents moved from Maloga to Cummeragunja where in 1888 the Protection Board allocated farm blocks to individual families.