

### 3. A Little Fulla

#### The Party

In 1938 I turned five years old. I remember Mum and all my Aunties putting on a party for me. Mum went to a lot of trouble to make the day special for me and what a glorious day that was. There were Dad's sisters Aunty Ruby (Near), Aunty Bay (Atkinson), Aunty Iris (Atkinson), Aunty Markie (Saunders) all helping Mum with the cooking. It was a major production and Nanny Pris was the 'main director'. The men were smart enough to stay out of the way and the women excitedly chattered amongst themselves as they baked and decorated.

Then when it came time for the sweets, Mum went to get the icecream which she had so cleverly stored in Nanny Pris' bath tub to keep it cool. But, tragically, it had all melted. I think poor Mum was even more disappointed than me. She really wanted the day to be perfect. Well for me it already was. There was so much love around, the family was so close and all chipping in as much as they could and they made me feel so special. I remember that day vividly today as a 79-year-old man, looking back, reminiscing. It was a good day! A great memory!

At the time Mum, Dad, me and baby brother Keith were living at Nan and Pop Mackray's house in Morrell Street, Mooroopna. We also had Aunty Markie, Aunty Bay, Aunty Iris and Uncle Bert Johnson, with their families and Aunty Louie and Uncle Charlie Muir (they use to come and go shearing). We were all living in the one house. See Map of Mooroopna.



**Me with my cricket bat at five years old.**

Grampa James and Granny Ada lived over the back fence and shared a common gate. They had their daughter Miriam and her son Theo, their son Carey Snr with his wife Mary and daughter Pat (Neve) all living with them. They were big houses back then so we could really get the whole mob in. It just showed how Grampa James and Granny Ada always had their kids living close to them just as Nanny Pris went on to do with her kids, and her brothers and sisters did the same with their kids.

## The Boys' Shenanigans

### The Revenge

Now, I don't want to ruin my image, but I guess if I am going to tell my story, I better tell it right. That means the good and the bad. So I better tell you the story about cousin Dimpsey Johnson, me and the can of kerosene.



**Aunty Iris Atkinson, my Mum Betsy Nelson (nee Clements), Aunty Amy Charles (Alf Turner's mother), and Nanny Pris sitting in front. This photo would have been taken around the time of my fifth birthday.**

Source: GBRN Collection.

Nan and Pop lived next door to old Mr Grey. They shared a common fence with him, as they did with Grampa over the back. There was a huge bottle-brush growing along the fence line and it was hanging over the fence. One day, bored with nothing better to do, Dimpsey and I started throwing rocks at the tree. We were trying to break the bottle-brush flowers off the tree, but the rocks were hitting the roof of Mr Grey's house. He let us go for a while until he finally got sick of us and complained to Pop and Nanny Pris. We got a serve from Nan and Pop, so then Dimpsey went and found threepence sitting up on the shelf in Nanny's house, then 'dragged me' – yes, dragged me – down to the O'Brien's hardware store which was next to Doonans corner petrol station in Mooroopna and *he* bought a can of kero.

When we got back to Mr Grey's house, and out of pure revenge, he used the kero to light a fire and started stoking it up under the corner of Mr Grey's house. Yes, of course I was there going along with it too, with a little voice inside my head saying 'stop'. But thank goodness Mr Grey came out and caught us. And boy did we get a hidin' that night. Mum gave me a hidin' and when Dad got home, he was on for giving me one too. My tiny Mum was holding me in her arms running around the kitchen table, while Dad was chasing her trying to get to me. Mum figured I had already had sufficient hidin', so was trying to save me from another one. Of course, this was *all* Dimpsey's fault; at least that's how I like to remember it! Needless to say, after this incident, we got kicked out of the house at Morrell Street, so Nanny Pris and Pop Mackray got a hut down on the Flat and we quickly moved.

## The Timber Yard

As you can imagine from the last little episode, Dimpsey and I were pretty adventurous kids and inseparable; we also used to knock around with the Hawkins Brothers,<sup>1</sup> Alan and Russell who were as bad as us. Bonded together as we were, we were just like a human dynamo. We would get up to all sorts of mischief, as boys do.

One thing we loved to do was go down to McKean's Timberyard (see Map of Mooroopna) in Mooroopna and go playing around and climbing on the timber. One day when I was five years old, not so long after my birthday, I was climbing up onto the top of the high timber piles, standing tall, thinking I was king of the world, or at least, king of the timber yard; when suddenly, the pile of timber started to fall beneath my feet and I came tumbling down with a heap of timber crashing down on top of me. I was only a little fella and was pretty brittle boned underneath that load of timber. I was completely terrified, frozen, couldn't speak, couldn't move, couldn't scream. I felt absolute fear and dread. The horrific pain shooting through my entire body told me I had done some serious damage. I tried desperately to stop myself from blacking out. I was waiting for the boys to rescue me, but no, what did they do? They scattered. Left me!!

Little did I know they had raced straight down to Grampa James' home in Mill Street to get help; interesting that he was the one they turned to when they needed help. Now this is a day that really sticks in my mind because it's the day that Grampa James and Pop Mackray became huge in my life; this was the day they became my heroes; this was the day they rescued me from an uncertain fate. Sound dramatic? Well to this little black duck at the time, it was!

Grampa James, who was 79 years old then, had rushed down to the sawmill to help me; when he arrived Mr McKean had just finished lifting all the timber

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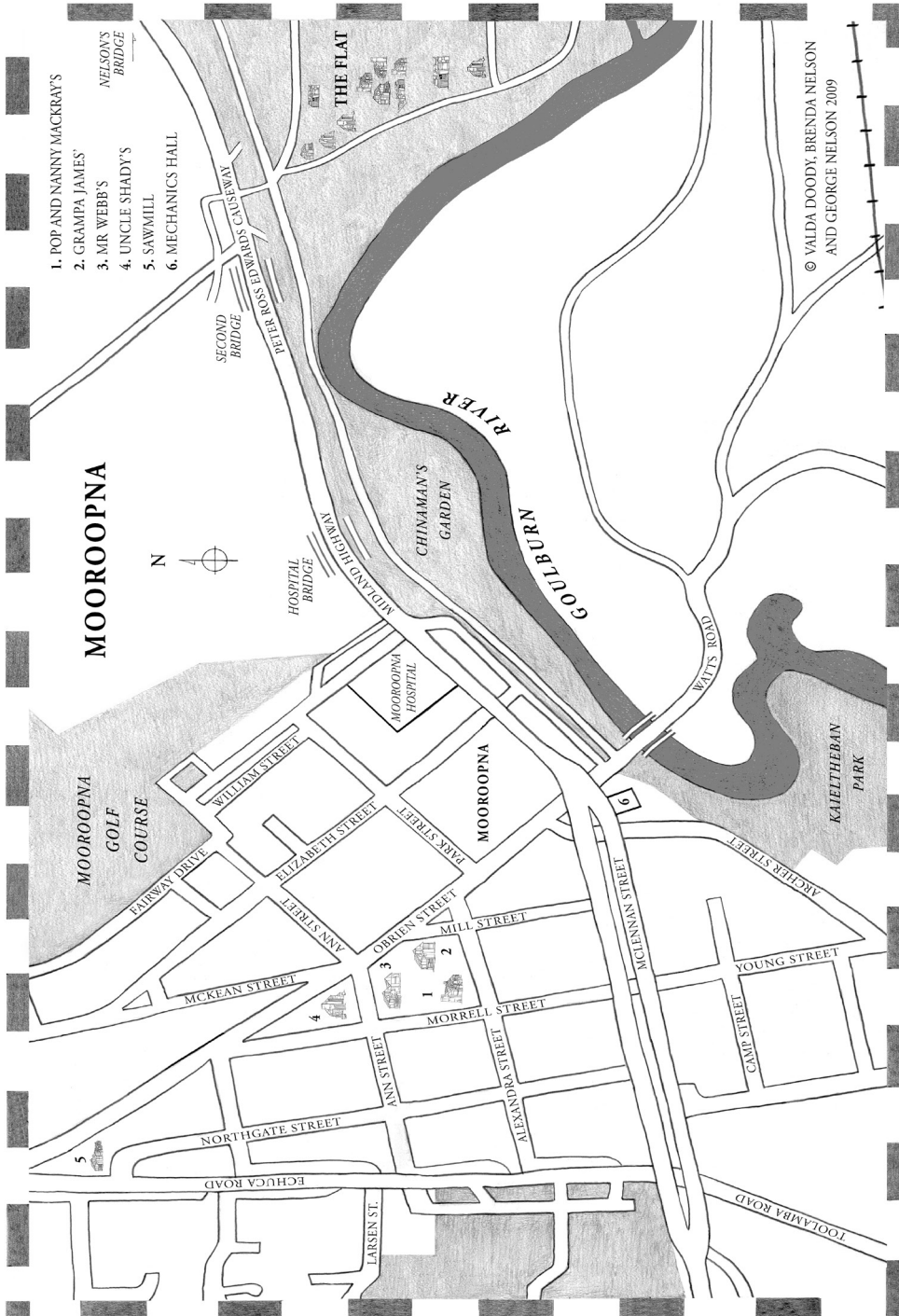
1 Country and Western singers.

off me and he swept me up and handed me directly over to Grampa's anxiously awaiting arms. Grampa then kept telling me quietly that I was going to be okay, to try and soothe my worried mind. And you know, hearing his voice in my ears, I knew I was going to be okay. He carried me over the road to where Pop Mackray was waiting in his Chevy ute with the motor running ready to respond with a quick trip to Mooroopna Hospital. They got me there in a flash and Grampa waited with me the whole time while Pop went and picked up Mum from down the Flat and brought her back. Then all three waited as tests were done. It turned out that I had broken both my ankles and my right thigh and I was to stay in traction for two to three months in Mooroopna Hospital which was barely 2 km from our home on the Flat, down by the Goulburn River, where we were now living since the fire episode.

Mum walked up from the Flat to visit me every day and when I was finally discharged my darling Mum was there waiting; she turned up to the hospital to pick me up – in a pram. It wasn't too far to go, just over the road and into the bush to the Flat so off we headed, but we only got as far as the Cork trees (see Map of Mooroopna and the Flat) when Mum accidentally upended the pram with me in it. Poor Mum, she felt so terrible. Luckily I wasn't so injured that she had to turn around and take me back to hospital.

One thing is for sure, from then on I would forever have a deep bond with Grampa James and Pop Mackray and an even deeper one with Mum that grew out of this traumatic event. As a five-year-old kid you don't really look at the adults around you except Mum and Dad. You don't really 'see' them. But from that point forward, I really started to 'notice' Grampa and Pop for the strong, loving and compassionate men they both were. From that point forward I felt safer knowing I had them both in my life. From that point forward, they, along with my mother were my three heroes.

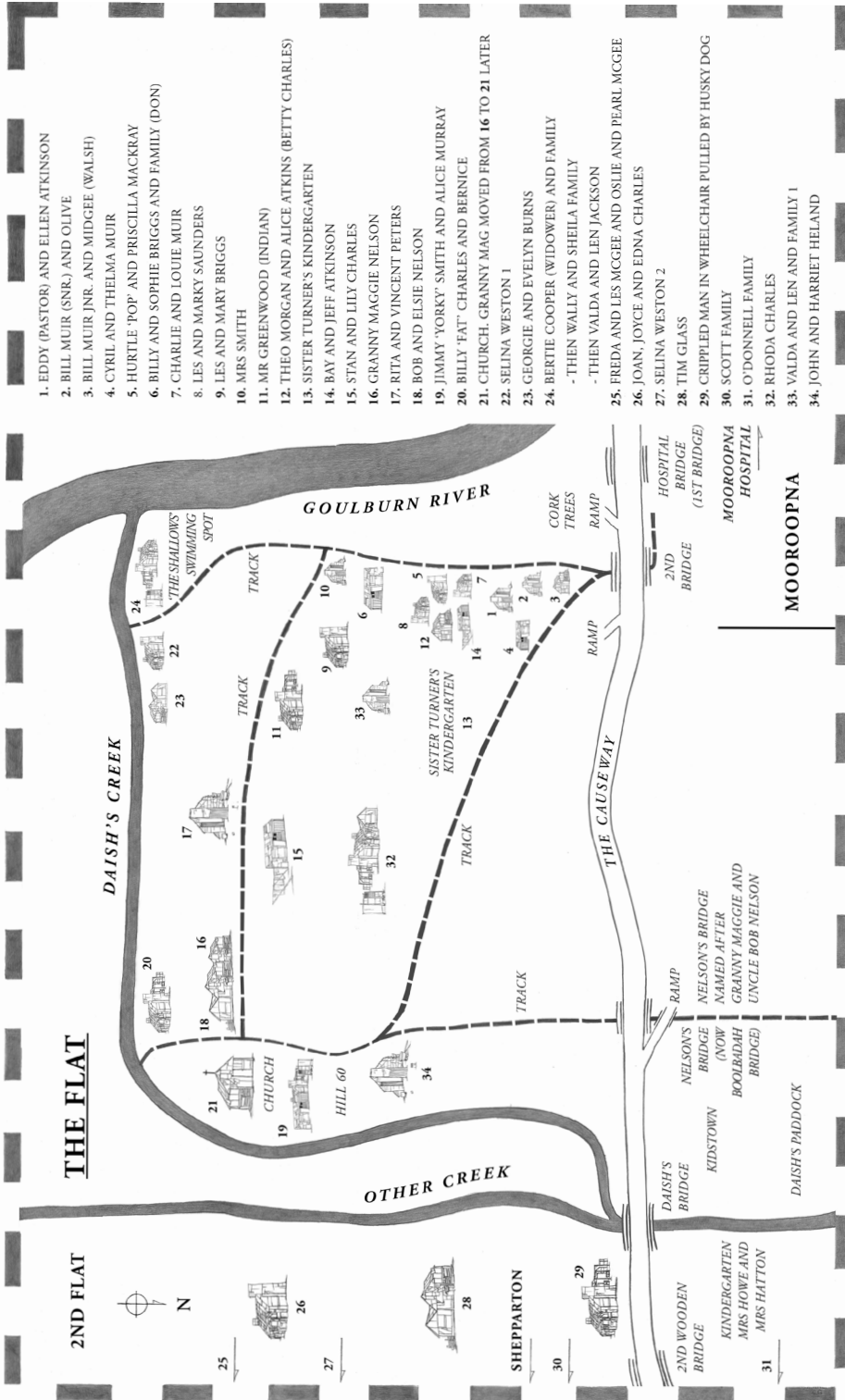
**The following map was developed by my wife Brenda, my friend Valda Doody and me. It comes from our memories of our time living or visiting family on the Flat. Life on the Flat was transient and mobile because our people and families were coming and going for work. Some only visited family, some stayed a short time (like Brenda) some stayed a few years (like me) and others lived there for over 20 years (like Valda). So we have drawn this map containing the details of who lived where, during the time that WE lived on the Flat. When others look at this map they will think 'that's not right... that's not how it was in my time'. And that may be true. We were all there at different times, with different people and families. So I ask that you look at this map only in terms of 'our memories' and 'our time' there. It doesn't have to be true for everyone.**



33 Map of Mooroopna, copyright Valda Doody, Brenda Nelson and George Nelson 2009.

Source: Illustrator: Ian Faulkner.





Map of the Flat, copyright Valda Doody, Brenda Nelson and George Nelson.

Source: Illustrator: Ian Faulkner.

## Grampa's Home

Once I was healed Mum and Dad could always find me either running in and out of Grampa James and Granny Ada's home or hanging around Pop Mackray. I was drawn to them both and loved watching them at work. I would watch and listen as Grampa talked to others, he sat writing at his desk, or as he sat quietly reading his bible. He had a real presence about him and I could see why so many people were drawn to him. I also noticed that he always smelt of disinfectant from constantly cleaning and disinfecting his hands. Obviously this was an important practice for someone who was always treating patients and dispensing herbal and bush remedies. For although he had now retired and moved to Mooroopna, he continued to treat many of our Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal community members – just as he did at Maloga, Cummeragunga and Barmah.

Nanny once told me that people both black and white would travel long distances to seek out Grampa's healing treatments. She said that even William Barak brought his very ill son David to see Grampa once, all the way from Coranderrk Station near Healesville, to Maloga Mission, in Grampa's early days there. Apparently Grampa had built a solid reputation as a healer very early on in his time at Maloga and the people started to come. Sadly, by then, young David was so ill from tuberculosis that even Grampa could not help him.

Dad would send me and my brother Keith to Grampa's house to ask for hangover remedies after he'd had a hard night. So off we would go with Curly – our red heeler dog – and six black swans in tow. We had the pet swans from the time they were babies and were told we had to pass them off as ducks because it was illegal to keep swans as pets. Everywhere Keith and I went the dog and swans would follow. We must have been a sight to see. Trouble is, as the so called ducks got older, their necks got longer and longer!

Anyway, we would eventually arrive at Grampa's after dawdling along, getting side-tracked here and there, and there he'd be, preparing his remedies for his patients. I would watch Grampa mixing his remedies, weighing powders on his scales, preparing healing remedies and packaging them for his patients. And I remember Cousin Pat Neve (Aunty Mary James' daughter) being around then too. She was a bit older than me so she was there helping Grampa by folding up the little square bits of paper for him with the remedies inside.

## The Book

I believe it's around this time that Grampa wrote and published a book titled *Heritage in Stone*, about his life, living with our Aboriginal people along the

Murray River at Maloga Mission, Cummeragunga Mission and Barmah. We all knew about this book, I even saw it once or twice, however, I have never been able to locate a copy after decades of searching.

## A Different Kind of Black

As a child you don't see the difference between people of different colours. But as I started to take more notice of Grampa I started to see that although he was black he was a different 'kind' of black to us Aboriginal people. Regardless of that difference, he was completely one of us, through and through, but it added to the mystery that was Grampa and raised many more questions in my mind.

So, as you know, I got very inquisitive and set out on a little mission to find out more about Grampa. As a seven year old I thought that would just take a day or two, maybe even a week, a month at most. I would ask the other kids, Mum, Dad, Aunties, Uncles, Nanny Pris and Pop Mackray; everyone except Grampa. I was determined to find out where he came from, how he ended up here with us, and why. But people either didn't know or they all had different stories to tell, and just confused me more.

## The Butter

One day when I was hovering around Grampa's kitchen as usual, Grampa was sitting at the kitchen table taking a spoonful of butter to suck on, when Granny Ada scolded him harshly for this. He replied in a pained voice: 'Oh mama, you know I need this for my stomach.' I don't know what he was suffering from at the time, but he did have that spoonful of butter often and he really believed that it gave him comfort.

## The Fire

Two other major events happened in 1938. First Grampa and Granny Ada's home burnt down<sup>2</sup> (and no, it had nothing to do with Dimpsey or me!). I remember that day and the house fire very clearly with Dad and others throwing Grampa and Granny's belongings out of the house into the yard frantically trying to save books, furniture and other important belongings. But, sadly, very little could be saved. Precious items were lost including documents, photos, a copy of Grampa's published book *Heritage in Stone* and his medical treatment books in which he documented the use and dispensing of the many Aboriginal bush remedies, Indian herbal treatments, and white man's medicines. This was all such a wealth of information and an enormous loss.

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<sup>2</sup> Rhonda Dean interview 2012.



It seemed that the stress of this event was too much for both Grampa and Granny and they really suffered the loss. They moved in with their youngest son Carey and his wife Mary in Claude Street, Shepparton, but then, due to a lack of space, they moved down the street to live with their daughter Becky.



**Grampa with his granddaughters Claire (Moulton) and Ruby (Near).**

Source: GBRN Collection, original source unknown.

## To School

The other major event in 1938 for me was my starting school at Mooroopna Primary School. I never had stability as far as my education was concerned because as soon as I got settled at school we would be packing up and moving on for Dad's work. Soon after starting school at Mooroopna we moved back to Barmah Lakes for Dad's work burning charcoal. In those days we travelled everywhere by horse and cart. Dad had a few horses over the years. A couple of beautiful big Clydesdales and at other times a couple of regular horses. When I think of the later ones I laugh, remembering the huge battle of wits Dad had with one of those horses. You see we would load up our gear in the cart, then all get up in our designated places, and Dad would yell something like 'giddy-up!', and his horse would immediately sit down. Yes a real battle of wits between man and horse. The horse won every time. Needless to say, it was a slow trip from the Flat to Barmah and beyond.

Once we settled into Barmah Lakes I wasn't going to school at all until the school teacher Mr Edgegoose got wind of me being up at the lakes and sent word to my parents to get me enrolled at Barmah School on the following Monday, so they did.

But it made no difference, because very soon we were off again, moving back to the Flat. We moved back and forth from Barmah Lakes to Mooroopna for visits here and there, until finally, by the time I was seven we were back living more permanently with Auntie Ruby Near at Mooroopna in an eight room house at the back of the Mooroopna Hospital. A few of us were living in this big house including John Near Jnr, his sister Beryl (Uncle John Near's kids), Auntie Iris, Mum and Dad, my brother Keith and me.