

4. Hunting and Gathering

The Bush

During my early years moving around and camping in the late 1930s to early 1940s I learnt a great deal from my Mum and Dad about the history of our people – the Yorta Yorta, our ancestry, culture and traditional way of life. Whenever we set up camp in the bush it consisted of a hessian bag tent. We never built anything more onto that because we moved so often there was no point so we made do with what we had. Then, whenever they had the chance they would tell my brother Keith and me stories about the old tribal ways of fishing and hunting. We were only little fellas but we loved to listen to them and soaked up everything we were told. We would be out bush alone: Dad, Mum, Keith and me and then at other times we had others (or families) with us like Pop Mackray, Uncle Arthur and Uncle Bob Nelson, Uncle Stan and Auntie Lily Charles (Mum's sister) and Alf Turner (Uncle William Cooper's grandson) who was then a teenager driving a horse and lorry for my Dad.

Each night they would sit around the campfire telling the legends of our great hunters and the fantastic skill they had to hunt, fish and provide for their tribe and clan. I sat amongst them staring into the fire in the dark night, struggling to keep my sleepy eyes open, because I didn't want to miss a thing. The fire burning bright, the sound of the sparks crackling as the sap riddled wood burnt and the smell of burning gum leaves wafting through the camp – this was our home.

Dad used to say that before white settlers arrived on our land, our Yorta Yorta Ancestors lived right across every inch of Yorta Yorta country, and in particular, spent a lot of their time in the area now known as the Barmah and Moira Lakes complex and they lived a life of plenty. They never wanted for anything. Everyone knew who they were and where they came from; there was no question of tribal names, heritage, blackness or boundaries. He said there was a strong sense of pride and belonging to family/clan, tribe and the land.

The tribe's main daily activity saw the men fishing and hunting for animals and bird life which were in abundance; and the women gathering small animals and vegetables to supplement the food that their men had caught and killed to feed their mob. Our people were able to vary their diet with so many different types of birds and water fowl and their eggs, along with kangaroos, emus, plant life, fish, shellfish, and especially their favourite '*Mandiga*' the great Murray cod and '*Bana*' the crayfish, which filled the rivers and creeks. Such abundance was not limited to pre-contact time; I saw kangaroos and emus roaming in big packs when my parents and I camped in the Barmah Forest in the early 1930s.

Tribal Names

I think we camped along every bit of that river between Barmah and Ulupna Island. We knew every twist and turn, every nook and cranny, every fishing hole and bunyip hole. Dad knew exactly where to put his fishing lines and cray nets to be sure of getting a good feed for us each night.

I remember vividly all the times Dad would sit down with Keith and me telling us yarns, and we were in awe of him. One story that sticks in my mind is about the names of all the Aboriginal tribes from the top of the Murray River in the Mountains, to where it spills into the ocean in South Australia; he said that those tribes whose names are a word repeated, e.g. Yorta Yorta, Latji Latji, Wati Wati, Wemba Wemba, etc., were all named that way because their tribal land is on both sides of the river. Those tribes who have a single word name are only on one side of the river. This makes a lot of sense when you think about it and certainly gives food for thought today. He told me that story again and again throughout his life, saying it had been passed down to him from the Ancestors, to the Elders, to him as he grew up on Cummeragunga; he continued to hear it as a young man as he worked amongst other men in the bush; and now he was passing this to us.

The Emus

I also remember around the same time, when Dad was working in Barmah Forest cutting wood and our family was camped on the Sandridge (a long thin stretch of sand, near the Barmah Lakes), a big mob of emus ran past our camp. There were around 200–300 or maybe more. Then 5–10 minutes later another 100 or more followed them heading in the same direction that the first pack had taken. A short while later my Great-Uncle Bob Nelson walked into the camp. He was carrying a greyhound dog under each arm. The skin on their ribs had been cut as if they had been slashed with a very sharp razor or knife; each dog had five to six of these long cuts on each side. Uncle Bob asked my Mum for a needle and cotton; he then sat down and started to sew up the many cuts in the two dogs, a task which took him hours.

Apparently when the emus had been chased and cornered by the dogs, they had turned on the dogs, attacking them, by kicking with their powerful legs and ripping and slashing with their big toes. Both the emu and the kangaroo have a very sharp big toe, a lethal weapon with which they can disembowel a dog or a man; both the emu and kangaroo are extremely dangerous when cornered. The dogs soon found that out!

Uncle Stan's Dogs

One day one of Uncle Stan Charles' dogs chased a kangaroo into the water. The kangaroo kept backing into the water until the dog was swimming. The dog swam right up to the kangaroo and tried to bite it at the throat. As soon as the dog did this, the kangaroo put its paws around the dog's neck and sat down in the water, trying to drown the dog. Stan had to swim out in the water and hit the kangaroo with a stick to save his dog.

The Flood

Very near this same camp, another incident with a kangaroo took place when my Auntie Lily (Mum's sister) and her husband Uncle Stan Charles were camped with Mum, Dad, Keith and me, as they often did. Uncle Stan was working with Dad cutting wood and burning charcoal for gas producers when the Murray River started to rise. The Forestry Department workers drove through the forest and told the woodcutters that the State Rivers Department had phoned them to say that a small amount of water was about to be let go from the weir at Yarrawonga, but there was no need for them to shift out of the Barmah Forest.

When the river rose rapidly and the water came through the forest, we ended up camped on the Sandridge which was now an island. This was high ground and the water only came up around the lower parts so we were safe; and we were surrounded by an incredible number of emus, kangaroos and rabbits. Perfect! What more could we need?

Listening and Learning

Dad introduced Keith and me to the art of hunting, fishing and surviving in the bush from the time we were little fellas. Teaching us survival skills in the bush was a real necessity because if the bloke he was working for was late bringing our supplies, us boys would go with Dad, fishing and hunting anywhere from Barmah Lakes and Barmah Island to the Gulf on the Murray River and end up at Ulupna Island. We loved our father and especially loved heading out to do our men's business with him. This made us feel important.

Fishing with Dad

There were a couple of special places we went to fish where Dad said the old people way back spent a lot of time fishing because it was known to bring great results. And he had a few little tricks up his sleeve that he had learnt from his

Dad, as he did from his. We caught anything from red fin, yellow belly, Murray cod and trout cod; and we loved crayfishing too, just so Mum could cook up a good feed of curried crayfish tails and damper. Nothing better!

Dad was widely considered to be a very good fisherman. One of my most vivid memories of the abundance of fish in the Barmah and Moira Lakes area is from around 1940 when I was seven years old. Dad often caught large numbers of fish in the Murray River. He would put in a set line or sometimes a cross-line measuring 120–150 yards long, which was strung from one side of the river across to the other side (cross-lines were illegal in those days and are still illegal today). Dad would only put in the cross-line on one night a month. The line would have 12 or 15 hooks on it with each line and hook set about six to ten feet apart. I would help Dad by rowing the boat and steadying it while he pulled the boat across the river, by placing one hand over another along the line, and he unhooked the fish as the boat moved across the river. The line often had a fish on every hook and Dad would keep three to four of the best fish (the 4–5 pounders) and he would throw back the rest. When I asked Dad why he threw some of the fish back he always said: ‘They will be there waiting for us next time ... we can’t be too greedy. This is “our way” and we aren’t allowed to take any more fish than we need for a feed.’

Dad was renowned for catching some real beauties especially Murray cod by using his secret bait in equally secret locations and he said that all the Nelson men were great fishermen including Uncle Arthur Nelson, Uncle Bob Nelson and Dad’s brother Keith Nelson Snr. But the women gave them a run for their money. I once saw my Aunty Lily Charles catch a Murray cod and when it was pulled out of the water it was as big as her. Some of these huge cod must have been in the river for a very long time to get to the size they did. Sadly, once the boats and paddle steamers started to get busier they scared the fish away and fishing wasn’t as plentiful as it once was.

Hunting with Dad

If we weren’t fishing we were hunting kangaroo, emus and rabbits, with Keith and me having to run down the rabbits. We didn’t bother so much with hare because they were tough and had to be hung for 3–4 days to soften up; so we stuck to the rabbits and gathering turtles and their eggs. We weren’t so keen on goanna for a feed either, so we really only had it as a last resort if there was nothing else. Keith and I were given rabbit skins to peg and we would come to town with two dollars worth of skins to sell. We thought we were great! Another source of food for us back then was mountain, wood or grey teal duck; and witchetty grubs tossed around in a pan with a bit of butter were just something special.

Gathering with Mum

Mum and I would go up around Barmah Lakes to collect buckler bush (a wild cabbage) to provide a vegetable to add to potatoes with our different types of meats.

Bush Medicines

We also collected plenty of our old medicines everywhere in the bush. I won't mention them all here but one thing Mum loved to do was boil up gum leaves or Murray pine needles for cough mixture for us kids. She used 'Old Man Weed' for a wide range of medical conditions especially healing wounds, or to help the men's thinning hair grow back.

Sacred Business

Mum would also take Keith and me out collecting gum leaves and other special plants for rituals and for other business she liked to tend to and for when she had some special places to go like funerals. She used to take gum leaves up to the Cummeragunga cemetery to do a 'smoking' whenever there was a funeral, or when we went visiting the graves of those who had been lost to us. She said it helped to release the loved one's spirit so that they could be with the Ancestors. Even at home around the camp she loved to do the gum leaf smoking for cleansing our camp and keeping a good feeling around the place.

Mum learnt about the traditional practices from her mother Granny Kitty and I too have passed this knowledge on to some of our children as they have asked. These are important traditions that we continue to practise in our home today, just as was taught to me.

The Sisters

Mum and her sister Lily were very close and always loved to laugh and joke around. They were a real delight to be around and made life really happy amidst the hardship. They always seemed to find the funny side in things and Keith and I had a lot of laughs with them while the men went out to work each day. These were really happy times and a great memory in my life.

Great Times

While living off the land was pretty hard in those days with the men having to do the hard heavy work and women having to make a home and meals out of very little, it was still a great time that I so fondly remember today. There was great love, respect and kinship amongst family and friends; they helped and supported each other, always yarning, laughing and telling stories. They had great pride in themselves and their Aboriginality; they were strong men and women raising strong children who loved to stay close to their parents, even as adults, forming a large extended family. Remarkably, they agreed to disagree without families falling apart over minor disagreements. Something we could learn from today.



Mum, Dad, Aunt Lily, Baby Daphne (Milward) and me.

Source: GBRN Collection.

Clever Men

Dad would love to tell Keith and me in detail about the skills of our great tribal hunters prior to white settlement and what clever men they were. Later in my married life, my father-in-law Ronald Morgan often wrote about the qualities of our Ancestors in letters to newspapers where he quietly fought for Aboriginal rights, and in his book as follows:

Also we have learned from our Aboriginal people themselves that they had their customs and beliefs that were of a high order. The myths and legends of the Aborigines many such as were told to me for bedtime stories even though they were of some wild bird or animal, something primitive, still none lacked a moral background or teaching. The place of the happening would be some spot known to the listener and one where the events related would most likely happen. (Morgan 1952)

Diving for Bana

The Murray crayfish '*Bana*' was a great delicacy for our people over thousands of years, as it is today. Apparently Aboriginal divers would dive down into the river with some of the treated¹ bulrush material wrapped around one of their hands. They would dive deep down to where they would look for the crayfish holes in the side of the river-bank. After finding a crayfish hole the diver would put his hand deep into the hole until a crayfish could bite the bulrush material with his nipper. The crayfish would not let go and the diver would pull his hand out of the hole and then grab hold of the crayfish.

The diver had to let the crayfish grab the cover on his hand; he could not grab hold of the crayfish directly because the crayfish would immediately spread its legs, jamming the diver's hand in the hole and the diver would eventually drown. By using the cover, the diver could let go if he needed to. We loved going crayfishing with Dad but there was no diving involved. We were out in the boat using nets and Dad always managed to pull in a good feed for us in some of those special places he had.

The Nets

The hand-made nets were used for various activities such as fishing and duck hunting. These nets were made by gathering bulrush stalks which were then baked in an earthen oven until the outer skin was cooked. Then the skin would have to be removed and the stem beaten with a stone or piece of wood until it was soft enough to be peeled off in thin strips. These strips would be woven into a string or thin rope. This string was then used to weave nets with either a type of hoop net for small fish and yabbies, or long nets which could be stretched across creeks and rivers to trap fish.

1 Lightly singeing the bulrush in the fire, then stripping it until it's very thin.



Note: A full-size version of this map is available on the ANU Press website.

Fishing

Prior to white man's arrival, our tribal men would catch fish using fishing lines with bone hooks, spears, nets and fish traps or weir systems. Long nets (similar to gill nets) were stretched tightly in the water, usually secured at either end to sharpened stakes which were driven deep into the river bed to hold the net tightly across the running water.

They were well ahead of their time with their hand built weir systems which they created by digging trenches. They understood the river so well that they were able to judge – to mathematical perfection – just the right angles, fall and flow rate to bring the best result. They dug trenches in a depression close to the rising river and the water would flow into the depression and with it, fish swam into the hole. Then wooden sticks would be driven into the earth across the mouth of the trench to form a barrier to stop the fish from swimming out of the hole and at the same time allowing the water to drain from the hole. As the water receded the fishermen would either walk into the water muddying it as they went (the fish would be suffocated by the muddy water and rise to the surface to breathe and they could be scooped up or speared by the men),² or they would break off a leafy sapling and then drag it through the water – the small fish would then become trapped in the leaves and branches and be dragged out onto the ground where they would be gathered up by the men, women and children for cooking.

The Ducks

My Dad told me that they showed great skill in catching ducks too, by using the same bulrush nets they used for fishing. The men would either stretch the long nets across the narrow part of a river or creek, or between the trees. Then, when the ducks were flying towards the nets, the hunters would throw their boomerangs at the highest of the ducks. The boomerangs made a whistling or screeching sound when they were thrown, a sound similar to what a hawk makes when it is diving to attack ducks. When they had used up all their boomerangs the men would put their fingers in their mouths to whistle imitating the sound of an attacking hawk. On hearing that sound the ducks would frantically dive into the nets as they tried desperately to avoid the diving hawk and be caught by the hunters.

2 Stan Charles interview 1940.

The Gun Fishermen

Of all my father's family, his Uncle Arthur Nelson was the 'gun' fisherman along the Murray River back in the 1920s. He would regularly stop his horse and cart full of fish at the Barmah Store/Hotel and sell 100 pounds (income) worth of fish in a couple of hours. One hundred pounds in 1920 at the present day rate would be a very considerable sum! Back in those days the average wage would be lucky to be nine pounds (\$18) per week.

The Moira Lakes Fishing Company

It is during the same time that two brothers from America named Rice established the Moira Lakes Fishing Company at the Barmah Lakes. The head of the company was 'Governor' Joseph Waldo Rice who originated from Boston, United States, via the California goldfields and Bendigo goldfields, to settle on the Murray River near Barmah in 1856.³ According to the *Barmah Chronicles* by G.M. Hibbins, he had heard about the abundance of Murray cod in the river and so set up the Moira Lakes Fishing Company (MLFC) at Moira Lakes. The company supplied the Bendigo goldfields with a ton of fish per week.

It has been reported by many of the old Yorta Yorta men back then that the MLFC fishermen pulled thousands of tons of Murray cod out of the Murray River, Moira and Barmah Lakes system.

Several methods were used to transport the fish to the Moira Lakes Fishing Company packing sheds. In one method the Aboriginal fishermen caught the fish, then tethered the live fish to the sides of the flat bottom row boats and left them swimming in the water. When the boats reached the Moira Lakes Fishing Company's packing sheds, the fish would be killed and packed in boxes and covered with wet hessian bags. Then the fish were sent down the river to Barmah to be loaded onto paddle steamers bound for Echuca, where they were loaded onto coaches bound for the busy goldfields at Ballarat and Bendigo.

In the second method, caught fish were transported along the river in a unique way; cane baskets, with a few gum leaf boughs inside, were hung over the side of the flat bottom boats and allowed to hang in the water. Then the fish were placed into the baskets and covered with gum leaves and transported down the river to the packing company, where they were packed in boxes covered in wet hessian bags and taken by rail or coach to be sold at the Ballarat and Bendigo goldfields, or even in Melbourne.⁴

3 'Spotlight on Barmah' (booklet) written 1961, 'BARMAH a heritage and Historical snapshot(1961)', <<http://barmahpast.topcities.com/>>.

4 Ken Briggs interview 1992, Mooroopna.

The Snakes

Snakes, both tiger brown and tiger black, were a constant danger to people camping near the Barmah and Moira Lakes as they never strayed too far from the running waters of the Murray River. Mum would always rake up all of the sticks and dry gum leaves around the new camp and heap them in a line or circle around the campsite. Then she would set it all alight, leaving a line of ashes. When I asked her why she did this, she explained it was because the snakes don't like crawling through ashes because the ashes would get into their scales, irritating them.

We never had any trouble with snakes coming into our camp. But one day when Dad and Uncle Stan were burning charcoal up the Murray River, Dad's two Clydesdale horses got away and Dad asked Uncle Stan to get the horses while he stayed back to lift the charcoal kilns.

So Uncle Stan walked off to collect the horses with me in tow. We were strolling along and next minute Uncle, in one fell swoop, picked me up by the scruff of the neck and threw me behind him. As I got up, dazed and brushed the dust off myself, I realised we had almost stepped on a tiger snake propped up in a horse hoof hole in the mud, ready to strike. Uncle killed it and we then immediately headed off walking another 50 yards until Uncle Stan stopped dead and exclaimed in absolute astonishment '*Look!*' What I saw up ahead has forever stuck in my mind and haunted my dreams. There were hundreds or thousands of snakes crossing the track in front of us heading down to the river to get water. Uncle Stan quickly spun around pulling me with him and said in a high pitched voice: 'Your father can go and get his own horses!'