

Introduction

My earliest memory is as a small boy standing with Dad and my Nanny Priscilla (Pris) Mackray on the steps of the Cummeragunga ('Cummera')¹ Hospital. Nanny Pris held onto my hand firmly as we waited to go through the door. Nanny was quite a large and tough lady, with dark gentle eyes, smelling sweetly of the beautiful talcum powder she always wore. On the other side of me stood my dear father – a tall strong and dark man, anxiously waiting to enter the hospital door. It's 1935, I am only two years old and my Mum had just given birth to my brother Keith, who was born premature and weighed only five pounds. He was so tiny that once we took him home, he slept in a shoe-box.

Pastor Doug Nicholls' sister, Aunty Nora Charles, was midwife this day, as she was for many of the women on Cummera. Mum told me later that Nanny Pris had used the same bed when Dad was born, Mum herself used that bed when I was born and now she was using the same bed for my brother Keith. Five years later, at Mooroopna Hospital, came my brother Brien, then my sisters, twins Mary and Dawn who died ten hours and three days after their birth respectively; finally my baby sister Carmel arrived safely in 1944.

Over the years that followed, our life, where we lived and where I went to school would be dependent on where my father got work. We would move between Dad's jobs in Victoria, from Barmah Forest to Nagambie, Rushworth, Coomboona, Shepparton East and back again. There was a bit of an age difference between Keith and me and Carmel and Brien, so earlier on it was just Mum, Keith and me that would move around with Dad, camping in a canvas tent, wherever Dad was working. We didn't have much in the way of belongings other than the tent and bare necessities because we always had to be ready to move on to the next camp with a moment's notice; we really had to travel light.

My Mum was a tiny woman with a big heart, big smile and even bigger laugh, always seeing the funny side in everything and always protecting her kids as much as circumstances would allow. I loved nothing better than to have her sweep me up in her tiny arms and give me cuddles. All was right with the world, when I was in her arms, and it seemed that everyone was drawn to her. I remember so well the sight of her bending over the camp fire as she was cooking up a feast and I remember the smell of her cooking. We mostly lived off the land, eating whatever Dad and the Uncles could catch; and one of Mum's delicacies was curried cray tails. Just the smell of curry powder today takes me straight back there – standing around watching my Mum cooking with the aroma of

¹ Also spelt Cummeragunja, Cumeroogunga, Cumeroogunja.

curry wafting through the camp and deep into the bush. That curry with some of Mum's fresh cooked damper you just couldn't go past. She was a great cook and a beautiful soul.

Mum and Dad loved to tell the stories of the lives of themselves, their families and our Ancestors and we loved to hang on their every word. In those early years, if we weren't alone, we were camped together with extended family; the Aunties and Uncles would be raising us kids; and we would all be moving around together for work. Keith and I learnt a lot about family and we were forever listening to the yarns they would all be telling and laughing about as they sat around the campfire in the evening and even today I can still hear their voices echoing in my ears...

As little fellas Keith and I spent a lot of time getting around with the men, such as Dad and all the old Uncles as they went out to work or catch a feed. We really looked up to my Dad as a strong man with great wisdom and stories to tell. He was our role model, always working hard trying to make ends meet, trying to keep us all together and forever telling us the stories of our old people, our old ways, and our tribal lands. To look at my father through my little boy's eyes, he always seemed like he could do anything; nothing could break him nothing could stand in his way. But sadly, as time passed, things happened along Dad's life journey such that us kids eventually slipped through his hands. By my 13th birthday, things had changed so much that nothing would ever be the same again.