

2001 'Healing The Pain'
Stolen Generations Conference
12 – 14 MARCH, 2001, ADELAIDE

9:00am Keynote: Life Story - James Stirling , Member of the Stolen Generation

Let me take you on a walkabout back in history to 1920.

Local councils at this time were demanding powers to confine Aboriginal people, who had moved into or near towns.

These people could be evicted, their dwellings demolished and they could be jailed.

Apparently this was the situation in the Alice in the late 1920's.

Aboriginal people were mustered together and transported to Jay Creek, some 60 miles west of Alice Springs. It appears that this group consisted mainly of women and children, all "half-castes". History has it that in this group there was a young unmarried lass, who had just given birth to a baby boy...I was that child.

Two miles north of the Alice was an establishment known as the Telegraph Station.

Work on the Adelaide to Darwin telegraph link up was nearing completion and this site was no longer required.

In the early 1930's the Federal Government permitted the local authorities to transform this facility into a mission for "half-caste" children - known as "The Bungalow".

The six or seven buildings were used for the Managers residence, laundry and bathroom facilities, kitchen and dining room, stores and another as a casualty ward.

It appeared that the very large barn like building had been constructed in the centre of the complex, to house the mission people - this consisted of living and sleeping quarters and toilet facilities and would you believe they were of the septic variety !

The total group of some 70 to 80 people was made up of several unmarried mothers and boys and girls ranging in ages from 5 to 15 years.

All these people had been brought in from the surrounding districts by the Police or the Welfare.

95 % of the children were without their parents.

The women on the mission were maintained to carry out all the domestic chores needed to provide for the children.

There were constant comings and goings...boys and girls reaching the age of 15 years were sent out to work for station owners or as domestic servants in the town.

New arrivals were always coming in to balance the numbers.

The mission was managed by a married white couple.

With such a great number of children, there were many tasks to be completed.

Cooking, washing, mending, gardening and cleaning.

All children over the age of 6 were allocated duties of some kind.

The major domestic chores were in the hands of the mothers.

Boys in particular had to milk the goats, gather kindling wood, attend to the garden, light the fires in the kitchen, laundry and bathrooms.

Coppers were placed in these rooms and were required to be lit each day from early morning.

Duty rosters were drawn up each week by the Manager and rotated.

Each person was responsible for making his own bed in a neat and tidy fashion.

Bedrooms had to be swept out each day.

Senior boys were also responsible for attending to the pump which supplied our water and priming the kerosene lamps - which involved trimming the wick, cleaning the glass and filling with kerosene.

Bells were rung at waking time and before each meal.

Punctuality was a must and lines had to be formed before marching in to meals.

School at the Bungalow :

School began at the age of 6 years for all children.

This was the occasion when I began to realise that I was alive.

February 1935 saw Herbie Lawton, Albert McNamee, Freda Glenn and James Stirling enter a classroom for the first time.

Miss Robb and Miss Randell were the School Mistresses.

The standard of schooling was very high.

Besides being thoroughly drilled in the three R's we also had music supplied by a 40 strong fife band with percussion accompaniment, folk dancing, sewing, gardening and wood work.

Over the 5 years of my schooling, teaching staff changes occurred - Miss Penroy and Miss Kelly came in place of Miss Robb and Miss Randell and later we had a male teacher - Mr Walter George Boehmm.

He certainly straightened out the place, it was his arrival that added wood work as a subject.

An old black smith shop was stripped of its furnace and bellows, fitted up with 4 moveable benches, carpentry tools were obtained and away we went.

Many of the boys quickly adapted to the work and were soon producing some fine samples. These were sold by Mr Boehmm to the towns people with the proceeds going to the Red Cross.

The School Band also came to the fore, providing accompaniment for singing and folk dancing.

Perhaps its greatest worth was shown when the School was invited to provide the music for the Anzac Day March. This took place in the Alice and the sight of Aboriginal students marching side by side with the white population was a sight never to be forgotten.

Activities out of school time were many and varied - from acting as goat herders, swimming in the water hole, catching and riding wild donkeys, bush hikes in search of bush tucker, convoys in old car tyres, clay modelling after the rain seasons, bush hockey and a good old game of cricket....all these helped to while away the time.

Restrictions were placed on us and were strictly adhered to.

The Manager, under instruction, had notices placed around the mission at specified spots :

Aboriginal Reserve

Trespassers Prosecuted

By order

These perhaps had a two way function, to keep intruders out and to keep us in.

We were restricted in our wanderings in all directions, except for the east.

Only the senior women were permitted to go into the Alice - on Wednesdays or on Friday night for the pictures.

Another regular activity was the attending of church. Each Sunday the three Ministers would attend at the allotted times. We were very keen to attend and enjoyed the services.

Children new to the mission were simply placed in a religious group on a numbers system.

I feel that we were very privileged in certain ways. Anzac Day was always solemnly observed. We celebrated Guy Fawkes Day with a bon fire and crackers and this was a most enjoyable occasion.

Last but not least was the celebrating of Christmas, always a very happy time with toys, sweets and Christmas pudding.

One can never keep pace with the Government's thinking.

Plans had been made to close the mission and transfer everyone to the extremes of the Northern Territory.

We were to be divided into our religious groups with the Roman Catholics going to Melville and Bathurst Islands, Methodists to Goulburn and Croker Islands and the Church of England people (of which I was one) to Groote Eylandt.

The Roman Catholics were the first to depart.

Transport was provided by Army trucks...leaving the Bungalow just at dusk and travelling through the night.

The Church of England group was held back for several months as facilities on Groote Eylandt were not completed.

This really was a blessing in disguise as the war in the Pacific was beginning to threaten our northern shores. Government ordered that all people on the three missions were to be evacuated from the Northern Territory and sent to southern parts of the Commonwealth.

People from the Gulf country joined us at the Bungalow for a few months before we began our journey southward.

Our friends, the Roman Catholics were already settled in a Melbourne suburb, while the Methodists had completed their long journey to Otford, a small town about 50 miles south of Sydney.

Time had come for our departure.....leaving Alice in the now famous "Ghan", spending a few days in Adelaide then journeying on into New South Wales, to a small country village called Mulgoa, 9 miles south of Penrith.

All this movement to such great distances was brought about by the danger in which Alice Springs was placed.

At this time - 1941 Alice Springs had been built up into a very strong Military Base.

Strategically she was most vulnerable for the MacDonnell Range in the near south, with its only access, Heavitree Gap, would be a prime target for the enemy.

Life in N.S.W.....

Mulgoa, a small farming community, just south of Penrith was steeped in history.

The old Church of England rectory, which was built by the Cox brothers in 1836 was not a very welcoming sight.

This ancient dwelling, with its dark, dingy basement, devoid of light or windows was to be our home.

Our group of some 30 people consisting of unmarried mothers and boys & girls between the ages of 3 to 14 were to be under the supervision of 2 most elderly ladies. Conditions were vastly different to those at the Alice.

Apart from the dilapidated rectory, the only other buildings were a barn and 2 out houses.

Boys occupied the basement, the girls had the ground floor and verandahs, while the first floor was taken by the Missionaries.

Within several weeks a large timber dwelling was erected on the western area 50 metres from the rectory. This was only for the mothers and the girls.

The main centre of the village was some distance to the south, all clinging closely to the Mulgoa road, which continued onto Wallacia which was around 5 miles away.

The property consisted of 40 acres of undulating land enclosed on 3 sides by Mulgoa road. The western line was a deep creek which only held water after heavy rains.

The only water came from a below ground concrete tank and this had to be carted from village supply.

A 30 gallon tank was fixed to the wall outside the laundry. Water pumped into this tank from the well below only served the kitchen, the bathroom and the laundry for the Missionaries. There was a maximum of 4 taps in the whole complex.

Living conditions were deplorable.

Every drop of water for personal use had to be pumped into a bucket and carried to its required destination.

Outside coppers were the only means of heating water for bathing. A small area was partitioned off by hanging a potato sack down from the rafters.

This constituted the bathroom & laundry for the boys. Senior boys had to do their own washing, ironing & mending.

Sleeping quarters for the boys were in one of the better downstairs rooms & along the outside,

under the overhang of the verandahs.

All meals were eaten in the dining room, which was situated in the main area of the building.

Boundaries were defined, and boys & girls were kept well apart.

No one was permitted to leave the property.

It appeared for a while that we were not welcomed by the local people.

There was the local school, about half a mile away, but we were not permitted to attend.

Some contact was made with the locals when attending church....but these services were only once a month, as the Minister lived 20 miles away and his Parish consisted of 4 Churches.

As time went by, relationships were improving and in 1942 3 of the boys were enrolled at Wallacia Public School. This School was 5 miles south of the Home & we had to by pass the local school. Transport was provided by the school principal, who lived in Penrith, he had to pass the Home on his way. Relationships between the pupils were quite good & friendships were formed. All 3 boys performed quite well, this I think was really a "test case" as Aboriginal children were not permitted to enrol at a "white school".

In 1943 Harold & I were enrolled at Penrith High School & the remaining children were taken in at Mulgoa.

These happenings in themselves were really wonderful achievements, but they put a real strain on the children. From running around bare foot in ill fitting clothing, means had to be found to outfit some 15 children with acceptable attire.

Church groups in Penrith & Emu Plains and Army Disposals helped with this problem.

The Senior girls sewing circle which was formed, helped to some degree.

One can never predict the thoughts of authority, for in 1944 I was taken out of the Home & placed in a private home with a young married white couple in Sydney.

The other boys from 9 years & upwards were taken from Mulgoa to a property at Mt. Wilson, some 20 miles north east of Mt. Victoria.

While in Sydney, I attended Hornsby Junior Tech, the idea being to improve my skills in the manual arts.

I enjoyed my stay, attending Church regularly & working hard at my lessons.

Perhaps "the experiment" had not succeeded, for at the end of 1944, I was returned to the Mission at Mt. Wilson - a boys only situation.

We were then in the care of a married couple who were in the process of establishing a farm.

The junior boys, 10 in number, of which I was the eldest, had accommodation in the main home, while 5 senior boys shared a wooden slab hut in the main paddock.

The work was very hard, felling trees, ridding paddocks of bracken fern & sieving & carting soil in wheel barrows to make garden beds.

Once a week we were taken in pairs to work for the local people, most of whom had crops of some kind.

We were not permitted to attend the village school.

The 5 senior boys were called away, being sent back to Groote Eylandt...supposedly to make preparations for our return.

It was not long after this that all the boys were returned to Mulgoa.

We had a new Manager & Matron, both of whom were more focused on our well being.

All eligible children were enrolled at the local primary school, even I who should have been in Year 9 at High School.

1946 was the dawning of a year of new experience.

7 of us were deemed ready for High School, 2 girls & 5 boys. The remaining children were enrolled at Mulgoa.

Living conditions did not improve but our self esteem was high as we were made to feel welcome

in the district & at school.

Personal pride in appearance & dress was paramount & this carried us into our tasks with renewed assurance.

School was exciting, I was in the Intermediate year & was one of the senior boys at the school. We were all taken up with the sporting activities & excelled in several departments.

Life at home became invigorating. The local cricket club accepted us as members, boys joined the boy scouts, rugby league could be played with the Penrith club, so there was always something to look forward to.

Being under the umbrella of the Church Missionary Society (C.M.S.) religion was to the fore.

Each evening a short service was given, Sunday school attended each week & the church service taken on the allotted Sundays.

The lessons learnt from these gatherings most certainly had a great effect on our lives.

No bad language, so very little discipline had to be given.

We really were a close knit happy family.

Mr Potter, our new manager was most supportive & even drove us to our cricket matches & various other social outings. He had an old truck with high sides and on occasions every one would pile in to go swimming, to church or even to a holiday resort.

Life could not have been more promising.

Senior girls were requested by outside agencies to be employed. Craft lessons, sewing & weaving were taught to the girls.

Leather work & mechanics were available for senior boys.

School was a place of enjoyment both at Penrith High & Mulgoa Primary.

For 3 wonderful years 1946 to 1948 we made the most of life, furthering our education, opening new pathways & making new friends.

1948 was my final year...I would be sitting my final exam. Penrith High was only in its second year as a full High School, thus we had a relatively small class of 14 students in 5th form.

Many friendships were made within the small group, I can remember one in particular !

But, alas...the bombshell had exploded, the Government had decreed

“that the Mulgoa mission had to close. Everyone would be returned to the Northern Territory”

Quotations - Pix 1948.....

“ Startling evidence of their ability to fit into normal society is the record of a little settlement at Mulgoa, 30 miles west of Sydney. In 1942 25 half-caste children were evacuated from the Northern Territory to Mulgoa, where the Church Missionary Society

98 (Cof E) settled them in an old rectory. These children have grown up on the outskirts of Sydney, mixing freely with whites and have acquainted themselves magnificently.

They have repaired the rambling, 110 year old rectory at Mulgoa and made it into a spotless happy home proving that people of mixed blood are quite as responsive as any others to good surroundings, training and example - that right treatment will evoke eager response and splendid results in these people born under the handicap of prejudice and poverty.

Mulgoa children sit as friends with white class mates at the local school, and one boy has so distinguished himself in leadership at Penrith High that he has twice been elected captain of his house by free vote of his white school mates. Some of those who have grown out of childhood at Mulgoa are established in good jobs in Sydney, where employers give them high praise.

Yet, these people have had but half a chance, compared with a white child's normal privileges and prospects. They started from nothing, their schooling began late, conditions of life at the Home are makeshift because funds for such good works are ever short. In spite of all this they have contrived to make a creative life with a purpose, and a promise for the future.

But now an air of uncertainty hangs over the close knit little community, for the Church Missionary Society does not see its way to financing the Home at Mulgoa any longer, and the Commonwealth

authorities propose to send the young people back to the Northern Territory.

None of them wants to leave the only real home they know, although they are promised a hostel life and a chance to continue education in the North.

“They are respected here” says the Superintendent, ex-serviceman J. Potter. “These people can hold their heads up in this district where they have made friends and connections, and where they have settled down.”

“It’s not charity these people want, you know but just ordinary human rights and a chance to make their own way.”

It is cruelly inhumane to even think of wrenching these youngsters from the normal lives they know to the segregation of the North. This kind of thing can happen only because Australians are utterly apathetic. We have closed our eyes to the colour problem because it is not an immediate menace. But, if something is not done about it soon, it will become a menace.”

Sydney Morning Herald - December 1948.....

“Sir, May I support Miss Wedgewood’s comments in your correspondence columns today and congratulate the ‘Herald’ on the publicity it is giving to this deplorable matter.

The fact that the material conditions to which the children are being removed are satisfactory is not the important factor. The important point is that they were being assimilated into the community at Penrith: and thus, quite fortuitously as it happens, a great social experiment had been initiated which is in line with the best scientific thought on the problem.

What started as a temporary measure has been allowed to continue for 6 years, which is a long period in the life of any child. A sense of security has been developed as a result of their reception in the Penrith community - a reception which does high honour to the people of that district.

Their forcible removal to a new environment destroys all of this. Their alleged ‘willingness’ can be disregarded in view of the fact, which the Rev. Mr Montgomerie’s statement discloses, that the Government had already decided to close the Mulgoa Home.

In the light of this knowledge, and of the sense of insecurity which is engendered, what possible alternative to agreement did the children have?”.

Jean Daly

President, St. Joan’s Social & Political Alliance

Fifty years on the Government and its many “helpers” have not made any further advancement in the problem of assimilation.

A really worthwhile experiment showing excellent signs of succeeding was simply blown away. With the departure of my life-long friends I was given permission to remain , to further my education and face the world alone.

I was successful in matriculating in the Leaving Certificate and was to enrol at the Sydney Teachers College in 1949.

College did not commence until 1st of March, so it was necessary for me to seek accommodation for two months.

The Church came to the rescue putting me up with several families until college began.

There were about twenty five young men with me, in the hostel, all of whom had come from the country to further their education either at University, the Technical College or Teacher’s College.

We were several miles away from Campus but many modes of transport were readily available.

College life was just a step-up from High School.

However, you were much freer in your movements and facilities needed were easily obtained.

The new experience of Practice Teaching was a challenge I really enjoyed.

The course only took two years and that time seemed to really fly.

While awaiting my appointment, I stayed with a cricket friend at Rooty Hill.

There was a jam factory nearby so I found employment there.

My scholarship was granted to me by The Aborigines Welfare Board, and it was to them that I was

answerable.

Unlike the NSW Education Department who appoints you to a specific school, I was given a choice of three.

I opted for Burnt Bridge because of its coastal position.

My teaching career commenced on the 27th of January 1951 at the Aboriginal School.

Burnt Bridge - Kempsey NSW

1951 saw the dawning of a real challenge being a teacher with my own class. I was appointed to Burnt Bridge Primary School with Principal Mr Mick Perrin.

The school was a disused home on the Burnt Bridge Aboriginal Mission. It consisted of a large room, an enclosed back verandah (my room) and a small partitioned off area which served as a store room.

All pupils were Aboriginals, most of whom lived on the mission. Others came from the area around South Kempsey known as Double Bridge.

Mr Perrin was a wonderful teacher. He had the welfare of the children at heart, his discipline was firm and just and his understanding of these children certainly won their admiration to him.

I was extremely lucky indeed to have such a person as my mentor. My role, apart from the classroom, was sportsmaster and I really enjoyed being involved in coaching the boys football and cricket and netball to the girls.

They had their success in PSSA competitions and it wasn't long before a bond of friendship had been formed between teacher and pupils.

The year, 1951, was a most significant one in the history of Australia. We were celebrating 50 years of Federation. All primary schools on the Macleay - and there were over 40 at that time - were to be taught the "Flag Drill" for a mass demonstration to be staged at the Kempsey Showground.

It was my "brief" to learn and then to prepare our school for the great occasion. The pupils responded willingly and really put on a wonderful performance on the day.

This was really the first acid test to which our school was put and we were placed before the public eye. I was very pleased with the results.

I remained at Burnt Bridge for five years, during which time I assisted the children with their studies and sports outside school time. I married a local girl on December 17 1955.

In 1956 I was transferred to East Kempsey Primary School.

My interests were mainly in sport and I spent time in administration as well as participation in several fields.

I set up home in West Kempsey and had a family of four girls.

All my teaching career was spent in the Macleay Valley.

After four years at East Kempsey I went over to West Kempsey.

West was a very large school - three departments - Infants - Girls - Boys.

We had quite a number of aboriginal pupils, some of whom came from the Kinchela Boys' Home.

My stay at West lasted twelve years, during which period I improved my status to List I, then List II.

This enabled me to seek promotion.

Luckily for me a small school - Crescent Head Public School became available.

1972 saw me as Principal of Crescent Head Public School.

There were only two teachers and about forty students.

The enrolment at the school began to increase steadily.

From a sea - side holiday resort Crescent Head became quite a thriving centre.

With a rapid increase in population, the school enrolment rose accordingly.

Facilities weren't up to standard, but with a most co-operative and understanding wife, an experienced female assistant and a core of interested, hardworking parents things slowly, but surely, began to change.

The P&C fought tooth and nail for better facilities. Children were introduced to a different school

environment.

The Eisteddfod became a most important and successful vehicle to provide the pupils with an understanding of aesthetic and disciplinary values. As the enrolment grew we were provided with a wonderful new school.

Allied with this was the arrival of new staff, each of whom was most competent, co-operative and professional in each field. The children were most fortunate to have such dedicated teachers.

Over the years the school has really grown and kept abreast of all the changes in modern education.

From 40 pupils in 1972 the enrolment had increased to over 200 in 1998.

This increase meant the school had to be reclassified from a third to a second class; which in turn meant that I could not hold this position. Because of this situation and family illness I decided to retire at the end of 1988.

Tragedy struck in 1989 when I had the misfortune to lose my wife through breast cancer.

Teachers were needed at the Aboriginal Campus at Kempsey, so I spent the next three years teaching communications and maths to senior students.

In 1998 I enrolled as a casual teacher and now do a great deal of casual teaching in local primary schools, mainly West Kempsey.

This enabled me to be in close contact with the children and also to continue my interests in coaching sporting teams.

I became involved with the Durri Aboriginal Medical Service in the role of chairperson, of the Youth Committee. This involved working with the Youth Workers (male and female) mapping out programs and organising activities for the youth of the district.

I was nominated for the Board of Directors in 1993 and have been an active member ever since.

The position of Chairperson has been mine for the past three years.

We now possess a Medical Centre worth in excess of half a million dollars, have over nineteen different programs and employ forty staff.

Out Posts at Bowraville, Bellbrook, Burnt Bridge, Crescent Head and South West Rocks all come under the Durri umbrella.

In conclusion I would like to tell you something wonderful that has happened to me.

Each winter I involve myself in coaching women's hockey team's.

In 1990 I had a new player to the district join my team. She was a friend of my daughters.

During conversation at home she happened to mention my name, to this came the reply from Mother "I knew a Jimmy Stirling once"

Investigations were begun, old school photos were produced for evidence and yes everything matched up.

These investigations were rather secretive just to make doubly sure there wasn't a mistake.

There wasn't.

I plucked up enough courage to phone the special number.

After my first inquiry as to who was the speaker, the phone went dead.

I had to ask again to get the reply.

It was that special friend whom I had at school in 1948 at Penrith High.

After renewing acquaintances, after forty seven years, we decided to marry. Both of us had lost our partners through illness several years prior to our meeting.

We now live in Kempsey. Yvonne is kept busy with her gardening.

On the occasions when I am not doing casual teaching or attending to business at the Durri Aboriginal Medical Centre, I lend a hand in the garden. Yvonne had three girls from her previous marriage and now has 6 grandchildren.

I managed one better, having four daughters with six grandchildren also.

Despite the early hurdles and pitfalls, life has been very kind to me.

I would dearly love to thank all those people who assisted me through life's long journey.

The teachers at the Bungalow School - Misses Robb, Randall, Kelly and Penroy plus Mr Boehnm.

Our managers Mr Jones and Mr McCoy.

Then in NSW we had Miss Dove and Miss Anderson followed by Mr James Potter.

The teachers and pupils at Penrith High who really took us in to their confidence and treated us as equals; in particular Yvonne Richards who was my personal friend.

Mr Mick Perrin Principal of Burnt Bridge Public School, who really helped me to place my feet firmly on the ground and pointed me in the right direction.

My family in Kempsey, Mr & Mrs Craig and their daughter Fay - my first wife who was a tower of strength in assisting me in my teaching career especially at Crescent Head.

All my teaching career was spent in the Macleay Valley - 1951 to 1988 - 1989 - 2001. I still associate myself and am now readily accepted at the schools as a casual teacher or a sporting coach.

Being in the one area for so long has its advantages - particularly when winning the respect of children whose grand parents were once my pupils.

Colour discrimination rarely raised its ugly head and I was accepted by all the various groups.