

#### **4 Local perspectives on the reservation of land for Aboriginal people**

## 4.1 Katanning

The earliest files and annual reports of the Aborigines Department indicate that Katanning was a focal point for the Aboriginal population of the State's south-west. In 1899 the Department requested a local magistrate to provide figures on the number of Aborigines employed by whites, relieved by Government, and 'wandering' about the district. The magistrate complained of the problems of such a task, and gave the following statistics, emphasising the approximate nature of the third figure:

<i>Natives employed by whites</i>	30
<i>Natives relieved by Government</i>	20
<i>Wandering natives</i>	200 <sup>1</sup>

It was perhaps in response to such haphazard sources of information that the Department sent one of its officers, George Olivey, as a travelling inspector on his renowned 'grand tour' of the south-west in 1902. Olivey was informed that there were eighty 'natives' and sixty 'half-castes' living in the vicinity of the town. Of these only four elderly people were on rations. The rest either worked with local farmers or practised a traditional hunting lifestyle. The more assimilated 'half-caste' population were working on farms and "a few had even purchased their own blocks of land".<sup>2</sup> Katanning had acted as a traditional meeting place for Aboriginal people because it was the intersection of three tribal grounds and contained the necessary resources to allow large ceremonial gatherings. At the turn of the century it was reported "that up to 200 aborigines gathered near the town each year around Christmas time to play their game of hockey".<sup>3</sup>

In 1897, the first reserve in Katanning was gazetted, Reserve 4681. Its designated purpose was as a "Hospital for Aborigines" following an outbreak of typhoid. Despite protests from the Chief Medical Officer, the hospital was closed by 1906 because of its proximity to white residential areas and fear of the spread of contagious diseases. The land was eventually allocated to the Railways Department which required barracks for its workers.

The idea of a camping reserve at Katanning was first proposed as early as 1903. A report from Police Constable SW Hardy referred to "several complaints" and he

believed a reserve would “place a check over the supplying of liquor by the whites and restrict the contact between the races”.<sup>4</sup> Henry Prinsep, the Chief Protector, agreed in principle to a temporary reservation, but bemoaned the fact that there was no “law passed by which natives can be compelled to stop in certain localities. At present they wander where they like and there is no law to prevent it”.<sup>5</sup> The first site considered, Lot 420, was rejected because of strong objections from the local Board of Health due to its proximity to the houses of white townspeople.<sup>6</sup> However, a suitable five-acre plot was eventually found and on June 23, 1905, Reserve 9622 was gazetted on this site.

By 1909, there were signs of explicit racial tension in Katanning. In that year the local paper, *The Great Southern Herald*, complained “Katanning is just now swarming with Aborigines”<sup>7</sup> and laid the blame squarely at the location of the Aboriginal campsite within the town boundaries. In arguing for the efficacy of a more remote site the paper exemplified a prevailing public attitude:

*[the current situation] causes loitering... and dissuades charity because it encourages loitering even if no one can fail to pity these remnants of a dying race.*<sup>8</sup>

The situation continued to worsen; a report in 1911 from Corporal Perkiss detailed trouble between a group of Aborigines (there were now about seventy on the reserve) and recommended finding another location. Although the matter was looked into, there was a strong objection on the part of local whites to the granting of further reserves near Katanning and no further action followed.<sup>9</sup>

Between 1911 and 1913, the reserve population rose from 40 to 200. Aboriginal people came to the town in search of work, medical treatment, education, rations and the support of kinship networks. Also, Aboriginal people were actively encouraged to move to Katanning by Annie Lock of the Australian Aborigines Mission (AAM). Lock had established a preaching station on the reserve to teach local Aboriginal people the Christian religion, as well as hygiene and basic domestic skills.<sup>10</sup>

Education eventually proved to be the issue over which racial prejudice erupted. In spite of increasing resistance from whites, Aboriginal parents insisted on the education of their children, and as the reserve population grew so did the influx of Aboriginal children into the state school. This created a state of affairs that proved too much for the sensitive dispositions of a number of the townspeople. The complaints of white

residents generally revolved around what they perceived to be the unhygienic appearance and condition of the Aboriginal children. However, there appears to have been an unwillingness or an inability to make the connection between the difficulties Aboriginal people faced in maintaining 'acceptable' standards of hygiene and the fact that the reserve was overcrowded, and lacked a water supply and sanitary facilities.<sup>11</sup> Instead, a shallow and derogatory view was publicly expressed which used the appearance of some children as an example of the innate incapacity of Aboriginal people to look after themselves. In response to public pressure, the Education Department reluctantly provided separate instructions for Aboriginal children. But it was not enough. By 1913, pushing for total expulsion, a group of prominent Katanning citizens urged the Chief Protector, Charles Gale, to cooperate in a scheme which would establish a mission at Carrolup. Gale personally visited Katanning and was sympathetic to the pleas of the white community. At the time, *The Great Southern Herald* reported:

*Mr Gale remarked that he was not going to allow able bodied natives to hang about the camp and live on the government... they were apparently making the fact of the school for native children being established in Katanning an excuse for laziness.*<sup>12</sup>

Although Gale personally approved of the residents plan, he was overruled by the minister in charge of the Department of Aborigines and Fisheries, John Drew, who objected to what he felt was a "vague and hazy proposition".

Racist hysteria gradually gathered momentum and eventually gripped the entire wheatbelt. In Katanning, the reaction of whites to an outbreak of disease saw the police disperse a compliant Aboriginal population who feared for their own safety. However, hostile reactions to their presence elsewhere soon forced them back, moving the local MLA to write a letter to the Government complaining that the "niggers are again in town".<sup>13</sup>

In an attempt to assuage white antagonism in 1914, the inhabitants of a number of the south-west camps met at Katanning to develop a set of laws to assist the self-regulation of behaviour on south-west Aboriginal reserves. The motions decided upon were recorded by Annie Lock:

1. *They must be good.*
2. *No loafers allowed on camp.*

3. *No gambling in the way of cards and two-up allowed, they can have a game of cards at night when their work is done but not play for clothes or money.*
4. *All the men and women to be home from the town before dark or 6 o'clock and no drink allowed if they do get any drink they must not bring it into the camp and they must not make any noise or disturbance in town or on the reserve.*
5. *No native arms to be used to fight with and no guns and not even the wand (digging stick) the women use.*
6. *All young men must have their own camp and not loaf about on the old people and eat their rations but go and earn their own food and help the old ones<sup>14</sup>.*

Unfortunately, the enterprise failed, primarily because the authority structures within the Aboriginal camp communities were unable to enforce the regulations.

In June 1914, the teacher at the Aboriginal school resigned and the Education Department refused to replace him. Despite Drew quickly offering to finance a replacement from the meagre funds of his own department, the Education Department had finally lost patience amid the growing agitation and the school remained closed.<sup>15</sup> The Education Department was also increasingly confident of its legal position in regard to expelling Aboriginal children from 'white' schools on the grounds of health or hygiene. There were established precedents in Western Australia, and the Department had been watching, with some interest, the success of similar action undertaken by the Department of Public Education in Cape Town, South Africa.<sup>16</sup>

In January 1915, after a series of hastily convened public meetings the police removed the entire Aboriginal population of Katanning by foot to Carrolup. In response to this situation, the Department of Aborigines and Fisheries elected to establish a settlement for the deportees. The Carrolup settlement scheme received Cabinet approval in March 1915 and a superintendent was appointed the following June.<sup>17</sup> Now vacant, the Katanning reserve (Reserve 9622) was declared a public utility in April 1915, and two years later it was cancelled.

In the early 1920s, Government policy, guided in the south of the State by Deputy Chief Protector Aldrich, began to view the town reserve system as a more viable economic choice for the south-west than the unwieldy and expensive settlements. In 1922, in an effort to reduce Departmental expenditure, Carrolup was closed. The resulting drift of Aborigines back into the Katanning necessitated the gazettal of another reserve, and on 30 June 1922, Lot 841 was made Reserve 18034. Just over a

year later this reserve was deemed “unsuitable” and also closed. A new reserve, 18426 (popularly known as the ‘rifle range’ reserve) was subsequently gazetted on 26 October 1923. During the 1920s, Aboriginal people were placed under persistent economic pressure due to the Government’s post-war agricultural programs and competition from migrant labour. Through no fault of their own, the Aborigines were now more reliant than ever on a grudging white bureaucracy and the “town reserves now became the focus of their way of life”.<sup>18</sup>

During the 1930s, the Aboriginal population of Katanning became caught in the crossfire of two separate issues. The first was the white population’s paranoia over the seemingly inexorable rise of the ‘half caste’ population. This was expressed as a fear of

*the problem of 48,000 uneducated and untrained human beings with a conflicting mixture of the civilised man and the savage within them, making them more than usually susceptible to contaminating influences.*<sup>19</sup>

The second problem impacting upon the Aborigines was an ongoing dispute between the local and State tiers of government. Essentially, the issue was one of responsibility. The current reserve, 18426, was continually plagued by an inadequate water supply. As the Aborigines did not pay rates, the local Roads Board protested that the problem of the water supply rested with the Aborigines Department. Chief Protector Neville was reluctant to organise a permanent supply for the reserve. Obviously cost was a major factor, but it is possible that Neville was wary of a repeat of the events of 1912–1915 as he believed:

*if facilities were provided, that the natives would congregate at Katanning with the result that as many as 100 might take up permanent residence on the reserve.*<sup>20</sup>

In response, an editorial pointed out the paradox of a policy where “the natives are forced to remain in the vicinity of the town in order to draw meagre rations... yet cannot depend on a water supply”.<sup>21</sup> Although the problem was temporarily resolved by carting water, never a satisfactory solution, the overall lack of facilities inevitably impacted on the health of the Aboriginal community. Reports from the period stated how:

*there have been three deaths here lately including a child . . . the . . . children are inherently weak and three out of five have died already.*<sup>22</sup>

By the middle of the decade it was apparent that the situation had become intolerable, Sergeant Buttle, the local protector, noting:

*In my Opinion the present Aboriginal Native Reserve... is not suitable for the purpose. The water supply... is quite inadequate and unhealthy for the juveniles. We are also experiencing trouble with the local farmers their sheep being worried by dogs allegedly belonging to aboriginals.*<sup>23</sup>

Various solutions were put forward including, once again, the wholesale removal of the Aboriginal population. Indeed, proposals for the re-opening of Carrolup had been argued for and against since 1931. The Katanning Roads Board was decidedly tentative in its support of the scheme, prompting the usually steadfast *Great Southern Herald* to declare its attitude "somewhat obscure in respect to this question".<sup>24</sup> Alternative sites such as Bremer Bay and Murdong were suggested but nothing came to fruition.

In general, the early 1930s witnessed an upsurge of attention towards Aboriginal issues, which in turn was reflected through the pages of the *Great Southern Herald*. Energetic efforts were made by particular individuals to alleviate some of the hardships faced by the Aborigines. Throughout the decade, Christmas collections were organised, and from 1934 the proceeds of these collections went towards the erection of a rudimentary schoolhouse on the reserve; *The Great Southern Herald* recording that:

*[t]he little schoolroom stands as a monument to the patient endeavour and determination of a few citizens who saw fit to help the native children who could not help themselves.*<sup>25</sup>

*The Great Southern Herald's* editorial policy was sharply critical of government neglect and negligence and not adverse to occasionally directing its anger against the wider community:

*Something is strangely wrong with the morals and perspective of a government which can act in such an inhuman way towards a people whose greatest crime is the coloured skin.*<sup>26</sup>

*. . . the Western Australian Aboriginal is treated with cruel indifference by a people who pledged themselves to the care and well being of the native owners of the land when they dispossessed him.*<sup>27</sup>

Yet the fact remains that the adoption of the Aboriginal cause by a select few of the town's elite made little impression upon the overall problems keenly felt by Aborigines, problems which were exacerbated by the onset of the Depression. Neither did it quell

the anger of whites who, confronting similar difficulties, became spectacularly angry at any signs indicating preferential treatment.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, official opinion was still heavily influenced by the topic of health and its ability to induce various forms of moral panic among the townspeople. When the Moseley Royal Commission visited Katanning, the Roads Board recommended a policy of self-sufficient separation which it believed would help to contain the 'half caste' population and curtail the threat of Aboriginal health problems affecting the white population.

In 1936, the ongoing water problem at Reserve 18426 reached a crisis point as the town itself faced an acute shortage of water, the local water supply being down from 30 million to two million gallons. Throughout the period many Aboriginal people camped on land more suitable than the reserve, sometimes after negotiating an arrangement with land owners, and in spite of persistent harassment from the police and other authorities. However, Sergeant Buttler informed Neville of his intention to "shift the camp to a spot to be selected at the Police Pools so that no nuisance shall arise".<sup>29</sup> The "nuisance" Buttler referred to was probably the tensions that would arise if Aboriginal people asking whites for water were perceived as competition for the precious resource.

Once again, through no fault of their own, the Aboriginal population of Katanning were removed from their homes. The entire process was repeated in 1938. This time, the owner of the property from which the Aboriginal people camped at Police Pools had taken their water was reluctant to provide the service again as "last year some damage was done to his fences and some petty thieving took place". Nevertheless, the removal was accomplished with drinking water being carted the three miles at a "rate of 7/6 per 200 gals per week".<sup>30</sup>

Whilst the supply of water was proving a major headache for the various arms of the white administration, it was only one of an array of problems confronting the Aboriginal people of Katanning in the late 1930s. As the wider economy began to emerge from the depression, Aboriginal people remained in a desperate plight. The financial burdens of permits and medical fund contributions proved a strong disincentive to potential white employers, one complaining that "he could not afford to waste his time and money coming into town for a permit".<sup>31</sup> This left large numbers of Aborigines in town starved of work and in some cases loitering and accosting white residents for money and alcohol. The situation provoked an impassioned plea from Sergeant Buttler to the *Great Southern Herald* in order to "correct a mistaken idea held by the public that a fee is

required for casual employment of natives<sup>32</sup>... might I appeal to the public to employ natives whenever possible so as to improve their condition".<sup>33</sup> Privately, Buttle was gloomier, confiding to the Department: "I regret to state that employment offered by farmers has considerably decreased and the native is no longer wanted".<sup>34</sup> On the eve of his retirement, Buttle wearily conceded:

*. . . that Katanning townsite be declared a prohibited area . . . You will agree that the police are put in an awkward situation trying to give the native a fair deal . . . it seems hard or cruel for police to strictly enforce their authority on natives who are behaving themselves . . . I frankly admit that I am sympathetic towards the native as his existence is always drab and he generally gets "more kicks than a h'a'pence".<sup>35</sup>*

The new protector, Sergeant White tried to carry forward the sympathetic policies of his predecessor but was greeted with a baptism of fire, including a brawl that escalated to dangerous proportions. In response, White enforced a 6pm curfew on Aborigines being within the town which raised the ire of law-abiding Aborigines. In a letter to the Commissioner, Sam Morrison, who declared himself a "half caste of Katanning who had lived there all his life and have not caused any trouble to the police,"<sup>36</sup> described events after he returned home after spending the day looking for work:

*Me and my wife went down town to do some shopping as my wife was going down to Perth. I had to go down to the police station as Sargerent White wanted to see me to let me know about the fare for my wife. And after we had fix every thing he then told me to get right out of town at 6 o'clock. And he said if I didnt he would have to put me inside for lawtering about the street. And he all so said that if any of us people went to the pictures he would cut our weeks rashons. So I would like you to let me know if he can do that because he said he could it is awful to think if cant see a picture show some time you know Mr Bray the time now is not like one time.<sup>37</sup>*

In reply, the Deputy Commissioner explained to Morrison that if certain restrictions were not enforced the leading members of the community would demand to have the entire town totally prohibited.<sup>38</sup> Greater restrictions on Aboriginal people continued to be sought by the white community but Bray held firm, insisting that the provisions made in sections 40 and 41 of the Native Administration Act, regarding illegal camping and loitering, were sufficient:

*There is power, of course, under section 42 of the Act to declare prohibited areas, but this is only resorted to in extreme cases, and so far as I know it is hardly necessary to go to this length in the circumstances*

*which obtain in Katanning . . . natives pass through this town, but generally speaking they are of good conduct. Isolated instances of unsatisfactory conduct are only to be expected from time to time, and there is also an expectation of this with white people too. In my opinion the exercise of sections 40 and 41 should be sufficient to deal with any complaints, but should a prohibited area be declared it would mean that Katanning would be totally prohibited to natives not in lawful employment. They would not be able to enter the town for business and other purposes except with passes, and this would be a hardship on the well disposed and working natives about the district. These latter should not be penalised for the misconduct of a few natives, hence I feel the position could be handled better by the judicious use of section 40 and 41.*<sup>39</sup>

In a desperate attempt to find a palliative for a depressing pattern which ran across the entire region, the Department finally reopened Carrolup. The second Carrolup settlement was a rather half-hearted effort.<sup>40</sup> Discipline was lax and breakouts were frequent, stretching the already strained resources of the police to the limit as they rounded up runaways. Ironically, the reopening of Carrolup did not seem to decrease the complaints of whites in Katanning. In 1943, an exasperated letter from the Chamber of Commerce, endorsed by the local MLA, Arthur Watts, noted “the menace of loitering in the town boundary of Katanning of natives of both sexes”.<sup>41</sup> The department responded by blaming a recent outbreak of meningitis at Narrogin and the subsequent quarantine of the Carrolup settlement for the sudden influx into Katanning. Although appreciative of the Department’s explanation, the town leaders were far from satisfied and maintained a consistent level of complaints. A local Justice of the Peace, AA Stevens, while “acknowledging they [Aboriginal people] have certain rights” felt that “the matter is becoming so serious and seeing the filth they make in their present surroundings, I feel sure you will wish to give consideration to this vital matter”.<sup>42</sup> Even the usually supportive *Great Southern Herald* was prompted to declare that “Carrolup has not solved the half caste problem... young half castes were growing up entirely uncontrolled”.<sup>43</sup> At last the Department relented and sent Deputy Commissioner McBeath to visit the town. After spending two days observing the situation, McBeath somewhat ambivalently concluded that:

*. . . Katanning Road Board and the townspeople have justification and foundation for their complaint. I am fully convinced that quite frequently large numbers of natives visit the township of Katanning, and also that they frequent the streets unduly, but through no fault of their own.*<sup>44</sup>

The numerous inadequacies of Reserve 18426, particularly its distance from the town, had rendered it practically useless, and consequently Aboriginal people camped at

various spots around Katanning, including what used to be Reserve 9622. McBeath proposed to utilise an area of land close to the railway station for the transient Aborigines and force those who wished to remain in Katanning onto what had been Reserve 9622, which was located at the southern end of the town. Interestingly, McBeath and others in the Department of Native Affairs seem to have been unaware that Reserve 9622 had been cancelled. A year later, with no action apparently taken, it was the turn of the South-West Inspector, JH Bisley, to face the wrath of Katanning's white hierarchy. This time action was taken and on 24 November 1944 Reserve 22441 was gazetted, its location being the old 9622 reserve. With an official reserve now within a reasonable distance of the town, Reserve 18426, which had always been reluctantly occupied, lost all relevance and was eventually closed in 1950.

The general improvement in the economic status of Aboriginal people which had begun during World War II continued after the cessation of hostilities. Aboriginal people dominated the casual labour market in the south-west. They did most of the clearing, burning off, fencing and crutching, and made up the greater part of the hands in the shearing sheds.<sup>45</sup> At Katanning, despite the presence of the reserve, the Aboriginal population remained fluid and dispersed, displaying a determination to have a measure of autonomy and choice in deciding where they lived. Places inhabited by Aboriginal people included the reserve, Broomehill Road, and the race course and brickyard camps.<sup>46</sup> Police harassment of the families which refused to live on the reserve continued, officially motivated by concerns regarding the lack of facilities on unauthorised camps and the possible health issues that may arise.

The existence of a widespread Aboriginal community made monitoring and controlling a difficult process, and drinking and gambling proliferated. The attitude of the Department of Native Affairs was surprisingly flexible and pragmatic, or perhaps resigned. Aware of the large transient element always entering the town for short periods, the Department felt that the police should make every effort to force them onto the reserve as it was "these persons that cause any trouble that occurs".<sup>47</sup> However, "regular residents... should not in my opinion be interfered with merely because they are not living on the reserve".<sup>48</sup> Unfortunately, the police were far more arbitrary in their selections, provoking one white land owner to complain:

*I would like to bring under your notice certain facts how the cullered people are being harrised by the police... there is none camp on my property that will camp on the reserve as they have no time to be treated like a lot of*

*prisiners... it is not their fault that they are not a lot better than what they are but they cannot improve their standard of life while they are hounded about by the police all treated worse then 60 years ago its time as a people of a free country we treated them like Human beanes.<sup>49</sup>*

For Harley Hayward, who grew up on the Katanning reserve, police harassment is an enduring memory:

*the police were omnipotent, there was nothing you could say or do... I was caught once playing just off the reserve after six with some friends and we were taken to the police station and flogged with a hose.<sup>50</sup>*

Similarly, Noel Mourach recalls:

*the police were hounding people all the time . . . when they needed a gardener they would grab someone. Old Herbie's drunk let's grab him.<sup>51</sup>*

Increased employment now meant there were opportunities for some Aborigines to purchase lots in the town, although there were still hurdles of prejudice to overcome. Arthur Morrison, an Aboriginal man who possessed a citizenship certificate and had a distinguished war record, was faced with constant scrutiny and criticism from the Roads Board when attempting to build a house on a block he had purchased. A letter to the Department of Native Affairs from the local District Officer noted:

*It seems that the Board are disappointed with Arthur Morrison... who was sold a building block within the townsite in an area which is being fast built upon because Morrison, in spite of promises to put up a reasonable abode has failed to do so.<sup>52</sup>*

Some years later, after he had erected a house, the Road Board relented but Morrison still faced prejudice, the District Officer commenting:

*Mr Fuller secretary of the road board was interviewed. He had no complaints to make. I was surprised to learn that the immediate neighbours... do not speak to him [Morrison] or even nod over the dividing fence. The secretary confirmed... that it was a case of snobbishness [and] has the highest regard for Morrison and considers that he and his house are a credit to the street.<sup>53</sup>*

Education provided to Aboriginal people continued to be of a poor standard. Although the local school had resumed teaching Aboriginal pupils, school attendance was irregular, and Aboriginal students had to contend with demeaning prejudice in both the

classroom and the schoolyard. The local headmaster is recorded to have complained to the Department of Native Affairs District Officer “that on average the native children in his school were very backward” and that he found “the coloured children inclined to be more pugnacious than white children... possibly due to an attempt to overcome a complex that goes with colour”.<sup>54</sup> Considering the ordeals Aboriginal children had to suffer this is hardly surprising. On one occasion the District Officer noted, with some discomfort:

*I was taken around in turn to each class in the school and all the native children in the class were made to stand up and were pointed out to me. Those who were irregular in attendance being castigated there and then. A procedure which was more embarrassing to me than the coloured children and which I am determined to avoid on my next visit.*<sup>55</sup>

Looking back, Harley Hayward recalls how Aboriginal children were made to feel ashamed of their colour and their poverty. Lack of fuel on the reserve meant that tyres would be burnt to keep people warm. This left a residue of soot over the clothes and skin of the children and the smell of burning rubber would permeate their clothing. The walk to school meant walking past the homes of white people and being subjected to the racial jibes of white children, and on arrival the Aboriginal children would invariably be sent to the back of the classroom because of the smell emanating from their clothing and skin. Hayward himself was too embarrassed to take ‘reserve tucker’ to school because of the insults it provoked. He would either go hungry or nip down to the local Co-Op where his mother had arranged a credit facility and buy more conventional “white food”. Hayward now believes the system did not encourage Aboriginal parents to inquire about their children’s progress, and that over time it also engendered a lack of self-confidence when dealing with whites in positions of authority, no matter how spurious.<sup>56</sup>

Aboriginal health also remained poor. Eye conditions, pneumonia, dysentery and typhoid were common ailments. Doctor Douglas Pope, who ran a local surgery often treated Aboriginal people ‘on the house’.<sup>57</sup> However, relations between Pope and the Department were placed under strain in the autumn of 1953, when the headline of the *Great Southern Herald* hysterically warned: “SPREAD OF DISEASE FROM NATIVES”. The accompanying article then detailed how Pope believed a “potent cause of the trouble to white residents was the introduction of communicable diseases amongst the population by natives...” Pope considered the source of the trouble could be controlled to some extent by the erection of ablution facilities on the reserve. The Native Affairs

Department had apparently signified its intention to do something but had taken no action.<sup>58</sup> The following week's editorial loftily intoned how the reserve had been a constant source of trouble, but it was now time to grasp the nettle:

*... neither the local authorities nor residents have any reason to be pleased at its existence. Acknowledging, however, the handicaps under which the coloured people are obliged to live and accepting the fact that they cannot be expelled from sight or mind, the one course open is to improve the conditions of the camp site... While it can only be accepted that the prime responsibility in caring for the natives, and protecting the white community's health rests with the Departments of Native Affairs and Health, there is also some responsibility which must fall on local residents... the town will have to take action on its own behalf. It would appear essential an attempt be made before the next summer to install ablutions and washing facilities... Even if the cost of such protection had to be met by the town, and by individual residents, it should prove cheaper in the long run than exposing children to the annual risk of serious illness.*<sup>59</sup>

The Department questioned the veracity and credibility of Pope's assertion regarding the link between Aboriginal ailments and the white population, describing his theory as "a bit far fetched",<sup>60</sup> but work on the reserve was nevertheless made an urgent priority. Impressed by a scheme operating at Narrogin, a group of Katanning's citizens formed a Native Welfare Committee and by the middle of the decade the reserve was equipped with lavatory, laundry and shower facilities.<sup>61</sup> One of the earliest achievements of the newly formed Committee was the erection of two cottages on the reserve, but, perhaps its most significant and enduring contribution was the building of a kindergarten in the early 1960s.

The 1950s saw a surge of interest in the spiritual welfare of the Aborigines with numerous Christian denominations requesting access to the reserve. There was a core group of white women with a genuine interest in the overall welfare of Aboriginal people and particular concern for the situation of children for whom homework classes were organised. One lady in particular, Mrs Dowdell, actually received the MBE after the Aboriginal community wrote to the Queen on her behalf.<sup>62</sup> The Department was somewhat less enthusiastic about the activity of religious organisations and individuals. In the case of the Jehovah Witness' application, the Department, in refusing, was of the opinion "that the feeling amongst natives of the South is that there is too much religion in their welfare diet".<sup>63</sup>

Despite a more concentrated interest in the welfare of the Aboriginal population, new problems arose. The Aboriginal community itself began to suffer from the participation of some Aboriginal people in destructive internal feuds, which were often exacerbated by excessive consumption of alcohol. Fighting terrorised the other reserve residents, on occasions forcing them to abandon their homes.<sup>64</sup>

Organised discrimination still existed in myriad forms, often in defiance of legislation. The Royal Exchange hotel operated a selective ban on Aboriginal women which “worked admirably”. The ban was imposed so that Aboriginal women would be out of the way when the white customers came to drink. As late as 1968, the policy of the town’s three hotels in respect of Aboriginal women was as follows: the Katanning hotel would not serve them; the Royal Exchange placed a limit of two glasses each; and the Federal banned them altogether.<sup>65</sup> In addition, Aboriginal people were excluded from the Katanning Pictures for a time, and also from the Katanning Trotting club, and the segregation from the rest of the Katanning community that the reserve effected made finding casual work more difficult. Len Eades recalls:

*The worst thing from my point of view, see I was a shearer, and if a bloke wanted a shearer he would have to come and pick me up, but he wasn’t allowed on the reserve. He couldn’t drive onto the reserve and say Lennie can I get you for a day’s shearing, or a week, or whatever. He had to get permission from the police before he could come and see me. I reckon that was wrong, they weren’t doing any harm, just looking for a working man, and I couldn’t go walking in the streets looking for work, you wasn’t allowed.<sup>66</sup>*

Gradually, various amenities were added to the reserve, including electricity in the mid-1960s, and Departmental housing. By 1970, six families were in state houses in the town and there were 10 houses on the reserve. Despite these changes, for many, life remained harsh, particularly on the reserve. The houses on the reserve were home to large numbers of people and lacked any form of sanitary facilities. Families without houses existed in makeshift shelters constructed from any material that was available.

A decline in rural employment saw some Aboriginal people trapped in a cycle of boredom, drink and gambling. But for many there was a perceived normality to the situation; the cards, the two-up, the brawls, the deaths, and the regular intrusions of the authorities. Those living on the reserve survived the depredations of reserve life by pulling together. Money, food and possessions were shared, and families became extended interchangeable units. Today, most of the fond memories Aboriginal people

have of life on the reserve relate to general caring nature of the reserve community. For those who were children on the reserve, however hard, it was their playground.

By the middle of the 1960s the policy of assimilation was in full swing, with Aborigines being absorbed into towns across the entire state. Katanning was no exception and neither was the conflict that the policy often inaugurated. The Shire council harangued the Department over the types of housing it proposed and the suitability of its tenants, provoking one superintendent to wearily concede: "it is obvious that the shire do not want any more natives living in the town".<sup>67</sup> The intransigence of the Shire provoked a letter from the Minister EH Lewis who urged the Shire to "give the selected tenant a 'fair go'... by its attitude the council will do much to mould a more sympathetic attitude to natives... who are trying, and succeeding, in raising themselves to a standard acceptable to most whites".<sup>68</sup> Ultimately, the policy of assimilation spelt the death knell for camping reserves. By 1974, the houses on the Katanning reserve were being demolished or removed and the residents dispersed into the town.

But not everybody was happy to just up and leave homes they may have occupied for a number of years. One reserve resident simply refused to leave. The Department's policy was clear:

*an individual has every right to decline an SHC home... in time there is every possibility that the individual's motivation to leave will increase as the reserve population drops. No coercion is to be used...*<sup>69</sup>

On 29 May 1974, a letter declared that Reserve 22441 had "ceased to function" and recommended that the land revert to the Crown. In July of that year, the Shire applied for the land to be made available for light industry, an application which was endorsed by the Department of Community Welfare. However other opinions felt that "it could be visualised that land could be required in the future for Aboriginal use..." It is suggested that the land be retained or swapped for more suitable land owned by the shire. Enquiries revealed difficulties with this proposal because of a shortage of available Shire land but PR Barker, a representative of the Department of Community Welfare, maintained that an alternative site should still be sought with the Department of Lands. A piece of land was eventually found, a portion of Lot 189 Andrews Road. It was decided to relinquish Reserve 22441 to the Shire once the procedures for this lot had been finalised.<sup>70</sup> On 12 March 1976, the purpose of Reserve 22441 was duly changed to 'industrial purposes', but Lot 189 Andrews Road was not used as planned.

Today the old 'five-acre reserve' is intersected by roads and its predominant feature is a large wheat bin. Even in its present state, for many Aboriginal people the reserve remains a physical reminder of a tumultuous local history. In 1996, a small plaque was erected on the reserve by the local Aboriginal community in acknowledgement of the Aboriginal legacy of the location.

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<sup>1</sup> Aborigines Department: file 150/1899.

<sup>2</sup> Haebich, *op. cit.*: p.6.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*: p.132.

<sup>4</sup> Aborigines and Fisheries: file 2922/1914.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Great Southern Herald*: 24/4/1909.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Aborigines and Fisheries: file 2922/1914.

<sup>10</sup> Haebich, *op. cit.*: p.132.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*: p.133.

<sup>12</sup> *Great Southern Herald*: 1/11/1913.

<sup>13</sup> Aborigines and Fisheries: file 2922/1914.

<sup>14</sup> Aborigines and Fisheries: file 753/1914, quoted in Haebich, *op. cit.*: p.146.

<sup>15</sup> Biskup, *op. cit.*: p.152.

<sup>16</sup> Haebich, *op. cit.*: p.141.

<sup>17</sup> Biskup, *op. cit.*: p.153.

<sup>18</sup> Haebich, *op. cit.*: p.222.

<sup>19</sup> *Great Southern Herald*: 24/12/1932.

<sup>20</sup> *Great Southern Herald*: 13/12/1933.

<sup>21</sup> *Great Southern Herald*: 17/1/1934.

<sup>22</sup> Department of Native Affairs: file 92/1934.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Great Southern Herald*: 8/7/1931.

<sup>25</sup> *Great Southern Herald*: 6/6/1934.

<sup>26</sup> *Great Southern Herald*: 17/1/1934

<sup>27</sup> *Great Southern Herald*: 27/1/1934

<sup>28</sup> Such anger was strikingly illustrated in letters to the local paper. For example, in December 1935 a letter from "Poor White Trash" bemoaned why certain people were encouraging a "crowd of cheeky, fat and lazy aborigines to lead idle useless lives at the expense of the white community... whilst old women of both sexes are organising their energies on behalf of our black brothers (who they never see by the way) we have to put up with the spectacle

of strong and able bodied abos idling in the streets in white people's clothing, buying oranges and bananas and strewing the streets with peelings and skins" (*Great Southern Herald* 18/12/1935).

<sup>29</sup> Department of Native Affairs: file 92/1934.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> Department of Native Affairs: file 644/1938.

<sup>32</sup> However, Haebich notes that there was such an obligation on employers to pay permit fees to employ casual workers (Haebich, *op. cit.*: p.354.).

<sup>33</sup> *Great Southern Herald* 9/7/1938.

<sup>34</sup> Department of Native Affairs: file 644/1938.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> Biskup, *op. cit.*: p.197.

<sup>41</sup> Department of Native Affairs: file 644/1938.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> *Great Southern Herald*: 11/9/1943.

<sup>44</sup> Department of Native Affairs: file 644/1938.

<sup>45</sup> Biskup, *op. cit.*: p.223.

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- <sup>46</sup> Department of Native Affairs: file 97/1952.  
<sup>47</sup> Department of Native Affairs: file 42/1949.  
<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*  
<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*  
<sup>50</sup> Interview: Harley Hayward 18/6/1997.  
<sup>51</sup> Interview: Noel and Patricia Mourach 20/6/1997.  
<sup>52</sup> Department of Native Affairs: file 31-2/18/1949.  
<sup>53</sup> Department of Native Affairs: file 31-2/18/1949.  
<sup>54</sup> Department of Native Affairs: files 42/1949 and 97/1952.  
<sup>55</sup> Department of Native Affairs: file 42/1949.  
<sup>56</sup> Interview Harley Hayward 18/6/1997.  
<sup>57</sup> Interview with Douglas Pope, 1990, Oral History 23352: Battye Library, Perth.  
<sup>58</sup> *Great Southern Herald* 10/4/1953.  
<sup>59</sup> *Great Southern Herald* 17/4/1953.  
<sup>60</sup> Department of Native Affairs: file 31-2/18/1949.  
<sup>61</sup> Department of Native Affairs: file 97/1952.  
<sup>62</sup> Interview, Harley Hayward, 18/6/1997.  
<sup>63</sup> Department of Native Affairs: file 31-2/18/2/1962.  
<sup>64</sup> Department of Native Affairs: file 97/1952.  
<sup>65</sup> Department of Native Affairs: file 25-2/1953.  
<sup>66</sup> Interview Len Eades 29/5/1997.  
<sup>67</sup> Department of Native Welfare: file 31-2-7/1965.  
<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*  
<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*  
<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

## 4.2 Brookton

The recorded history of Aboriginal settlement in Brookton can be traced back to John Mungar Bennell and his family in the mid-1870s.<sup>1</sup> Bennell's descendants have lived in and around Brookton ever since. There was an influx of Aboriginal people into Brookton in 1915<sup>2</sup> but numbers in the town prior to 1921, when the Department of Aborigines and Fisheries began including Brookton in its records, are not known. For the next ten years, the population increased as Aboriginal people were drawn to Brookton, as to other towns, "in search of rations, employment and the support of their kin networks."<sup>3</sup> Other factors gave impetus to the migration. The clearing of land was transforming Aboriginal lifestyle. Entertainment facilities, such as the cinema, two-up and the availability of alcohol, also attracted people to townships. By the 1930s, local whites began to pay more attention to these people in their midst.

Brookton's Aboriginal population peaked in 1931, coinciding with calls for the creation of a reserve. Typical of the segregationist sentiment of the time, the Roads Board nominated for the purpose an area of land well out of the town, on the northern side of the road to Alderside and on the eastern bank of the Avon River. Initially, the Chief Protector of Aborigines, AO Neville, believed that the site was unsuitable but he changed his mind after visiting Brookton at the beginning of 1933. The reserve, he declared, was "most suitable in every way . . . A supply of drinking water is the only difficulty, but presents no greater obstacle than at the existing camp."<sup>4</sup> Upon inspecting the town, he took affront at the challenge to the Department's control. Seeing where Nyungar people had made their homes, Neville declared "This is not a reserve at all, and the natives have no right whatever to be there." The camps were to be removed in an underhanded fashion, with Neville advising that "It is an opportune time to move them as there are less [Aboriginal people] there at present than there have been for a long time, some having gone out to work."<sup>5</sup>

Brookton's first Aboriginal reserve was known as Rusty Bridge by the people who were sent to live there. The land was designated as a water reserve (Reserve 289), and on 12 December 1930 the purpose of the reserve was changed to "native camping". In February 1933, the reserve was declared under the *NAA 1905* and the Chief Protector wrote to the Brookton constable stating: "I shall be glad if you will now take the necessary action to cause the natives to move to the new Reserve."<sup>6</sup> The Aboriginal

people of Brookton were subsequently removed to the reserve, even though the problem of a water supply had not been addressed.

Fred Collard who grew up in pre-War Brookton recalled:

*I've experienced all that 'out of town' stuff. Where there's 'Native toilets only' down the streets... Couldn't go into the picture hall unless all the Europeans had filled it up. Then you could go in last.<sup>7</sup>*

Segregationist sentiment was strong in Brookton in the 1930s. In 1937, a petition signed by 39 of the town's citizens was presented to the Minister for Native Affairs. In part, it declared that:

*the presence of the natives is completely undesirable from the point of view of the citizens... natives should be removed from centres of white population as much as possible... we have no hesitation in saying that the Townsite of Brookton is no place for them and that a reserve at a much greater distance from the town... should be provided.<sup>8</sup>*

At the end of 1939, the Minister for Native Affairs went to Brookton. The whites he met condemned both the Department of Native Affairs and the Commissioner and requested that local authorities be given the power to force Aboriginal people out of town. Later that year, owners of premises let to Aboriginal people were pressured to give their tenants notice of the termination of their tenancies as soon as possible. A petition presented to the Roads Board complained that "[t]he present indiscriminate mixing of the white and coloured population... was not considered to be in the best interests of the community as a whole..."<sup>9</sup>

In the late 1930s, the reports of the Department of Native Affairs show that there were over thirty children and an unknown number of sick, elderly and invalid people among Brookton's Aboriginal community. Nevertheless, faced with the continued refusal of Aboriginal people to move onto the reserve, the local protector threatened to stop issuing rations to Aboriginal people if they did not relocate. The threat was not all that effective. For the next decade, some people used the reserve, but many others camped on vacant land around the town or on farms and elsewhere in outlying districts, following the availability of work.<sup>10</sup>

Over a long period of time, a succession of police officers in Brookton actually helped ameliorate the antagonism towards the town's Aboriginal population by often refusing to act on the Roads Board's behalf. In 1938, when the Commissioner asked Brookton's

constable to investigate Roads Board complaints about Aboriginal people being in town after dark, the reply came:

*In my opinion these natives should not be deprived of a little freedom. They are very seldom seen in the town after sundown. It is only on ration days and Saturday Nights that they frequent the town and attend the picture shows. These natives are always tidily dressed and do not give any bother to anyone. I therefore see no reason for the complaint... these are all a good type of native and are easily controlled.*<sup>11</sup>

In other ways, harassment permeated most aspects of life. For example, in 1941, the Roads Board passed a resolution that any dog found wandering loose in the town between sun-down and sun-up would be destroyed<sup>12</sup>, a measure clearly aimed at dogs owned by Aboriginal people. Four weeks later, the Board decided that any organisation hiring the town hall "be granted the right to exclude coloured people from their functions if so desired."<sup>13</sup> Until well into the 1950s, Aboriginal footballers were barred from the local teams.

There were also frequent attempts to bar Aboriginal children from the school buses and they were often kept out of the school. The Roads Board pushed for a whites-only school from the 1930s until well into the 1950s. Members found the means for it in regulations which gave teachers the power to send home any child which did not meet standards of cleanliness. These standards were at local discretion and eventually the pressure took effect. In 1943, it was noted that the reserve was deserted, only this time, rather than the residents moving back into the town, most had left the district entirely. According to the local constable, they had done so because they were unable to get their children admitted to the Brookton school.<sup>14</sup> Many families moved to Beverley to enrol their children there.

In the immediate post-war period, increased employment opportunities brought many Aboriginal people back to Brookton. As early as 1940, a small number owned houses on the edge of Brookton, but for the most part, Aboriginal people continued to live in semi-permanent camps constructed from makeshift materials such as hessian bags, bush timber, flattened kerosene tins and used railway sleepers. In the late 1940s, buoyed by better employment and wages, Aboriginal people again attempted to buy blocks of land in the town. They were rarely successful. The district officer noted they "had not been able to do so, for what reason they did not know..."<sup>15</sup>

With the increased Aboriginal presence in town, tensions flared again. In February 1949, the Department of Native Affairs' District Officer attended a Roads Board meeting and noted complaints by Board members that:

*the town is being over run with natives, they have been frequenting the Hotels, including Lounges, their living conditions are unsatisfactory and they are not industrious, and some members object to the children attending school with white children and in some cases travelling in school buses from outlying districts.*<sup>16</sup>

The District Officer dismissed their complaints as having little basis, pointing out:

*All of the children I saw were well clothed and considering the shortage of water in the town particularly clean in their person and dress as were most of the adults... [It appears that] some members of the Board are anti-native and would almost deny the native the right to live in the district at all... it is most unlikely that any interest will be taken by the local Board in effecting any improvement as regards living conditions for natives.*<sup>17</sup>

Before the 1950s, professionals in Brookton gave scant regard to Aboriginal needs and feelings. In 1939, the chairman of the Hospital Board declared that the Aboriginal population required too much treatment and the local doctor claimed diseases were being spread by Aboriginal people intermingling with the white population.<sup>18</sup> When receiving treatment, Aboriginal people were housed in sheds and tents in the hospital yard. Doctors rarely, if ever, visited the reserve. Education was likewise affected by prejudice. Fred Collard recalls:

*There was some racist teachers . . . One headmaster, he used to make us come in and wash under the cold tap in the icy morning when it was four or five below. He reckoned we never had a wash. He could smell the smoke, but, you know, my Mum used to scrub us in the night in a big camp tub. We'd stand around the camp fire. The smoke would get into your clothing and he'd reckon we'd never had a wash so he'd do that to us... But there was a few nice lady teachers who were compassionate.*<sup>19</sup>

Perhaps the most grievous example of prejudice and neglect at Brookton was that 17 years after the Rusty Bridge Reserve had been declared it still did not have an adequate water supply. In Brookton, throughout the period from the 1930s to the 1950s, water often had to be carted to the Rusty Bridge Reserve from nearby farmers' paddocks or the tanks which supplied the railway. Europeans may have believed (and said so at times) that the Aboriginal lifestyle did not need piped water, but this ignored

the obvious fact that prior to white settlement Aboriginal people did not face the same restrictions on access to natural sources of water such lakes, rivers and soaks.

Another deficiency of the Rusty Bridge Reserve was that in times of heavy rain it was in danger of being flooded by the Avon River. The reserve was low-lying and its proximity to the railway embankment has increased the risk of flooding. In the late 1930s, a particularly bad flood occurred and the reserve was cut off from the town. The bridge itself was underwater, as was the bridge on the York Road, and access to the town was possible only by the use of ropes tied across the railway bridge. Parents were understandably concerned for the safety of their children, and following the flood, people moved onto farms or across the railway line to the south-west of the town.<sup>20</sup>

Rusty Bridge Reserve was also too far from the town and the school, and it was near a cemetery. Consequently, although Aboriginal people were constantly hounded to live on the reserve, it was used erratically. Sometimes as many as 80 people camped there but at other times numbers dwindled to just a handful.<sup>21</sup> The Roads Board and the Department began looking for an alternative site in 1949, but found difficulty reaching an agreement, with the Board offering clearly inferior locations.

Brookton's Aboriginal population was eventually offered three areas in which to camp: a return to Rusty Bridge; the Brookton Common (which is now the golf course); or an area along the railway line south of the town. The first two sites were both across the river from the town. With memories of the floods still vivid, the third site was chosen. It was closer to town than the Shire wanted but it was accepted by the Department of Native Affairs and was gazetted as Reserve 23384 in January 1952.

The Brookton Reserve, as Reserve 23384 came to be known, was home to a large and usually stable population over a long period of time. Despite the reserve's rudimentary accommodation and sanitation, it offered security, a feeling of community, and a sense of identity. During the 20-year period that Aboriginal people camped on the Brookton Reserve (1950–1970), the close proximity to town meant that there was closer interaction between Aboriginal people and Europeans. From week to week, reserve residents dealt with the Department of Native Welfare, the police, the churches and local farmers and townspeople. However, the right to keep whites, including police, off the reserve was jealously, and usually successfully guarded by Aboriginal people. Former residents can recall whites who occasionally came to the reserve from out of

town to solicit women being chased away and even physically assaulted. Even the police and Departmental officials would park on the road, blow the horn to get attention, and be dealt with at the roadside. Long-time reserve resident Janet Hayden remembered:

*There were a lot of bad things that happened around Brookton. I know that for a fact, but it never affected our lives... In my whole life in Brookton I was protected.*<sup>22</sup>

There were many aspects of reserve life which are now fondly remembered:

*We loved playing two-up. We played other games like skittles and bush hockey, marbles – we'd sit and play marbles for hours . . . We never worried about gambling. It was only on the weekends when all the men had some money . . . On the weekends, all the Nyungars would come from Pingelly or Beverley . . . and we'd all meet there and really have a good time.*<sup>23</sup>

The 1950s and 1960s brought change, if not progress. More regular schooling for Aboriginal children and then the move to town housing saw the dilution of Aboriginal culture and the decline in the use of the Nyungar language on the reserve. Since the days of the Rusty Bridge Reserve, the diet of Aboriginal people was becoming more westernised, although bush food still constituted a major part of people's diet well into the 1960s and traditional medicine remained vital. At the same time, efforts to segregate the town continued. After the 1949 inspection, the District Officer wrote of his suspicions that the Roads Board would use local by-laws to prevent Aboriginal people from building houses in the town.<sup>24</sup> As he predicted, at the Board meeting held in May 1952 it was stated:

*In regard to Natives in the townsite, it was decided that... natives living on town blocks must erect buildings in accordance with the Health Act which would be strictly policed.*<sup>25</sup>

One concession had been made. After years of complaining about sanitary standards, the Roads Board began to clear toilets at Aboriginal residences in the late 1940s, as it had done for the rest of the town for many years. In the mid-1950s, collections on the reserve were increased to three times each week and so more than twenty years after the camping reserves were begun, the problems with sanitary conditions were finally dealt with. Even then, in 1949, a local teacher felt compelled to write to the Department

that the Roads Board locked the public toilets so that they could not be used by Aboriginal people.

The Department of Native Affairs and its successor the Department of Native Welfare continued to restrict the freedom of Aboriginal people without offering a great deal of protection. Janet Hayden recalls:

*Native Welfare just did nothing. They just told us we were to stay there and that was it.<sup>26</sup>*

The Department also operated across the State to restrict Aboriginals from travelling by rail:

*In a lot of places, if the station masters and the policeman knew that Nyungars were travelling they would get in touch with the local Welfare and the Welfare would be waiting there at the stations.<sup>27</sup>*

Aboriginal people in Brookton avoided the Department when they could and resisted when they could not. The Department's role in the town was somewhat reduced because of the sense of community and determination amongst Aboriginal people. Former Brookton reserve residents maintain that because of the solidarity and pride in Brookton, children were not taken from the reserve.<sup>28</sup> However, the threat remained very real. According to Fred Collard:

*The Department; they were rotten cows . . . We'd have arguments with them all the time. All they were worried about was taking our kids away. My kids, when they were growing up, if they missed a couple of days of school, they'd be down there wanting to take the kids away . . . And the Native Protectors – who are supposed to be protecting our interests – never protected any land for us.<sup>29</sup>*

There was considerable resentment of the way in which Certificates of Exemption and distinctions made because of parentage acted to separate the Aboriginal community, although the recipients of the certificates were not blamed.<sup>30</sup> Those without certificates could be ordered to stay on the reserve while those with them were ordered not to mix with other Aboriginals. Janet Hayden describes how the Department used this system to threaten the break-up of families:

*[The Department] hounded Dad because Dad was living on the reserve with us [after he got citizenship rights]. A lot of our old people who lived*

*on the reserve had to deny their Aboriginality . . . [my parents were] told they shouldn't be on the reserve because of the colour of their skin. And Dad laughed at them. He finished up giving the Citizen's Rights thing back to them. Because he didn't want to be separated from his kids. I had my young brother and sister on the reserve and I wouldn't let them go with Mum and Dad because I didn't know if the Welfare would pick them up or what . . .*<sup>31</sup>

Local farmers, the police, and especially certain church leaders are remembered more fondly than the Dep artment. Aboriginal people did much of the labour required to pioneer agriculture in the region and many Aboriginal people had long-term relationships with the individual farmers for whom they worked.

*The farmers just took care of the Nyungars... [They] didn't care if you had twenty people come and visit. They never worried. Never interfered with them. Just as long as those people respected the laws on that farm... The town never took care of us but a lot of the farmers did...*<sup>32</sup>

The main function of the police was to ensure that Aboriginal people left the town centre at night but as long as they did so, the police did not bother about where they camped. It was only after the police constables were relieved of the role as protector and the Department provided its own officers that the requirement to be on the reserve at night was strictly enforced. In their role as protectors the police are remembered as having helped Aboriginal people, particularly in supplying water to the reserve. In the early 1950s, the town's constable worked hard to get the ban on Aborigines playing for the local football clubs lifted. However, the police actions were not always benevolent and, on occasions, they worked the system to their own advantage:

*The police, if they wanted their wood heap cut up, they'd just grab someone for being in possession of a bottle of wine, put him in for fourteen days so he could cut up a heap of wood... that's how they worked. (Fred Collard: 9.5.97)*

Without doubt, the strongest support for Brookton's Nyungar people came from certain people associated with the church. Mary Jones is particularly well remembered. She played an important part in the lives of Aboriginal people; doing everything from teaching religious lessons on the reserve and providing lunches for children to speaking on behalf of Aboriginal people in court.

*[Mary Jones] was the main one, I think, to get the Nyungars motivated. Miss Jones would have been one of the first ones to help the Nyungars in Brookton (Laurie Collard: 19.5.97).*

*The church was our biggest supporter. Only for them we might not be here today. Or I might not be (Fred Collard: 9.5.97).*

In the 1950s, employment was plentiful and usually paid well. Women worked in town as domestics, kitchen hands in shops (they were not allowed to serve at the counter) or at the local hospital. Some men worked for businesses in town but the most common work for Aboriginal men was as farm hands – shearing and clearing land. Ironically, in clearing land for farmers Aboriginal people effectively reduced the amount of land available to themselves for hunting and camping. Self-employment in the 1950s was restricted to work which required little capital. Many men supplemented their income working away from Brookton trapping rabbits or stripping mallet bark for tanneries.

In the 1960s, two new reserves were created to facilitate the move into town housing. The first of these was along White Street, on the south-west edge of town. This was gazetted in January 1962 as Reserve 26152. Two houses were ready for occupation by the end of the following year<sup>33</sup> and in 1964 a further two were built.<sup>34</sup> The rooms were tiny; the main bedroom barely fitted a double bed. They had unlined tin walls and cement floors which made them susceptible to the extremes of weather. People could escape the summer heat by sleeping outside but little could be done to alleviate the cold of winter when water would drip off the walls and ceiling, soaking beds and clothes.

As elsewhere, the transition to town housing was a difficult one. However, not everybody saw the move as being detrimental, then or now. In the 1960s, Nyungar people put a good deal of pressure on the Department and Mary Jones to get houses.<sup>35</sup> Thirty years later, former residents remember White Street reserve accommodation as “nice little houses”<sup>36</sup>... “a little bit [more] comfortable than the ones on the reserve.”<sup>37</sup>

Eighteen months after the White Street reserve was gazetted, a further block of land was set aside on Grosser Street. This was gazetted as Reserve 2768. Only one house was built there, in the late 1960s, but unofficial camps were also set up on the site. According to Laurie Collard, the house was...

*...a castle compared to the other ones [on the camping reserve]. You've got water and toilets... These were a mansion compared to the other type.*<sup>38</sup>

The Grosser Street house remains standing, but all the houses built on White Street have since been demolished. In 1972, control of the White Street reserve was handed over to the State Housing Commission (SHC) and the Aboriginal residents were gradually moved to housing closer to town. In 1974 the reserve was cancelled, and the houses were later demolished and the land sold. Today, Aboriginal people in Brookton feel somewhat cheated by the way in which these properties were disposed of.<sup>39</sup> Even though the houses were on land reserved for the purpose of "native housing", all proceeds from the sale remained with the SHC.

In the mid-1960s a program began which would, over several years, result in the building of five small (Type III) huts, a laundry and two toilet blocks on the camping reserve. In May 1965, a single light point was installed for each hut. Until the huts were built, people lived in tents and mia-mias<sup>40</sup> made of salvaged and bush materials, but the Shire, in an effort to keep the reserve 'respectable', cleared them away.

In the late 1950s, the average population of the reserve had been about 35, most of them long-term residents. At the end of the 1960s, the reserve population on occasions rose to about sixty. Large numbers of Aboriginal people were moving about the region and there were many short-term visitors, something the Department of Native Welfare considered undesirable.

*There was a lot of Nyungars that came in there... I guess they came in and tried Brookton out for a couple of years and then they moved back over to Quairading or wherever, Narrogin, Wagin, different places (Janet Hayden 23.6.97).*

The housing on the reserve could not cope with the extra population. At the end of 1968, Aboriginal people were again camped on Crown Land adjacent to the reserve where conditions were described as being "primitive in the extreme."<sup>41</sup> However, the extra population did not stay, many moving to Perth or regional centres in search of better housing and job prospects.

By March 1971, only one family was left and the reserve's useful life was considered over. Tenders were called and within a year, all the buildings on the reserve had been demolished and removed. In 1972, the reserve was handed over to the Department of Community Welfare. The purpose was changed to 'Government Requirements' in 1979 and finally, in 1991, the land was transferred to the Aboriginal Lands Trust.

Brookton was not unique in the treatment accorded the Aboriginals who resided there, particularly in the pre-War period. From at least the 1930s, The Aboriginal people who lived in and near the town were subjected to systematic and sustained discrimination. Aboriginal people were forcibly removed to reserves, refused basic health care and sanitary facilities, and Aboriginal children were barred from the school and even the school buses. Aboriginal people were forbidden to take part in social and cultural events, efforts to buy land were thwarted, and the need for an adequate water supply was ignored. In spite of this, the community showed enormous resilience, and the same families have remained in Brookton throughout this century.

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<sup>1</sup> *History of the Bennell Family* unpublished manuscript in the possession of Lester Bennell.

<sup>2</sup> Haebich, *op. cit.*: p.147.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*: p.292.

<sup>4</sup> Aborigines Department: file 377/30.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Aborigines Department: file 377/30.

<sup>7</sup> Interview, Fred Collard 9/5/97.

<sup>8</sup> Aborigines Department: file 377/30.

<sup>9</sup> *Pingelly-Brookton Leader* 21.12.39.

<sup>10</sup> Aborigines Department: file 377/30.

<sup>11</sup> Department of Native Affairs: file 1667: 1225/38.

<sup>12</sup> *Pingelly-Brookton Leader* 21.8.41.

<sup>13</sup> *Pingelly-Brookton Leader* 20.9.41.

<sup>14</sup> Aborigines Department: file 377/30.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Pingelly-Brookton Leader* 23.2.39.

<sup>19</sup> Interview, Fred Collard 9/5/97.

<sup>20</sup> The Seabrook Cultural Centre is now located in this area.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Interview, Janet Hayden 23.6.97.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Aborigines Department: file 377/30.

<sup>25</sup> *Pingelly-Brookton Leader*, 28.5.52.

<sup>26</sup> Interview, Janet Hayden 23.6.97.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Interview, Fred Collard 9/5/97.

<sup>30</sup> Interview, Janet Hayden 23.6.97.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> These were Type V houses, larger than the ones which would be built on the camping reserve but still offering rather basic conditions. The rent for the Type V houses was also higher than for those on the reserve.

<sup>34</sup> Department of Native Affairs: file 1525: 31-2/5.

<sup>35</sup> Department of Native Affairs: file 1525: 31-2/5/2.

<sup>36</sup> Interview, Lester Bennell 19.5.97.

<sup>37</sup> Interview, Laurie Collard 19.15.97.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> Traditional Nyungar shelters.

<sup>41</sup> Department of Native Affairs: file 1525: 31-2/5/2.

### **4.3 Guildford**

The areas officially designated for Aboriginal purposes in the Guildford area were the South Guildford reserve (Reserve 12720), gazetted between 1910 and 1943, the Widgee Road camping area, leased by the Department between 1942 and 1952 but never gazetted, and the Beechboro reserve (Reserve 25519) gazetted between 1960 and 1967. In the 1950s and 1960s the Allawah housing estate, on the site of the old South Guildford reserve, was the home for many of Perth's Aboriginal residents.

To some extent, these reserves have more of an administrative history than a history of occupancy. Widgee Road and the South Guildford reserve were vacant for long periods of time and the Beechboro reserve was never used. Only the Allawah Estate was extensively occupied. However, the Guildford area itself was, and is still, home to a large and relatively stable Aboriginal population who developed patterns of residency and economic means despite persistent attempts by authorities to disrupt both. From 1906 to 1967, Aboriginal people were just as likely to be living in camps in areas of their own choosing rather than on reserves. Government efforts to prevent 'indiscriminate' camping went on until the 1970s. As a consequence, Aboriginal life in the Guildford area was in large part shaped by the conflict between Government attempts to place Aboriginal people into a confined, controlled situation and Aboriginal efforts to avoid this. A succession of Departmental heads, from Prinsep at the turn of the century to Bray in the 1940s, wanted metropolitan area Aboriginal people strictly controlled and all others dissuaded from coming to the city. The Guildford reserves were intended to facilitate this.

In the early 1830s, the Swan area was the scene of serious armed conflicts between Aboriginal people and the new European arrivals. After the cessation of overt hostilities, in the 1840s and 1850s many Aboriginal people worked as labourers on the large estates around Guildford. In the 1860s Aboriginal labourers were largely replaced by convicts. By the turn of the century, the ravages of warfare, disease and dispossession had dramatically reduced the number of Aboriginal people in the Guildford area to the extent that they were seldom noticed. According to Daisy Bates, the 'Guildford Tribe' was recorded as having died out.<sup>1</sup>

In the first half of the twentieth century, several waves of Aboriginal re-settlement occurred in the Guildford area. In 1901, 110 Aboriginals were brought to Guildford for the Royal visit and a special camp was set up on Guildford Road.<sup>2</sup> This may have paved the way for more permanent arrivals. In the years to follow, Aboriginal people were noted camping around Guildford but urban development in the area forced them to relocate.<sup>3</sup> Many of them moved to camps north of Guildford, the largest being at Success Hill, a traditional meeting place on the bank of the Swan River.<sup>4</sup>

The failure of the Aboriginal agricultural settlement at Welshpool provided a major impetus for the move into the Guildford area. In 1908, Acting Chief Protector of Aborigines Frederick Gale, being somewhat less enthusiastic than his predecessor about the presence of Aboriginal people in Perth, transferred the running of the Welshpool settlement to a missionary group.<sup>5</sup> Farming activities at the settlement ceased soon after and most of the residents left. Some stayed in the Welshpool area but most moved to West Guildford (now Bassendean) and Eden Hill.

Almost immediately, complaints came from white residents of West Guildford about the Aboriginal presence and the local Roads Board ordered that they be moved. The police shifted the people to Success Hill, but there were further objections to the now extensive camp there. In 1910, the West Guildford Roads Board wrote to the Department of Aborigines and Fisheries demanding action be taken. The Department's response was to look for an area of land which could be gazetted as a camping reserve. The only site deemed available was an area of 48 acres [19.4 ha] in South Guildford. This site, the north-east corner of what is now the Perth airport, was gazetted as Reserve 12720 in the same year.

Creation of this reserve demonstrated characteristics common to the time. It was an action taken as a result of the demands of local government and white racism and not in the interests of Aboriginal people. The white imperative was simply to have Aboriginal people as far away from white residences as possible. The Aboriginal requirement for a habitable location received little, if any, consideration. When the Guildford council wrote to the Department saying that the site was "the most suitable in the district,"<sup>6</sup> they certainly did not mean it was the most suitable for the prospective Aboriginal residents. It had no water, no toilets, it was distant from the town and the places where most Aboriginal people worked (such as the Caversham vineyards), and it was next to a cemetery.

By contrast, the camps where Aboriginal people chose to live were near vineyards, less than a kilometre from the centre of Guildford, and had access to water. Success Hill for example, a popular camping ground, was a shady, picturesque spot where a spring flowed into the Swan River. Not surprisingly, when ordered to move onto the reserve, Aboriginal people resisted, initially with some success. Although the Chief Protector noted in 1910 that "the Police are doing all in their power to make the natives use this reserve,"<sup>7</sup> the police and the Department evidently lacked the resources to force the Aboriginals to move. The usual tactic Aboriginal people employed to avoid relocation was to quickly disperse if police or Departmental officials approached so that only a few people would be found at the camps.

Further complaints in 1915 also failed to see Aboriginal people moved to the reserve. The new Chief Protector, AO Neville, was initially of the opinion that another attempt at confinement was necessary. However, after speaking to the owner of the land on which many of the Aboriginals were camped, he noted that owner had no objections and in fact, "seem[ed] to like the natives being there, as they afford a certain amount of protection to his property, and do no harm themselves."<sup>8</sup> Neville determined that there was no point in pursuing the issue and for a long time the matter was ignored.

The Aboriginal population of Guildford increased suddenly in 1921 as a result of the Repatriation Department taking over the Pyrton Estate and evicting the Aboriginal people camped there.<sup>9</sup> However, from 1921 until the onset of the Depression, numbers gradually declined. This seems to have resulted largely from a semi-official campaign to remove Aboriginal people from the metropolitan area; a campaign made possible by the opening of the Moore River Settlement. Historian Peter Biskup has recorded incidents of this occurring:

*...in April 1918... forty-five Guildford aborigines were rounded up by police and sent to Moore River 'in their own interests'.<sup>10</sup>*

In the mid to late-1930s, the population trend reversed and large numbers of Aboriginals returned to the Guildford area, despite Neville ordering all unemployed Aboriginals in the Guildford camp to be removed to Moore River in 1932.<sup>11</sup> This sudden migration and the conditions under which these people settled established patterns which continue to this day. According to Departmental statistics, the Aboriginal population in the area more than quadrupled during the Depression, increasing from eighteen in 1930, to 78 in 1938. Drawn by the availability of seasonal labour and entertainment facilities in Perth,

Aboriginal people set up camps in places like Benara Road in Caversham, along Ivanhoe Street in Bassendean, and especially along what is now Kirke Street and the Mary Crescent Reserve in Eden Hill.<sup>12</sup> Throughout the 1940s, the camp at Mary Crescent was usually the largest.

Local Road Boards complained vociferously about the camps which had sprung up; the Bayswater Roads Board even requested a mounted patrol to police them. Early in 1936, the Swan Roads Board wrote to the Department asking that the local Aboriginals be moved onto the South Guildford reserve which was still not being used. Neville's reply was the first official optional acknowledgement that the site was unsuitable. The reserve, he said, was "too far from the district where the natives require to work to be of any service as a camping ground."<sup>13</sup> He asked the Swan Roads Board to nominate a small site nearer the places of employment. The Board's reply indicated white sentiments of the time. Members regretted that they were

*. . . unable to recommend any area which would be more suitable than the one previously mentioned, as all the Land owners and residents in this portion of the District are so far as we know opposed to any permanent camping ground being declared... Further, it would tend to depreciate the value of land.*<sup>14</sup>

The matter was shelved again until 1941 when the local councils began their most determined campaign to have the Aboriginals moved. At the same time, private interests began to complain about the effect on property values along Ivanhoe Street. Francis Bray, who had succeeded Neville as Commissioner of Native Affairs, was more receptive to the complaints. He saw as positive those factors which five years earlier Neville had felt disqualified the South Guildford reserve. Bray approved of the reserve's isolation from whites but was even more pleased by its proximity to the Guildford police "under whose control [the residents] would then be."<sup>15</sup>

After inspecting the site, Bray became even more enthusiastic. Ignoring the fact that Aboriginal people might need facilities that others regarded as essential, he wrote that "[t]he only drawback" was the lack of water.<sup>16</sup> As usual in these cases, the reserve was seen as a way to exercise power over the local Aboriginal population and "[b]y concentrating the natives into one area and eliminating the great many camps... the natives can be kept under better control."<sup>17</sup> It was soon apparent that Bray's plans were even more grandiose. He declared that when water was supplied, "all natives in the metropolitan area will be required to camp on the reserve."<sup>18</sup> Although the Guildford

Town Clerk refused to supply water and Bray himself acknowledged that the efforts of Aboriginal people to find water by sinking wells had failed, the move to the reserve was enforced, this time using the police. At the same time, the Department had begun refusing to distribute rations to discourage Aboriginal people from coming into Perth.<sup>19</sup>

Settlement on the South Guildford reserve began in May 1941. Some time after that, water was finally supplied. The move, however, simply transferred the source of complaints. This time, white residents in South Guildford protested. Both the Town Clerk and the South Guildford Progress Association (SGPA) wrote requesting another relocation of the Aboriginal community to "a site further afield," meaning outside the metropolitan area.<sup>20</sup> It was obvious that no site in Perth would be acceptable and two months later Bray was moved to write that "The natives are not persona grata anywhere in the Metropolitan Area, and wherever they are there will always be protests."<sup>21</sup>

To augment the rules of confinement to the reserve, the threat of arrest for petty crimes – drunkenness, supplying alcohol, loitering, 'being a public nuisance' – was used to intimidate Aboriginals from venturing into areas where whites lived and worked. Arrest was at the discretion of local authorities but was backed up by the power of the State Government. In July 1941, Bray wrote to the Swan Roads Board promising that the Department would send to Moore River any Aboriginal person who:

1. *Makes a nuisance of himself or herself to any white or native person.*
2. *If he persistently refuses to work and applies for rations.*
3. *If his child or children are refused admittance to school owing to their not being decently clothed and cared for in a proper manner acceptable to school authorities.*
4. *If a native is convicted of stealing or appears before the Guildford Court on a charge of drunkenness.*
5. *If he loiters at any place not otherwise on the reserve.*<sup>22</sup>

By deeming the above to be offences, local authorities were given enormous power to control the lives of the Aboriginals on and off the reserve. Undeniably, offences such as petty thefts did occur, but often Aboriginal people were left without many alternatives.

*When we were out of work, we used to go and steal for survival... Oranges, flour, bread. We had to. We had no social services in those days. We just kept going (Robert Bropho 26.5.97).*

The presence of Aboriginal people in Guildford was clearly an affront to some local whites, and the idea of Aboriginal people having freedom of movement even more so. In 1941, Bray wrote:

*The Guildford natives have for some time past been a problem to the Department, for the reason that their camps have been spread over a large area and this has caused a difficulty in watching their movements and keeping them under control.*<sup>23</sup>

In the end, however, it was not white protest which caused the closure of the South Guildford reserve but the war-time requirements of the armed forces. In November 1941, the Army requisitioned the site and the residents were driven off. The last people left the reserve in January 1942, just eight months after they had been forced onto it. Most seemed to have returned to the places they had lived before – various sites on vacant public and private land and condemned houses – triggering a new round of complaints about the presence on the Lockridge Estate. A letter to the Department, written at the time by the Guildford Town Clerk, reads:

*I am asked to register the Council's emphatic objection to any site in this vicinity being used for native camps.*<sup>24</sup>

The Department searched hard for a new site but it proved exceptionally difficult to find one. Local authorities clung to the belief that if their protests were vociferous enough, Aboriginal people could be kept out. Sadly, they were right. The Department was left with little room to manoeuvre. Unable to find any vacant Crown Land or sites acceptable to local authorities, Bray finally proposed a camping site on Widgee Road, east of Lockridge. There was little settlement there, a point he considered to be in its favour.<sup>25</sup> The drawback for the Department was that the site was privately owned and there was some difficulty finding the owners. Consequently, the site had to be rented and could not be officially reserved.

In September 1942, Bray wrote that the police would prosecute any Aboriginal person who did not move onto the new 'reserve', and if they still refused to move, their work permits would be cancelled and they would be removed from Perth.<sup>26</sup> However, the threats were mostly ineffective, partly because local industries required Aboriginal labour. Once again, the Aboriginal people of the region resisted being moved. The new camping ground was isolated, it lacked sanitary facilities and it did not have a water supply. Even when the Department provided a well, two years after ordering

people on to the reserve, they failed to maintain the pump and water often had to be carted. The area was also low-lying, swampy and prone to flooding and consequently was not much used during winter.

In order to force the move to Widgee Road and to further discourage Aborigines coming from the country, the Department stepped up its inspections of the scattered camps in the middle of 1941. In February, Bray had noted:

*Surprise visits . . . do a lot of good and I think we should have more of them. If we insist on good camps and sanitation in these districts it might have a tendency to discourage the natives from coming to Perth.*<sup>27</sup>

The threat of removal from Perth was also used in other situations. For example, in 1942, complaints were made in Bassendean accusing the local Aboriginal population of burglaries. There was no evidence to link Aborigines with these crimes but the Acting Commissioner visited the camps and told the residents that "unless they tried to assist the Police in the arrest of the culprit or culprits, arrangements would be made to move some more natives to Moore River."<sup>28</sup>

In the 1940s, new patterns of employment were established. Men found work in light industrial factories, most notably, Bell Bros. and Cresco Fertilisers. Women worked as domestics while work in the Swan Valley vineyards could involve the whole family. Employers were required by law to provide accommodation but they rarely did; even simple amenities like toilets and showers were often not provided.<sup>29</sup> Employment was the only acceptable reason for being off the reserve, but that too was a tenuous privilege. Unable to enforce the move to Widgee Road, Commissioner Bray wrote:

*The main difficulty is that about half a dozen of the men at present camped at Bassendean are working for Bell Bros . . . therefore it does not seem possible to issue warrants for the removal of these men and their families to the Moore River Native Settlement, seeing that they are in legal employment. In my opinion we would get over the difficulty by telling the employed men to move to a site adjacent to their employment, which, I understand, is in the Bullsbrook district. If they refuse to do this then warrants for the removal of their families to the Settlement could be issued, and warrants could also be obtained for the removal of any other natives camped at Bassendean and not considered to be in legal employment.*<sup>30</sup>

Bray had clearly come to a point where he wanted to move all Aboriginal people from Perth, whether permanent residents or not. But his efforts were to no avail. In the

spring of 1943, there was another influx of Aboriginal people to the Guildford area as labour shortages in Perth meant more work was available for Aborigines. New camps sprang up as a result of the new arrivals, the crackdowns on existing camps and the eviction of Aboriginal people from houses. The Maylands, Bayswater and Bassendean Roads Boards met with the Minister of Native Affairs demanding action. The camps were inspected again and the usual instructions issued. Seven families were ordered to go to Widgee Road, forty-seven families were ordered to return to the country and twelve families were sought or removed under warrant to Moore River and Carrolup. It was noted that fifteen families disobeyed the orders. Other Aboriginals came from the country and replaced those who were forced to leave Perth. As a final solution, Bray finally determined that Aboriginal families who had lived in Perth for decades should be removed as they were seen to be "an attraction for native relatives and friends who wish to come to the metropolitan area".<sup>31</sup>

As late as January 1944, Widgee Road was still not being used. As another alternative to the reserve, Aboriginal people had begun living in derelict houses in the Guildford–Bayswater area. When this was discovered, it was noted that "suitable action ha[d] been taken to make them vacate the condemned structures."<sup>32</sup> Ironically, after being made to vacate the condemned houses, Aboriginals were ordered to go and live on land that had no shelter where they would have to construct their own dwellings out of bought or salvaged materials, Bray noting that "[t]here was no intention on the part of the Department to provide the housing accommodation for the natives on the reserve."<sup>33</sup>

In June 1944, toilets were provided at Widgee Road and some degree of occupancy was finally established. Robert Bropho describes the move as follows:

*There was no help from them to get us to Widgee Road... They came here and told us we had to move . . . We had to pack up a few old belongings. We had to pull down some of our old bags we had on the walls of the make-shift camp – no timber, just forky sticks from the trees - so we had to pile all this scrap we had on a horse and dray and we took off... When we arrived there we had to go across this mucky ground. The water was all sloppy. We got up onto the high ground, the sandhills. There was a his and hers toilet already put up there. And they had a windmill stuck in the ground and the water was pumping. That was it. That was home for us. We had to build our camps there. (Robert Bropho 26.5.97)*

Over the next few years, the Bropho family were the mainstay of Widgee Road, though others came and went, particularly in summer when job opportunities were available in the vineyards. Conditions were not improved. Late in 1945, the Commissioner vetoed further development on the reserve on the grounds that it might encourage Aboriginal people to come to Perth to live.<sup>34</sup> Thus, faced with a choice between setting up camps in an isolated, unattractive location, or doing the same in a more attractive spot closer to town, unsurprisingly, many people opted for the latter.

*It got that bad out there, we had to pack up and move back [to Mary Crescent camps]. (Robert Bropho 26.5.97)*

In the post-war period, higher wages made it possible for some Aboriginal people to purchase blocks of land in the Guildford region. While the camps continued, numbers were reduced. Employment opportunities in the country also improved, reducing the incentive to come to Perth. In 1952, the owners sold Widgee Road, but by that stage it had been abandoned and was considered superfluous so the Department terminated its lease.<sup>35</sup>

Under Commissioner Stanley Middleton, Department policy changed substantially. In 1941, Widgee Road had been considered "eminently suitable," (AAD 993: 125/37) although the Department did everything it could to discourage Aboriginals from living in Perth. Eleven years later, another officer reported that Widgee Road was entirely unsatisfactory to which Middleton added "[Aboriginals] cannot be kept out [of Perth] and must be provided for since, unlike our own people, they cannot get accommodation at hotels and boarding and guest houses."<sup>36</sup> For a brief time, Success Hill was considered for an Aboriginal housing village, but after adverse public reaction the proposal did not receive Cabinet approval and the plan lapsed.

In the late 1950s, the Coolbaroo League set up Allawah Grove as an Aboriginal housing estate. By January 1959, there were 209 people living there, many of them former residents of the Guildford camps and reserves.<sup>37</sup> Allawah Grove was ultimately closed because the airport required the land, but the government still considered it necessary to provide a camping area in Perth for homeless Aboriginals and those drawn by the job opportunities in the Swan Valley. The Minister for Native Welfare inspected a site along Benara Road in summer, declared it to be suitable, and insisted the Department of Native Welfare buy it. By winter it was under water and the Department was forced to buy a second block of land – the site of what is now the Lockridge High School.<sup>38</sup>

In February 1960, this site was gazetted as Reserve 25519. This was the last official Aboriginal reserve in the metropolitan area but it was Aboriginal land in name only; there is no record of Aboriginal people camping there. At the time, suggestions were made that the reserve should support an Aboriginal aged persons home or a housing settlement but these did not eventuate. In 1966, the Education Department requested the site and the following year the Department of Native Welfare agreed to release the land, as the Department of Public Works had made available \$40 000 to purchase residential sites for Aboriginals in the metropolitan area. In June 1967 the purpose of the reserve was changed to "high school".

For much of this century being Aboriginal in the Guildford area meant being forced to move continually to stay ahead of harassment by authorities. Official policy was contradictory; the Government wanted Aboriginals to be self-sufficient and yet imposed tight controls on where they could live and work. Frequent inspections of their camps throughout the 1940s were followed by detailed listings of all persons found, their whereabouts, employment and the location and condition of their dwelling. Life on the reserves was hard, and more often than not Aboriginal people preferred to live elsewhere. However, as Robert Bropho points out in the book *Fringe Dweller*:

*. . . closing up the reserves, that is the last bit of their country that the Aboriginal people will ever own. Now that's gone, we've got nothing.*<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Salter, E. 1971, *Daisy Bates*, Sydney Angus and Robertson, p.117.

<sup>2</sup> Haebich, *op. cit.*: p.6.

<sup>3</sup> Carter, J., 1986, *Bassendean: a social history 1829-1979*, p.52.

<sup>4</sup> In 1908, the *Swan Express* noted the presence of a group of Aboriginals at Midland Junction and suggested that the

previous year was the first that this group camped there (*Swan Express* 1.2.1908).

<sup>5</sup> Haebich, *op. cit.*: p.103.

<sup>6</sup> Aborigines Department: file 158/31.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Haebich, *op. cit.*: pp.230-2.

<sup>10</sup> Department of Aborigines and Fisheries: file 817/18, quoted in Biskup, *op. cit.*: p.155.

<sup>11</sup> Haebich, *op. cit.*: pp.301-2.

<sup>12</sup> Department of Native Affairs: file 993: 125/37.

<sup>13</sup> Department of Native Affairs: file 158/31.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Department of Native Affairs: file 993: 125/37.

<sup>20</sup> Department of Native Affairs: file 158/31.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

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- <sup>24</sup> Department of Native Affairs: file 2511/10.  
<sup>25</sup> Department of Native Affairs: file 158/31.  
<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*  
<sup>27</sup> Department of Native Affairs: file 993: 125/37.  
<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*  
<sup>29</sup> Bropho, R., 1980, *Fringedweller*, Alternative Publishing Cooperative Ltd., Sydney, p.29.  
<sup>30</sup> Department of Native Affairs: file 993: 238/43.  
<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*  
<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*  
<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*  
<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*  
<sup>35</sup> Department of Native Affairs: file 552/52.  
<sup>36</sup> Department of Native Affairs: file 993: 484/52.  
<sup>37</sup> Department of Native Affairs: file 993: 515/57.  
<sup>38</sup> Department of Native Welfare: file 1733: 270/60.  
<sup>39</sup> Bropho, *op.cit.*: p.14.

#### **4.4 Collie**

The 1902 Annual Report contains the first acknowledgement of Aboriginals in Collie by the Aborigines Department. Evidently there was a relatively young Aboriginal population living around Collie at this time and employment was readily available. The relative lack of agricultural development around Collie delayed the disruptions to Aboriginal life which occurred in the wheat belt. The Aborigines Department, which would hand out rations to unsupported elderly and infirm Aboriginal people, is not recorded to have distributed rations in Collie prior to 1931. It was noted just prior to the First World War that "The few natives [in Collie] are all in employment and are cared for and content."<sup>1</sup>

The effects of the Depression forced a movement of Aboriginals into the Collie township; in 1935 the Chief Protector noted "it is only in comparatively recent years that the natives have resorted to the vicinity of the town."<sup>2</sup> For many years most Aboriginals camped at Boronia Gully, a few kilometres north-east of the town, and when local authorities and the Department of Native Affairs began planning an official camping reserve in the 1930s, Boronia Gully was their first choice. Although some distance from town, Aboriginal people had an obvious affinity with the area. However, the land was privately owned and when the owners were asked if they would be willing to sell the land to the Aborigines Department they refused and demanded that the Department remove the Aboriginal people camped there. Eventually a site for a camping reserve was chosen at Allanson, about seven kilometres west of Collie. Deemed acceptable by both the Department and the local Roads Board, this site was declared as Reserve 7136 in July 1937.

There were objections from the residents of Allanson but the Collie Roads Board overrode them.<sup>3</sup> The motives which determined the choice of Allanson made it typical of camping reserves on the fringes of south-west towns; the imperatives were those of administrators while little thought was given to the needs and wishes of Aboriginal people. Most local Aboriginal people preferred to camp in sites more accessible to Collie, the commercial and entertainment services they desired, and employment opportunities, such as they were. The segregation the authorities hoped to achieve through the gazettal of the Allanson reserve was extremely impractical for Aboriginal people.

Throughout its tenure, the Allanson reserve was rarely used, and as a result it was closed in 1952. Boronia Gully remained the preferred camping site, though conditions there were very basic. In March 1953, the *Collie Mail* declared that "If anyone doubts the necessity of a housing scheme for natives they should visit the encampment at Boronia Gully<sup>4</sup>..." During this period supplying alternative accommodation for Aboriginal people became an issue within the town, and for some years Collie appeared to be in the vanguard of Western Australian towns in its treatment of its Aboriginal residents. A portion of the town's European residents were actively concerned for the welfare of the local Aboriginal people. The most prominent group of these Collie philanthropists included a local doctor, AF Walsh, Ken Hay the editor of *The Collie Mail*, and a Roman Catholic clergyman, Father McSweeney. Believing that better employment, accommodation and education opportunities would encourage integration, Walsh and McSweeney formed the Collie Native Welfare Committee with the intention of using volunteer labour to build several houses. Walsh chose a site on the Harris River (or Mornington) Road, on the north-western outskirts of Collie. This was Forestry Department land, and in 1953 the Forestry Department released ten acres [4.04 ha] for the Collie Native Welfare committee's project.

Encouraged by *The Collie Mail*, Walsh and his committee began building immediately. They were careful to stress that their interest was the betterment of a select group of local Aboriginals and that they did not want the area to be used for camping. Walsh asked that the site be designated 'housing for natives' rather than a 'reserve' and that the land be vested in the Native Housing Scheme under trust. However, both the Department of Native Welfare and the Collie Roads Board wanted it declared a reserve and, ultimately, their desire held sway. After a long delay spent organising surveying, the site was officially declared in 1957 as Reserve 24848.

In its creation, the Harris River Road reserve was unique. Although the Committee leaders were prominent Catholics, residents were not expected to receive religious teachings in exchange for their accommodation. The reserve was quite clearly established by non-government and non-religious interests with the Department of Native Welfare only becoming involved much later.

Departmental involvement in the reserve was precipitated by increasing numbers of Aboriginal people moving into Collie seeking employment in the mid-1950s. The Commissioner of Native Welfare wanted to establish an additional Aboriginal camping

ground. After disagreement between the Department and the Collie Roads Board over the site of the native camping reserve, eventually the Department of Native Welfare decided to include an extra area behind the houses built by Walsh. The extra area for 'native camping' was incorporated into Reserve 24848 when it was declared.

The first house was occupied in March 1953 by Jimmy Cockie and his family. They had been living in a shack at the Boronia Gully camp. Soon after work on a second, smaller house was commenced. Designated for Douglas Ugle, this was occupied by early 1955. When the first house was being built, it was made quite clear to the Department and the public that it was intended for someone in permanent employment<sup>5</sup> and that "[t]he costs of the homes will be met by the tenants in weekly instalments..."<sup>6</sup> In a letter sent to the Department of Native Welfare in 1956, Walsh explained:

*I hereby declare that of the two cottages on the native reserve in Collie, the one occupied by Jimmy Cockie he should own. He has a right to it because I told him it was being built for him and he paid approximately £100 to me to help defray the cost of the building . . . The other I wish the Native Affairs Department to take over and allot to whomsoever they deem fit.<sup>7</sup>*

To facilitate the process of Aboriginal home ownership, attempts were made to improve employment opportunities. In July 1954, a group of church ministers declared they were seeking "secure jobs, preferably in the mining industry, for selected natives so that they can live in comfortable homes, as other people do."<sup>8</sup> The Miners' Union backed the attempt and in September, each of Collie's three mining companies employed two Aboriginals.

By the late 1950s, Walsh had come to believe that the SHC program would provide enough accommodation for Aboriginals in Collie and so he declared that his committee would discontinue their building program. However, the SHC failed to fill the breach. Further accommodation was still needed and, in response, the Department of Native Welfare and local service groups joined forces to construct four Nissen huts and an ablution block on the vacant reserve land behind the original houses.

Unfortunately, despite the good intentions, Walsh's program was ultimately of little benefit to Aboriginal people. Cathleen Harrison, who recorded life at the Harris River Road reserve in 1960, was adamant that the houses were second-hand buildings that had been demolished on another site and rebuilt.<sup>9</sup> She described them as being "dowdy, uninviting and comfortless."<sup>10</sup> The usually supportive *The Collie Mail* admitted

that the houses were never finished,<sup>11</sup> and the Collie Roads Board wanted to condemn them as being unfit to live in almost immediately they were occupied but did not have the power because they were on a reserve and thus outside the Board's jurisdiction. Despite the fact that the houses were of poor quality from the beginning, blame for their dilapidated state was often directed at the Aboriginal residents with the result that the episode had little long-term influence except that it provided fuel for a racist myth of Aboriginal irresponsibility and ingratitude.

Whilst many individuals were transient residents of the camping area, a core of the same families occupied the reserve from 1953 until at least 1968. Harrison's 1960 account noted that 22 people lived there on a more or less permanent basis. For those who remained in the Collie, district work was much harder to find than in areas with better established agricultural industries or where union labour was less important. There was some employment for men in the timber and mining industries and, from the 1960s, with the Roads Board. However, only a few managed to find regular employment. For women, the situation was dire; Collie held very few employment opportunities for Aboriginal women other than prostitution.<sup>12</sup> There was also the risk that the Department of Native Welfare would exercise its power to remove children to institutional care. In 1962, two infants were removed from their mother on the reserve and sent to Roelands Mission "because they had no permanent home".<sup>13</sup>

The diet of the reserve inhabitants was limited. A major problem was the lack of quality meat. In the wheatbelt, reserve dwellers supplemented the meat they obtained by hunting, with sheep which were donated or sold to them by farmers. Residents of the Collie reserve were apparently unable to get kangaroo meat and could not afford to buy good quality meat. There were other health problems, particularly respiratory complaints, which could be blamed primarily on the unlined houses which were impossible to keep warm and free of condensation. This problem was intensified by Collie's cold and wet winters.<sup>14</sup>

Arrest was a constant risk for Aboriginals living on the reserve. Convictions for 'victimless' crimes provided a second major factor contributing to a worsening of attitudes towards Collie's Aboriginal population. People were fined heavily or regularly sentenced for three- and four-month jail terms for offences like 'vagrancy' or 'being an habitual drunk.' These sentences could be for trivial breaches. For example, in 1964, one long-term resident was sentenced to five weeks in jail for supplying alcohol to a

person not having citizenship. All he had done was hand around a bottle of wine among a group of people in what he could rightly claim was his own home.<sup>15</sup>

The arrests intensified after the change in liquor laws in 1965 and *The Collie Mail*, generally benevolent towards the reserve's residents, obsessively detailed all court appearances. An editorial in the mid-1960s defended this policy, stating that such publicity should act as an effective deterrent. However, the combination of the arrests and the constant publicity resulted in certain stereotypes being promulgated and intensified. *The Collie Mail* itself once admitting that had they not been prosecuted for these petty offences, Aboriginal people would have appeared before the courts at a much lower ratio than others.<sup>16</sup>

In the 1960s, Collie moved towards a crisis in Aboriginal housing. Accommodation on the reserve deteriorated and Aboriginals were usually unable to find housing elsewhere. In June 1960, it was recommended the houses built by Walsh be burned as their condition was blamed for the incidence of tuberculosis on the reserve.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, even while they were considered to be uninhabitable, the houses were lived in for at least another seven years. Eventually, the residents of the Harris River Road reserve lost their houses, the land they lived on, and an unknown quantity of money. The houses were demolished in the late 1960s or early 1970s and the Cockie family were moved to Beverley by the Department of Native Welfare. Because the area had been declared a reserve in 1957, the title of the land was transferred to the Minister for Native Welfare.

The episode left sour memories for some Aboriginal people in Collie. A submission made in 1983 to the Aboriginal Land Inquiry noted:

*At that time, there was concern in the town that a great injustice was done to the Cocky (sic) family. Mr Dennis Cocky's grandfather saved sufficient money to purchase 10 acres . . .*<sup>18</sup>

The belief that Jimmy Cockie owned a sizeable portion of the land on which his house was built persists to this day.<sup>19</sup>

The transition to town housing in Collie was badly planned. Between January and November 1964, the SHC found homes for 222 non-Aboriginal people in Collie but money was deemed unavailable for Aboriginal housing. Initially, the Collie Shire

Council followed an example set by its counterpart in Narrogin and opposed the Department of Native Welfare's plans to build transitional housing for the residents of the reserve. In February 1965, the council resolved that Aboriginals should be provided with adequate housing, ostensibly because they would be at a disadvantage "in their attempts at becoming members of the community", but it seems that one of the main objections was that transitional housing, being virtually sub-standard, would lower property values if placed within the township.<sup>20</sup>

The Department of Native Welfare continued to push for transitional housing and threatened to go ahead without council approval. After a meeting with the Minister in May, the council withdrew its objections but construction was further stalled by the remonstrations of white Collie residents. Between July 1965 and January 1966, the Shire suggested three sites for Aboriginal houses but each time backed down in the face of residents' objections. The matter was then effectively shelved. In 1967, an officer of the Department of Native Welfare, talking about the transitional housing program, noted "This type of house has not yet been built at Collie", even though 150 had been provided in other parts of the south-west.<sup>21</sup> The following year, the Department bought four town lots from the SHC for Aboriginal housing. These were declared as Reserve 29624. However, they were not built on and when jurisdiction for Aboriginal housing was handed back to the SHC in 1972, it was decided the blocks were not required. Reserve 29624 was cancelled in 1974.

In the meantime, the Harris River Road reserve was closed (though it was not cancelled until June 1972). The former residents were left without accommodation and had to be sheltered in tents until houses could be found in town. Finding accommodation in Collie remained a difficulty for Aboriginal people some time. In 1970, *The Collie Mail* declared it had "discovered" an Aboriginal camp within a mile of the town's centre.<sup>22</sup> The accompanying picture showed one of three shacks built out of materials salvaged from the local rubbish tip. Four families, with several children, were living at the camp which the paper declared highlighted "the social problem relating to the housing of Aboriginals in the Collie area..."<sup>23</sup> When interviewed, the camp's residents voiced their complaints at being unable to find housing in Collie and the conditions under which they were forced to live. They were evicted from their camp by the council but the Department of Native Welfare was able to find housing for only two of the families.<sup>24</sup> At the time, the Department had four blocks of land, apparently unused, all of which had been reserved

specifically for housing Aboriginals, and there were also unused houses in Collie vested with the SHC.

Where town housing was found it was certainly no panacea. Many long-term reserve residents found that they were ill-equipped for the transition:

*When they closed the Harris River Road [reserve] down, they put us in town, and most of our elders, they had no knowledge of how to maintain a house . . . they just dumped us in town – 'here, fend for yourselves.' OK, if they do something wrong, because it's our culture, we are being evicted . . . (Sima Khan: 10.6.97).*

The last reserve to be created around Collie was Reserve 35844 which was gazetted in 1979, but little thought seems to have been given to the requirements of the intended occupants of the reserve. The reserve was intended for the accommodation of Aboriginal pensioners, and five small asbestos houses were constructed on the reserve soon after gazettal. However, its location, several kilometres from town, made it impractical for elderly residents. The houses were abandoned just six years after they were built and all but one has since been demolished.

Today the old Aboriginal reserves of Collie, particularly the Harris River Road reserve, serve as memorials to the lives and experiences of the Aboriginal people of Collie in the second half of this century. The memories these reserves evoke are of times of discrimination and hardship but also of times of community cohesiveness and solidarity. Reminiscing in 1997, Sima Khan, who spent some of her childhood on the Harris River Road reserve recalled:

*When I used to live up the Harris River Road I felt clean..... And we were together. We used to share things together... I felt like I was united with my family and I felt comfortable because every Nyungar on that reserve was family and I could go from house to house and sit and talk and yarn. At night we used to make big fires, share our tucker.<sup>25</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Aborigines Department, *Annual Report 1913*.

<sup>2</sup> Department of Native Affairs: file 993: 116/35.

<sup>3</sup> *Collie Mail* 4.3.37.

<sup>4</sup> *Collie Mail* 19.3.53.

<sup>5</sup> Department of Native Affairs: file 1078/53: 23.3.54.

<sup>6</sup> *Collie Mail* 12.2.54.

<sup>7</sup> Letter from Walsh to the Department of Native Welfare, 5 March 1956: Department of Native Affairs: file 993: 28/49.

<sup>8</sup> *Collie Mail* 1.7.54.

<sup>9</sup> Harrison, C. *A study of the culture contact situation in Collie*, Hons Dissertation, UWA, 1960: p. 7.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*: p. 9.

<sup>11</sup> *Collie Mail* 19.3.53.

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<sup>12</sup> Harrison (1960) noted: “Prostitution on the reserve is highly organised....It is the strongest spontaneous social contact between the mixed blood people as a group and the males of all classes of the European community”. Also, during the 1950s and 1960s *The Collie Mail* regularly reported on white men appearing in court for being on

the reserve ‘without lawful excuse’.

<sup>13</sup> *Collie Mail* 13.9.62.

<sup>14</sup> Harrison, *op.cit.*: p.15.

<sup>15</sup> *Collie Mail* 23.1.64.

<sup>16</sup> *Collie Mail* 11.5.67.

<sup>17</sup> *Collie Mail* 30.6.60.

<sup>18</sup> Submission to Aboriginal Land Inquiry from Lorna Little, 1983, vol. 9, section 2.

<sup>19</sup> Interviews conducted in Collie in July 1997 indicate that the Cockie family are still confused as to why they do not

possess the land.

<sup>20</sup> *Collie Mail* 11.2.65.

<sup>21</sup> *Collie Mail* 28.9.67.

<sup>22</sup> *Collie Mail* 11.6.70.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Collie Mail* 11.6.70.

<sup>25</sup> Sima Khan, interview 10.6.1997.