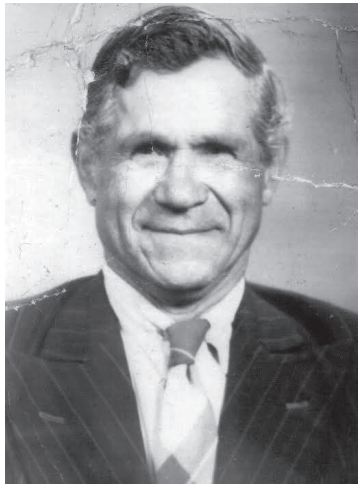

The gravel pit – our stories

Family footprints from Burekup to Bunbury

The gravel pit – our stories

This publication contains the names and images of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are deceased.

Published and produced by CAN
Design by TaylorSparks

PICTURED

COVER (TOP LEFT): Rachel and her grandson Derek Hill. (BOTTOM LEFT): Charles Hill.
COVER (LEFT TO RIGHT): Annette Garlett, Lera Bennell, Isla Bennell, Yvonne Garlette and Jennifer Quartermaine.
ABOVE (LEFT TO RIGHT): Yvonne Garlett, Annette Garlett, Jennfier Quartermaine, Isla Bennell and Lera Bennell.

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Funding Partners

Australian Government
Indigenous Culture Support

Australian Government

Australia Council for the Arts

Department of Local Government, Sport and Cultural Industries
Government of Western Australia

lotterywest supported

Foreword

CAN's *Bush Babies* project aims to preserve the stories of Noongar babies born in the bush, on Aboriginal reserves or on the outskirts of towns. Bush Babies is part of CAN's Rekindling Stories on Country strategy.

These stories are important for all Australians because they capture a moment in our history. They are from a time when Aboriginal people were denied basic human rights; a time when they were treated as trespassers on their own land.

In exploring such stories, we learn about the hardships many Noongar people endured but we hear remarkable stories of triumph over adversity, too. The prolonged journey of the late Charles and Rachel Hill (née Abraham) back to home country in the 1950's is one such story.

Through the *Bush Babies* project, CAN worked with the couple's descendants, who continue to live in the Bunbury region of Western Australia. Charles and Rachel were both 'bush babies'; Charles was born at Bridgetown and Rachel in Wandering. They went on to have 14 children, many of whom were also born in the bush.

Charles was a proud, hard-working Noongar man with Christian ethics. Rachel was a renowned midwife; just how many babies she delivered in the bush is unknown but she delivered many Noongar babies around Pingelly, Narrogin and Burekup.

The Hill family descendants wanted to honour their grandparents and record the journey of the extended family from their own property in Pingelly to their traditional home country around Burekup-Bunbury. Charles and Rachel went from being landowners to itinerants searching for a new and better life.

This result is this book, which tells the remarkable story, mainly in the words of direct descendants of Charles and Rachel Hill.

CAN would also like to acknowledge all the families that contributed to this book.

Introduction

by Myles Mitchell, with contributions from family members

PICTURED

Charles Hill.

This is the story of Charles Hill, his wife Rachel (née Abraham), their 14 children, and subsequent generations, who now comprise much of the Aboriginal population of Bunbury.

It is the story of one Noongar family's struggle to maintain some level of autonomy from government control in the south-west of Western Australia during the 1950's, as told by the direct descendants of Charles and Rachel.

At stake in this struggle was the freedom to move, the freedom to work, and the freedom to maintain possession of their children. They had to fight to maintain elements of traditional life under the increasing pressures of government control over Aboriginal people resulting from the enactment of the 'the 1905 Act' (the *Aborigines Act 1905*) and subsequent *Native Administration Act 1936*, both of which had the explicit purpose of legislating for increased control over the lives of Aboriginal people.

As this story illustrates, the Hill/Abraham family adapted traditional patterns of seasonal movement, reflecting the travelling patterns of their ancestors. They integrated seasonal farm work, and traditional hunter-gathering practices with seasonal movement.

Charles Hill was a proud man, a highly respected, hard worker who owned land in Pingelly, a small farming town in the southern wheatbelt. However, owning land did not afford Charles the freedom for him and his family that he so wanted.

Living in Pingelly, the family were subject to intense scrutiny and control from the Department of Native Welfare and police. Among the controls were

scrutiny about their movements. Whenever Charles and his family would finish seasonal work on one farm, they were required to obtain permits to move on to the next farm. However, they could not apply for the permits themselves. Only the farmer could apply to have them come, work and camp on his property.

Charles and his family fled Pingelly in the early 50's to escape such controls.

The family were frustrated with the policies dictating their lives, so they sought a better life. They were sleeping rough, under the stars mostly, sometimes under a bridge and camping out for months at a time. They found a temporary solution, back in Charles Hill's home country, near Bunbury, in the tiny township of Burekup. A local farmer let the family move into his dairy shed. The family endured freezing conditions over one winter before another local farmer let Charles and his family establish a permanent camp on an old gravel pit on his property adjacent to the Collie River and Burekup school.

This location served as their base camp at which they spent much of their time.

It was a good location — close to the river, an irrigation channel, and even closer to a small tributary creek, which provided a fine source of water for drinking, cooking, laundry, bathing and swimming.

Charles and his family were able to gain employment on a number of different farms in the area, some close enough to travel to each day, some further away towards the coast which would require the family to temporarily move camp for the duration of the work.

Charles and Rachel's choice to set up camp on private property was a wise one. It was this decision that ultimately helped keep this large, extended family together. Living on private property meant they were beyond the clutches of the Department of Native Welfare and the police. The gravel pit camp, while less than ideal, provided sanctuary.

The area they made their home was along the Swan Coastal Plain, on the western (coastal) side of the Darling Scarp in the lower reaches of the Leschenault catchment. They had family connections across the scarp too, in the Collie area, but seldom went over that way.

PICTURED

Rachel and her grandson Derek Hill.

Through the summer months, Charles and his family would work the farms between Burekup and the coast, carting hay, planting and picking potatoes ('spuds') and doing general farm work. They would also do stone and stick picking, clearing paddocks for farmers by hand.

They spent all of their spare time, mainly on weekends, as a family down at the mouth of the Collie River, on the south bank of the river just as it meets the Leschenault inlet. This was a special place for the whole family and still is today. The estuary is where the family camped under the stars and lived on seafood for days at a time.

This pattern of movement that led the family down to the estuary during the summer months followed the same patterns as Charles Hill's ancestors, who had followed this mobility pattern as part of their traditional hunter-gatherer traditions.

During the making of this book, four generations of descendants of Charles and Rachel Hill (née Abraham) took a journey into their past, revisiting sites of great significance to the family. Some sites brought countless happy memories flooding back; others reminded them of the hardships they endured.

For the matriarch of the family, Rachel, this story follows her journey from a cow paddock, to a gravel pit, to her very first home provided by the Department of Native Welfare. Rachel was in her 60's and widowed when she finally got her house. She lived to see her children and grandchildren make the transition from the bush to the suburbs.

PICTURED

OPPOSITE (LEFT TO RIGHT): Lera and Isla Bennell.
TOP (LEFT TO RIGHT): Lera Bennell, Isla Bennell, Yvonne Garlett, Annette Garlett and Jennifer Quartermaine.
BOTTOM (LEFT TO RIGHT): Jennifer Quartermaine, Annette Garlett and Yvonne Garlett.

The dairy shed

Charles Hill was a hard-working Noongar man who was fortunate enough to have his own property on the outskirts of the small wheatbelt town of Pingelly. It should have provided him with the freedom to work and build a better life for his children.

Instead, he was subjected to racism and oppressive government rules. So Charles packed up his family and walked off his land, moving them all to Burekup where he could be close to family and reinforce their strong cultural ties.

Burekup is a small town about 20 km north of Bunbury. It's believed the name is derived from a Noongar word for a local wildflower, *boorekup*. It was established originally as a timber town by white settlers in 1910. But by the time the Hill clan arrived in the early 1950's, it was farming that they remembered — paddocks full of potatoes, orchards full of fruits, and grazing land.

It was a bold and brave move, but one Charles was determined to make to carve out a better life for his children. However, his attempt to build a better life had a shaky start.

Isla

“I remember coming to Kelly Road in Roelands with my grandparents and parents and all the family in the early 1950’s and talking to Mr Rowley Wallam, who was the Elder at the campsite, about letting us stay there until we found our own place. Mr Wallam then asked the property owner for his permission to let us stay there.

We camped at Kelly Road for a few months, then we moved down to make a camp on the banks of the Collie River under a bridge.

Winter had set in and it was wet and cold; we kept the fire burning day and night to keep warm. The wet wood gave us more smoke than flames.

Dad, grandfather and his sons went looking for work with the local farmers at Burekup. One of the farmers offered his old dairy shed for us to stay in out of the rain. So we moved to Clarkies’ dairy shed. It had cement floors and walls. We kept that fire going.”

PICTURED

Isla Bennell.

Lera

“Well when we made the journey from Pingelly to Bunbury, we ended up sleeping under the bridge down the end of the road and then farmers come along and said to our grand-father, would you like to take the family over there?

Now you can see a little bit of the frame over there. Well that would have been the dairy shed where they milked all the cows, and was owned by the Clarkes. He let us live there in those little cubicles – cow cubicles – so every family had a cubicle and we all slept on the cement floor.”

PICTURED

LEFT TO RIGHT: Isla Bennell, Yvonne Garlett and Lera Bennell

Lera

“The dairy shed, it was terrible, it was crowded, cold. There were a few families and we all had different cubicles and there was not much room, no privacy.”

Annette

“My memories of the dairy shed? We moved down here when I was about four years old. I remember my cousin Roslyn Thorne was born here in the dairy shed. Her mum was Aunty Deidre and our grandmother delivered the baby. I remember being told off by my Aunty Dorie because we were peeking around under the doors and she told us off!”

PICTURED

TOP (LEFT TO RIGHT): Jennifer Quartermaine, Annette Garlett and Yvonne Garlett.
BOTTOM (LEFT TO RIGHT): Cheryl Hill and Isla Bennell.

Lera

“I had my first day of going to that school from there (the dairy shed). I remember these paddocks were full of spuds, so we picked the spuds, and the men carted the hay. We did a lot of labouring work for all those farmers around here.”

The gravel pit

The Hill family moved to Burekup seeking a better life and, while things were an improvement on Pingelly, the family were still controlled by unfair and degrading state laws.

Aboriginal people did not have the right to vote, they did not have equal pay, and they were not entitled to social security like other Australians, which meant that if they couldn't work, they had no money and the family couldn't eat. They certainly were not allowed to live in towns. It was a time when Aboriginal people had to be out of town and back on their farms or reserves by 6 pm — or face the wrath of the police or the Department of Native Welfare.

There was a policy of 'assimilation' that saw many children taken away from their families. We now know these children as the Stolen Generation.

After enduring crowded conditions in the dairy shed, the Hill clan took up a local farmer's offer to let them set up camp on an old gravel pit on his farm. Although it was far from ideal, it was a strategic move.

PICTURED

OPPOSITE (LEFT TO RIGHT): Jennifer Quartermaine, Annette Garlett, Isla Bennell, Yvonne Garlett, Lera Bennell, Korrine Bennell, Dellas Yarran and Cheryl Hill.

Annette

“At the camp, we would have to gather water from down the creek in a plastic bucket and we would get wood from around the area for cooking. The tin for the camp we would get from different places and from the dump as well.

We used to eat most of our meals outside in the summer. At night dad would set the trap and early in the morning the children would go and see if we caught anything. Rabbit would be food for our breakfast.”

Chris

“There were a few scary yarns sitting around the fire. We had no electricity, so when you need to go to the toilet at night I would be too scared! I had to get mum or dad or one of the bigger ones to come with me.”

PICTURED

Clem (Bill) Collard with baby Murray at the Gravel Pit.

Yvonne

I just remember going to school and the famers all the way along had an orange orchard. After school he'd fill up a big tin with the ones that were too small and he'd let us just take what we wanted. As we got older we all had our chores that we had to do, our brother, as soon as he became a teenager, he would have to go out hunting, he would prepare all the kangaroo meat and take it to grandmother and all the Aunties in the camp.

My brother and my cousins would also go maronning. They'd bring the marons back and share that up. And we had the potatoes. And he had his favourite dogs too. He loved his kangaroo dogs. One was named Laddie, the other one named Rusty. His uncle had a dog too, named Nelson. We used to lend his dog to go hunting, to go get some kangaroos.

Annette

Just coming to the gate here, the memories come back. When we were kids we would all get in the car and we would all want to jump in the middle, especially at night because you would have to open the gate! We would all be scared. We would all race to get in the middle so we would not have to get out.

Yvonne

Yes, I remember a couple of babies born here.

My Aunty Pauline, because she did not like going to hospitals, I could hear Uncle Mervyn comes running one night, calling my mother's name, 'Janie, Janie, quick, have you got some scissors? Pauline is having a baby!'

So mum would get up and go over there with granny to help deliver the baby.

Yvonne

I mean, I am proud of mum and dad. They did the right thing that way, you know. We were not taken away. I know mum used to say when someone in a big new car would come she would say 'go away, hide'. Sometimes we did not get the message, but we are still here.

PICTURED

LEFT TO RIGHT: Clem (Bill) Collard and Jane Hill, parents of nine children including Yvonne and Annette Garlett.

The drain

Wellington Dam is the largest dam in the south west. It gets its water from the Collie River catchment and feeds irrigation channels on the coastal plain.

One of those irrigation channels was a lifeline for the gravel pit mob.

When the families moved to the gravel pit, they had no amenities. It was just a campsite. But running alongside their new home base was a channel, or a drain, as they called it. This drain was intended to irrigate farms in the Burekup region, but for the Noongar families living on the gravel pit, it was their only source of water.

PICTURED

The drain.

Annette

“

Not sure if it was here or another area where I was swimming in the creek and my head went under. My aunty grabbed me by the hair and pulled me out of the water. It was a close call.

We lived up there at the camps until 1968. That was before we moved and I was still at high school. I used to catch the bus from here to go to Bunbury High.

Yvonne and I started high school and were ones of the only ones of the few Noongars there.

One of my old teachers said, ‘I’ll get you a job at the Cronshaws [manchester store]’. But they decided the camp was too dirty, no running water or anything, no baths, so I couldn’t stay there.

So I went and stayed with the teacher and her family at Eaton and went to work from there. And then I went with another family out at Gelorup and I used to bike into town for work.

If I wanted a job, I had to leave the family and the camp, but I got too homesick and came back to the family just before we moved to Waterloo.

”

PICTURED

LEFT TO RIGHT: Yvonne and Annette Garlett.

PICTURED

OPPOSITE (LEFT TO RIGHT): Korrine Bennell, Dellas Yarran and Lera Bennell (seated).

The pipeline crossing

Nestled in between Roelands Mission and the home camp in Burekup is a section of the Collie River that is crossed by a pipeline to this day.

This pipe was never meant to be a bridge, but it served as such for the gravel pit kids.

They would use the pipeline crossing as a short cut to visit the children up at the mission.

The waterway beneath the pipeline crossing provided opportunities for endless swims, adventure, and even a few close calls for the kids. It was also a much loved and appreciated source of bush tucker.

Annette

“I remember here at the river and pipeline, as little kids, we used to walk across there, which was kinda scary and we used to, my brother and cousins, go down diving for marrons as well. They would take them back and cook them and share them up between the families. So they did not eat it all themselves and they only caught what was needed.

It’s lovely being back. It brings back childhood memories and I feel at peace being here. I think that’s what it was like years ago. We could roam, we would walk all the way up here. I remember one day we walked all the way up to the mission and our parents were running all around looking for us. It was the freedom to wander, the freedom to walk around.”

PICTURED

The pipeline crossing.


In honour of
Charles and Rachel Hill
whom together raised 14 children
mainly on the banks of the Collie River
here in Burekup
They lived and contributed to the area
throughout the 1950's and 1960's
"A strong Nyungar family"

Isla

Oh, I have good memories! Like the water, plenty of water to swim in and walking on the pipeline. That was very interesting. And diving for marrons. And at night we used to go for cobblers. That's what we lived on.

There was a swinging bridge not far from the house. Girls used to go across and the boys used to wait till we got to the middle. They would swing it and we would all end up in the water. They thought it was funny but we didn't, cos it was quite a way to fall! But it didn't last long, that bridge — too many of us! The boys, you know, were a bit rough … so that ended the swinging bridge! But then they put this in (the pipeline crossing), so that was good. Cos we just walked across there, no worries … no problem whatsoever.

We weren't meant to use the bridge, we used it as a short cut to go to the mission. Or else we would go up the road and walk across in the shallows, to play with the kids. We would go and exchange them damper for fruits, cos they loved damper and we loved the fruit and we couldn't get fruits so they gave us the fruits. We got to know them and we still know a lot of them now, today. Some of them married into the family.

When we were little, we were told, 'Behave or we will put you in the mission!' Cos we thought it was just like somewhere where the kids were taken because they had no parents. We didn't know that they were taken away. But in later years, we found that those poor little kids … They used to say, 'Oh, when we saw you with your parents we used to say "wish we were over there with those little kids with their mum and dad". The workers used to say to them 'Yeah, but you know what? You got a lovely house here, sheltered and everything. Why would you need to go over there?' And they said, 'because they got love. Their mum and dad love them'.

We used to go to church there. They used to come and pick us up in a little bus and take us up for church on Sunday night. And we got to know a lot of the kids … but a lot of them have passed on now. It's really sad, because they were lost. You know? They didn't know how to live … and they didn't know how to love because they didn't get any love. I see them today, too, and it's so sad. They never married, a lot of them. Just broken people. Oh, we were sad. We wanted to be there with them but we couldn't. But we used to go meet them after school and play sport with them.

PICTURED

OPPOSITE (LEFT TO RIGHT): Yvonne Garlett, Jennifer Quartermaine and Annette Garlett.
ABOVE: Isla Bennell.

The Burekup general store

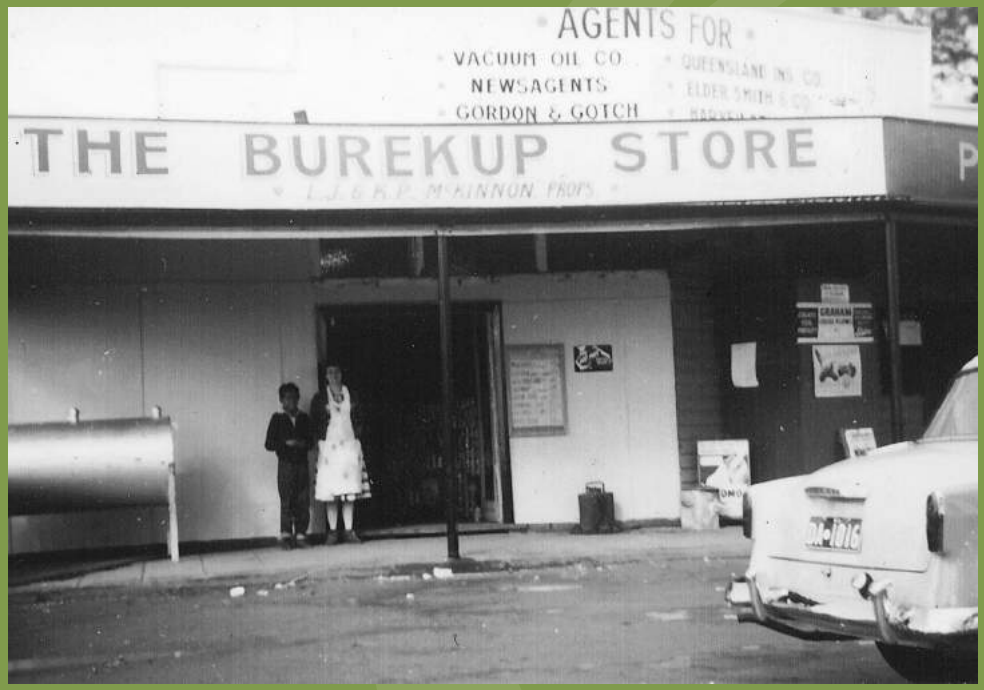
In 2014 the Burekup general store celebrated its 100th anniversary. The descendants of Charles and Rachel Hill (née Abraham) made sure they went back for the reunion.

The shop features largely in their memories of Burekup, as does the shopkeeper who ran a tight 'book', or system of credit.

Even when family members moved to other towns for seasonal work, they would still get their supplies from the Burekup general store.

Gail

What I remember about the shop, mum would write us a list and we'd knock on the door at the back and ask if we could get a few groceries. Mrs McKinnon was her name [the shopkeeper]. I found her to be okay. She let us book up. But she could be stern!



PICTURED

LEFT: Photo of the Burekup Store.
RIGHT: Harry Bennell.

Lera

When we did move away from Burekup, we could come back to buy our stores, buy a huge box of stores. She knew dad would come back and pay. This shop was the only place you could cash your cheques. She would take her share and then let us take the balance.

Annette

Mum used to get our clothes and lots of things from that shop. Always COD — 'cash on delivery'. She'd send us away and buy clothes for the boys, and the boys would never like them!

I also remember that she got this beautiful dinner set. She used to get it out for special occasions. I still have what's left of it … a few dinner plates. It came from that shop all those years ago — COD.

Burekup/Waterloo schools

For most Australians in the 50's and 60's, being able to send your children to school was a right, not a privilege. But for Noongar families, it was mostly discretionary.

Even though the families were living in a makeshift camp on a farmer's gravel pit, they were determined to send their children to the local schools to be educated.

The children often did not have the right clothes or shoes, nor did they always have food or money for lunch, but that did not dampen their enthusiasm to attend school and learn.

Not even an attempt by the Waterloo Parents and Citizen's Association to have them banned kept them away.

They mostly have fond memories of Burekup primary school. They even returned for the school's centenary celebrations and they have their names proudly engraved on commemorative bricks in the school grounds.

PICTURED

OPPOSITE (LEFT TO RIGHT): Lera Bennell, Isla Bennell, Yvonne Garlett, Annette Garlett and Jennifer Quartermaine.


NOEL
04

Burekup school

Isla

“I was eight years old when I started here, and I stayed here until grade school finished.

This school was beautiful, because we lived in Pingelly in the wheatbelt and mainly the farmers were — this is a bad word but this is what we called them — ‘rednecks’. They didn’t care for the Aboriginal people in the way that they should have and then we come down here and it was just like another country. The people were so lovely!

We never went back to live in Pingelly. We said no every time dad went back when he had to go shearing. ‘You can go by yourself, we’re staying!’

You know, we didn’t want to go back to ‘nigger nigger pull the trigger’ because they never did that here.”

PICTURED

LEFT TO RIGHT: Annette Garlett, Yvonne Garlett and Jennifer Quartermaine.

Isla

I went to Bunbury when I was fourteen and started work at St John of God with the nuns in the habits and it was lovely.

We always come back because they have reunions and stuff. We know everybody and we still see them, so it's really good. Still all friends.

We used to pick potatoes, we'd go from school, down the river down there, in the paddocks. We'd help our parents picking the potatoes, if we didn't we'd be sent home…on your way, they'd say, if you're not going to work, go home!

But we'd walk all the way to the school. We didn't worry.

The only lot that come around to see us was our Grandfathers' family, Charlie Hill and all his siblings and their children, so there was a big mob of us.

There was only one school, Brookton. I wouldn't go to school, I used to stand behind the tree when the bus come and my brother used to cry for me to get on that bus and go to school. I used to say, 'no I'm not going to school!' I'd rather go home to my mum and get a flogging than go to school and be called names. So I never wanted to go up that way and live.

Waterloo school

Gail

November 4, 1969, the Daily News headline says: 'Aboriginal children banned from school'. The story started, 'Four Aboriginal children have been sent home from Waterloo school because of lice in their hair.'

This was because I was going to Waterloo school at the time and my sister and brother, Chris, Jenny and my cousin Wayne, we got banned from school because of head lice and we had some sores at the time. But we didn't have any running water, so we had to cart water. So we were kind of banned because the P&C had a meeting and you know how things go at that time.

Annette

I remember going to a meeting with mum, with the principal. And then the newspapers came along, the South West Times, so mum and grandmother complained in there about how the kids couldn't go to school because there wasn't any proper water here (on the reserve), and then almost immediately, the Department of Native Welfare put a bore in so we could have water.

Our mum was quite a strong woman and she was able to do that.

Gail

Another thing I wanted to mention was being at Waterloo school was great, having us Noongars there, even though there was only four of us, made the difference in the sports carnival and they said that they only won it because we were there because they never won one before!

The bridge

When Charles and Rachel Hill (née Abraham) lived in Pingelly, they worked hard to buy their own land. They were deeply religious people and Charles even built a small church that Noongars from all around would visit.

But they left all that behind for the promise of a better life in the south west.

Burekup was home to Charles Hill. He took his family there looking for work and equality. He initially ended up seeking shelter under a bridge on the Collie River.

The river has always been an important lifeline for Noongar families.

Like generations before them, the river provided them with food and water. And even after they found more permanent places to live, they would return often to spend countless hours fishing and camping along the banks.

Lera

“I just remember as a kid, we used to walk up here, along that river at night with mum and dad and go fishing. We would be carrying our blankets and lanterns and we’d sleep there while they were fishing.

I remember mum got bitten by a cobbler one night and we had to take her to hospital to get a needle.

We would get out in that paddock, the whole family, mum, dad, grannies, uncles, aunties, cousins, and we would pick spuds from morning till night. And during the day we would grab a lot of spuds, come down to this river, come here and make a fire. And get the pan and have that real dripping that we used to buy and mum will make a damper and we would fry the fresh spuds, which was just awesome.

We would have a good feed and maybe have a swim and then get out there and do some more work. It was awesome. It was beautiful. You know, we didn’t have a care in the world, we were free, and life was just beautiful and we just did the best we could with what we had.

We survived off this river at that time. But people were friendly. They might have had their hiccups about Noongar people, but you know we, as kids, didn’t see that much. This river was a very big part of our lives and this bridge was really good because it provided shelter for us, too.”

Annette

“That used to be a good spot to go swimming. All uncles and cousins used to walk from the camp to go swimming there. But the river changed after the big flood in 1964.

I remember one day all the girl cousins were walking up the river from the bridge, towards the camp, and Gloria caught a marron on the way. She hid it because she was scared of what the farmers could say.”

PICTURED

LEFT TO RIGHT: Korrine Bennell and Lera Bennell.

Waterloo and Brickhill

In 1967 a national referendum was held and Australians voted overwhelmingly to amend the Constitution to include Aboriginal people in the census and allow the Commonwealth to end official discrimination. It was around this momentous point in history that the Noongar families living in Burekup were about to make the move away from a local farmer's gravel pit and into their very own homes.

The Department of Native Welfare of Western Australia built two state-owned houses on a swampy reserve on the outskirts of Waterloo.

Rachel Hill (née Abraham), now aged in her 60s, was given access to her very first home. It was the first time she had ever lived in a place with windows, a door, and power. Her daughter Jane and son-in-law Clem were given the house next door.

Many members of her extended family made the move with her, taking up residence at Waterloo.

PICTURED

BACK ROW (L-R): Jane Collard, Megan Allan, Abbie and Douglas Hill, Chris Collard, Lyndon and Glenn Garlett, Jackson and Cheryl Hill.
FRONT ROW (L-R): Kristina Jetta, Kassie Allan, Samuel Hill, Yvonne and Annette Garlett, and Gail Hill.

Waterloo

Yvonne

“It was good memories, because when we moved from the camp, you know, we had a front door, back door, bathtub, turn the tap on, toilet, veranda to sit on. It was really nice with our grandmother on the other side. We still had family living with us.

When we moved from Burekup to here, I already had my partner, so I moved in with mum and dad, and I remember we would walk from here all the way up the railway line back to the Burekup shop to do our shopping.

My eldest son, he was only a little fella … like, just walking … he would try and run off to the water near the house and my mum would sing out ‘Clem, get that baby!’

He (my son) was brought up on the fresh milk from the dairy farm near here. We used to get the old flagons and get milk. Right down to this day, he still drinks the fresh milk — and he is in his 40’s.

Yeah, and with these flies we used to sit on the veranda and wave the flies away and people would go past and think we waved at them, and so, waved back at us.”

Gail

“Well, to me it was like, you know, I hadn’t lived in a house before. This was like ‘WOW!’, having our own house. So yes, it was a big move. It was a big deal for all of us.

Just having a toilet was great! And just having doors, having some privacy!

When we moved here, the whole family moved here, so that was mum and dad and us nine kids. Our two oldest siblings, Rex and Yvonne, had their partners and a child each, so it would have been pretty packed.”

Chris

“To me, it means the first house with the plumbing, you know, water. Well, supposed to be, but we ended up getting water from the tank.

Just moving from a camp area to a house was a big buzz. And having electricity was a big plus, coming from somewhere where there was none. Just to have a fridge and the odd TV coming from where there was none.”

Gail

“Well, it holds significant memories for us. It was kind of the last place where we lived with our mum because once we moved to town in 1971, three months after that she passed away, so we hold this as a special place for memory of mum.”

Chris

“When you look back, the whole family was there and, even though we moved into a new building, we still had the culture, where we wanted to go into the bush, catch the odd kangaroo, and have food culture, that kind of thing.”

PICTURED

Photos provided by families.

Brickhill

The estuary

On the banks of the Australind estuary, just north of Bunbury, two giant, majestic old trees grow on the side of the road.

The trees mark the spot of many precious family memories. It was a favourite spot for weekend getaways and holidays away from the gravel pit and reserve.

It was where the family would spend nights around the fire and camp under the stars. Their days would be filled with swimming and fishing. They enjoyed good times and good food, caught straight from the estuary.

When they look back now, they realise their grandparents were showing them traditional ways to make spears and hunt for crabs.

PICTURED

LEFT TO RIGHT: Ethan and Dellas Yarran, Korrine, Brandon and Lera Bennell.

Lera

“This was a special place for the whole family and still is — the estuary where we camped under the stars and lived on seafood for many days at a time. We used to just camp there and have seafood all weekend. That estuary was holidays. We did not see any other Noongars around here. This was in the early 50’s.

We used to come in from Burekup, from that campsite where we were, near the gravel pit.

We used to watch our grandparents and parents, and the boys. They would get a forked stick. They would cut one off a tree. Get one stick with a fork in it and that was the way we would catch crabs. Or the boys would tie a bit of iron on the end and make a makeshift gidgee to catch the crabs.

When I think back, it was a traditional way of catching the crabs.”

Yvonne

I remember they would sit there all day crabbing, from afternoon to late in the evening. Then we would go back to Burekup. It was a family day, and that went on for years. And the same when we moved from there to Waterloo. Even when we moved to Bunbury, it was the same. We would go out as a family.

But then as the family got divided, it would only be the smaller family then. But, you know, the history was like it was our free time crabbing and it was a fun time.

We used to walk out there barefoot and catch crabs, sometimes by hand or with a gidgee. That's how we used to catch them and we would take a bucket or tub out there to put them in. I got bitten quite a few times.

We would take them back and light a fire out there and we would sort of get an old tin. If we didn't have one, we would find one at the dump and make a fire on the estuary there and cook the crabs, just boil them up there and sit down and eat them.

Mum used to put a stick on the crabs to pick them up. She didn't touch the crabs. She didn't put a hole in them. She would get a stick off the tree and use that to catch them. She was taught that from her dad and it's only lately that we sort of made those connections, that it was a traditional way of doing it.

PICTURED

ABOVE: Bennell family.
RIGHT: The estuary campsite.

Isla

“When the kids were asleep, me and my brother Ian, because we were the oldest in our family, we would go out and get the crabs, catch them and bring them back and have them cooked by the time the kids woke up. That’s how we lived while we were here for a couple of days. We caught them with wire and just speared them, because we didn’t have money to go and buy the fancy stuff.

We sometimes got bitten — we did a lot of dancing out there! All sorts of dances. Jumping on one another’s back, and all that. You know, scared. Especially the little ones when we took them out. They used to dance around us.

We were all the way along here, right up to the end. Because it was living off here and then we would go to the river and catch our fish. We were sitting pretty good, you know? It was wonderful. We would boil them up in salt water. We would bring our buckets with us, and we would have the fire going and the water boiling and we would go get the crabs because we knew we would catch them. So we would bring them back and just put them in the hot water … and they were lovely. Sweet and fresh as!

There were plenty of crabs in those days. They were everywhere. You couldn’t just walk along, you would be stepping on them. It was so good … until they put that refinery there. Killed them all.”

PICTURED

Isla Bennell.

The old Picton church

The Picton church is the second oldest church building constructed in Western Australia. It's where many of Bunbury's famous pioneers and early settlers have been laid to rest.

What the commemorative plaques and history books don't tell, though, is how significant the church is to Noongar people from the region.

Some ancestors of Charles Hill are also interred in the historic church grounds.

The old Picton church holds many memories, both happy and sad, for the descendants of Charles and Rachel Hill (née Abraham).

PICTURED

LEFT TO RIGHT: Yvonne Garlett, Annette Garlett, Jennifer Quartermaine, Lera Bennell and Isla Bennell.


ST. MARKS ANGLICAN
CHURCH

PICTURED

Isla Bennell on her wedding day at Queens garden.

Isla

This place would have been a camping ground for our ancestors because of the fresh spring water down there and the Preston River nearby.

Noongar families camped all along that river and I believe this place would have provided higher grounds for shelter in the wintertime. There is a lot of bush tucker here. The fish, turtles, wild ducks and other animals like the kangaroo and possums.

I got married here under the big Moreton Bay fig tree. I chose this place because of the peace and beauty.

Lera

This is one of the first churches in Bunbury and a lot of our old families, our ancestors, were born in Bunbury and they were married in this church and buried here. It is a special place to us to come back to. We remember that our family came from here. That's on my grandfather Charlie Hill's side. It's a beautiful spot.

It's an old weatherboard building, very strong wood and it's painted a chocolate brown. The style and design is so unique to the era of the time it was built in the 1800's. It is beautiful and when you look at it you can't help but smile. It's stood the weather and the time. To still be standing … and it's got a lot of stories within these four walls.

It's so inviting and you can actually sit around and chat and have picnics and barbecues and remember, you know, go back in a journey time or the journey that your old pops and nanas went through.

Annette

“It’s a special place because a few of us got married there. My brother and sister got married there and also myself got married in that park. I had all my family there and it was the middle of June. It was raining all day, but it stopped raining, it cleared and the sun come out. Yvonne’s daughter, my niece, she was my bridesmaid. She dyed her hair and it turned out green. And my little wedding bouquet, my other niece was playing with it and she broke it in half! So, yes, those are the memories from the old Picton church.

I used to live near here, and used to bring the nephews and nieces down to feed the ducks.”

Lera

“We bring our kids here because they need to know and understand the impact of colonisation and how they came and married into our ancestors and started to form all these families and the children who were born of those relationships. We are part of that. But to know that we are still here, we survived, we are still around and we ain’t going nowhere. And we have taught our kids to stand up and say ‘Yeah, this is home, this is where we belong and we are going to stay here’.”

PICTURED

TOP TO BOTTOM: Yvonne Garlette, Jennifer Quartermaine, Annette Bennell, Lera Bennell and Isla Bennell.

The Bunbury jetties

For decades, they were prominent landmarks in the south west — Bunbury's old timber jetty that served the port and another jetty nearby that was a popular swimming and fishing spot for locals.

The jetties have since gone, claimed by the sea and deterioration, but the good times and memories associated with them hold fast.

Koombana Bay, where the jetties stood, has always been a culturally important place for the descendants of the Hill family.

They visited the old timber jetties, and the beach, often. Their ancestors had fished and camped at the site for thousands of years.

As children, they would travel from Burekup to attend swimming lessons at the jetty. They all received swimming certificates and lifesaving certificates at the beach.

PICTURED

TOP LEFT: Bunbury Port.
ABOVE (LEFT TO RIGHT): Dellas Yarran, Brandon Bennell, Ethan Yarran and Korrine Bennell.
BOTTOM FAR LEFT: Dellas Yarran.
BOTTOM LEFT: Henry Bennell.

The Back Beach

The Hill family descendants chose Bunbury's Back Beach as their final stop on their commemorative journey.

It was a memorable end to a remarkable couple of days. And in a way, it brought their journey back full circle.

As children, their parents took them to this beach to see the ocean for the very first time.

They grew up as river kids, swimming in creeks and drains. They had never seen this much water — or the power of waves!

When they became parents, they brought their children here. And then, when their grannies came along, they too were taken to this beach.

It's now one of their favourite past times … for all generations.

PICTURED

LEFT TO RIGHT: Korrine, Lera and Brandon Bennell, and Dellas and Ethan Yarran.

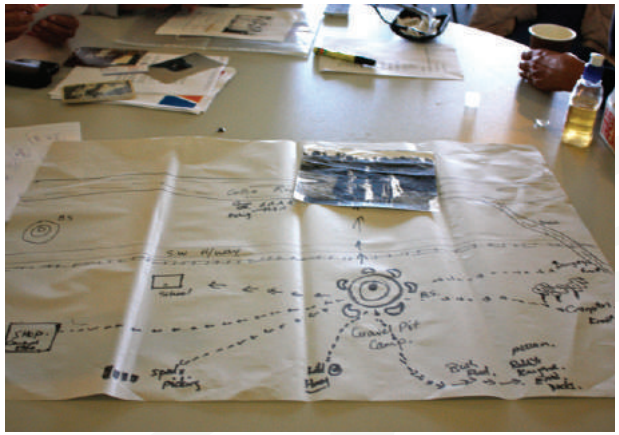
Lera

The beach just means to me: fresh, clean, fish, crabs, crayfish and prawn. It means beauty.

It's just awesome that you can come from Pingelly and the dry sticks, travel through the bush, and end up here at this beach. It's unbelievable.

And I thank my grandparents for bringing us to his country, bringing us home to find that place of belonging. Where we really belong here in Bunbury. This is our home.

I remember the first time I saw the beach. We were standing up at the lighthouse looking out over the ocean. We were just speechless, I think, just shocked speechless.



Isla

I just wanted to tell you about the first time we got to the beach, I was eight and we, as a family, we were standing up there, all our family.

First time we had seen the ocean. We went mad because we had never seen so much water in our life! And the longer we stood there, the more the waves started getting higher. We started getting scared, we were all standing behind dad going 'ooohhh … too much water'.

Because we were used to the little creeks and the dams, but the ocean was something else.

Annette

I remember we went into Bunbury, the Back Beach and the waves, it was the first time I had seen the waves!

My cousin Vernon, he had these little shoes and they fell in the waves and I ran in to grab them but my mother grabbed me and pulled me back to save me from being washed away by the waves!

Lera

Our grandmother went from living under the stars, to under the bridge, to the gravel pit and the dairy shed. She would have been in her 60s before she got a house. She looked after all those generations and she saw us go from the bush to the suburbs.

Pop died in 1966, she lived on a few years later. She finally got her house, but didn't have her life partner.

PICTURED

LEFT: Family History workshops.
OPPOSITE PAGE (LEFT TO RIGHT): Lera Bennell, Annette Garlett and Yvonne Garlett.

The 'grannies'

Dellas Yarran

I am a proud Noongar and Yamatji woman born and raised in Bunbury. It has allowed me to stay connected to a strong family and maintain cultural links to country.

To walk on the grounds where my mum, aunties and family walked makes you smile and gives you a sense of belonging. My mother has told me many stories of growing up in Burekup, Bunbury, Pingelly and other surrounds. It's so important to share these stories with my children so they can tell their children one day.

Mum has been an inspiration to me. To know the struggles of where she came from, the Burekup camps, a house made of tin and no running water, and surviving the harshest conditions. This made them stronger and made us stronger too. Mum always taught me to cherish and be thankful of what you have, but to always remember where you came from.

One of my favourite places is the estuary. When I was a kid, I remember spending all day out there crabbing. I was happy because all the family was there — Pop, mum, aunties, uncles and all my cousins. Aunty Rhona would make the fire and Pop would tell us stories as we waited for the crabs to cook in the drum on the open fire. There was always enough feed for everyone. When we finished, Pop made sure we had to clean up and leave the place exactly how we found it. On the way back, uncle would rev his car up and beat us all home, ha ha.

We all didn't realise we were making memories, we just knew we were having lots of fun.

Now, today, the best things in life are the people you love, the places you've been and all of the memories you've made along the way.

PICTURED

Dellas Yarran.

Message for all our grannies

Love our nannas and pops and love listening to the stories they tell us. We respect them and learn from them. They are special and we are very proud of them all.

Ethan Yarran

My nana is an inspiration to me. Her history is amazing. My nana, Lera Bennell, she has stories that still surprise me. When I went on the trip, I didn't know what was happening. I thought we were just staying and having a yarn [talk] but instead we went on a field trip seeing all the places my nana spent her years as a kid and teenager. All of the time, my nana and her sisters never left each other. They were together all the time.

My nana still tells me about Burekup. She spent a lot of her money at that shop, buying lollies, cooldrinks, biscuits, you name it. She also used to camp out on the riverside to catch cobblers and marrons. She said her dad used to tell campfire stories and if she and sisters were naughty, Pop would grab a switchy stick to flog them with it. Nana loved athletics. She had a good teacher at school. His name was Mr John Brown.

Nana taught me a lot of things about the bush and I know all the different wildflowers and birds. She took me to Wellington Dam too. I love my nana and there is one thing I know, I got to learn more from my nana before she goes [meaning before she passes on].

My Nan's always said the greatest gift of all is LOVE.

Brandon Bennell

I am very proud of my grandmother Lera Bennell. She is the strongest woman at her age I know. It was a refreshing journey on the Bush Babies project to see where and how she lived as a child growing up around the region. It makes me proud as a grandson of how much she withstood in her childhood.

I now have great faith in how I will be successful in whatever I pursue because I know that the blood in my veins are the genes of an intelligent, strong-hearted woman, who against all odds achieved an incredible amount in her life span. She has made my life so much better.

Korrine Bennell

I grew up in the greater Bunbury area as the eldest child of Dellas Bennell and Hank Yarran. Dellas is Lera's only daughter. I was often dragged all over the countryside by my parents and grandparents. I remember travelling to Williams via Collie to look at wildflowers and going to Burekup to listen to stories about the old days. I also remember going to swim in the drains, the Collie River, Honeymoon Pool, Koombana Bay and the Back Beach. I remember constant trips to Ferguson Valley and Dardanup to buy fresh fruit for the nanas. I also remember having to go along with family on fishing and crabbing expeditions in Bunbury, Eaton, Busselton, Nannup and Dunsborough. I also remember family reunions at Pumphreys Bridge and the Wheatbelt, although I constantly complained as a child about travelling here and there.

It wasn't until I got older that I realised how much cultural pride, knowledge of customs, heritage, stories, family links and Aboriginal identity were passed down to me through these long road trips and without them I would be lost.

Glenn Garlett

Nan would tell us that when they would go spud picking and go crabbing, it would be a family outing. They were hard times but happy times, plenty of space.

Kassie Allan

Pop said they had old cars that didn't go fast. They had no electricity, no bathrooms. Pop had to carry water from the creek.

Cheryl Hill

They lived in a camp with no water or electricity and played games at night like chasey and swim in the rivers and channels and the only time they went inside was when it was raining or to sleep.

Fabric of memory

As well as collecting stories from the past to preserve them for future generations, another important part of CAN's *Bush Babies* project is bringing people together to learn new skills.

In Bunbury, CAN hosted community photo sharing days, photography lessons and craft workshops, including eco-dyeing. This involves using plant material, such as native leaves and flowers, to create beautiful natural patterns on fabric. The prints the women created were so stunning that they wanted to incorporate them into family keepsakes.

The group came up with the idea of creating baby blankets using fabric prints of treasured family photos, recycled materials and eco-dyed patterns. The blankets they created are not just keepsakes, but living histories.

Here, the women tell you in their own words what their blankets mean to them.

Lera Bennell

“My patchwork rug is about my parents, my brothers and sisters, and also about my daughter and her children.

MY FAMILY – MY LIFE

My grandparents and parents survived the impact of colonisation, white settlement in our country, Australia.

They were all born in the bush where they lived with their families and relations.

This rug shows my mum and dad. Dad was in Carollup Mission, Stolen Generation, and with youngest sister Violet sitting on mum’s lap at Burekup.

A photo of my brothers and sisters on the ‘block’ in Pingelly, shows the ‘block’ where we lived in tin camps near all our aunties, uncles, cousins, etc. We lived together in many places between Pingelly and Burekup, but living in Burekup prepared us for the move to Bunbury.

My photos are of me, my daughter Dellas, my son-in-law Hank and my grandchildren, Korrine, Brandon and Ethan, dad and the grannies.

There are also pictures of my family, mum and dad, brothers and sisters having Christmas together as we did every year. Family gatherings in the bush were very important to us. Kept us together. Photos of me taken in the bush and near the ocean, also my career path.

P.S. I remember sitting at the Burekup campsite with my mum, granny, aunties and sisters cutting up the old clothes, coats, jumpers, etc. for them to sew patch rugs for us to keep warm in the winter time.”

Isla Bennell

“My rug displays pictures of my parents, my brothers and sisters, and my daughter Cheryl. The photos reflect my parents living at our first home in Bunbury, looking very happy and relaxed, after the long journey from their place of birth in the Beverley and Wandering bushlands.

Our family values were always keeping close, showing our love, care and support for each other by having our Christmas dinners and also Easter time together. Family gatherings in the bush were very important to us as we spent lots of years living in the bush.

The photos show how my daughter gave me so much joy and happiness during her growing up years.

I thank my grandfather, Charlie Hill and grandmother Rachel Hill (née Abraham), and my parents for bringing us home to his country, to find a better life for us. Moving from the wheatbelt town of Pingelly to the Collie River at Burekup and the ocean at Bunbury was like paradise.”

PICTURED

LEFT: Isla Bennell showcasing her family rug with her niece Korrine Bennell.
TOP RIGHT: Isla Bennell and her daughter Cheryl.

Acknowledgements

CAN would like to thank all the people who were involved in the Bush Babies project for sharing their stories and for their commitment and support.

The archival images used in this publication were provided by the families.

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Book design by
TaylorSparks.com.au

PICTURED

The bridge where the family once camped.

PICTURED

Charles Hill.

This is the story of Charles Hill, his wife Rachel (née Abraham), their 14 children, and subsequent generations, who now comprise much of the Aboriginal population of Bunbury.

It is the story of one Noongar family's struggle to maintain some level of autonomy from government control in the south-west of Western Australia during the 1950's, as told by the direct descendants of Charles and Rachel.

At stake in this struggle was the freedom to move, the freedom to work, and the freedom to maintain possession of their children. They had to fight to maintain elements of traditional life under the increasing pressures of government control over Aboriginal people resulting from the enactment of the 'the 1905 Act' (the *Aborigines Act 1905*) and subsequent *Native Administration Act 1936*, both of which had the explicit purpose of legislating for increased control over the lives of Aboriginal people.

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