Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE4896

Bulger, Violet Josephine

(1900 - 1993)

Born	19000825, Brungle New South Wales Australia
Died	19930731, Canberra Australian Capital Territory Australia
Occupation	Aboriginal Elder

Summary

Violet Josephine Bulger (née Freeman) was among the first Aboriginal children forcibly removed from their families under New South Wales' Aborigines Protection Act, 1909. She raised eight children on her own near Yass after being widowed in 1939 and went on to raise many of her grandchildren. She was respected as an Elder in the Canberra Aboriginal community until her death in 1993.

Details

Aunty Violet Josephine Bulger (née Freeman) was born on 25 August 1900 at the Aboriginal Station, Brungle, New South Wales (NSW). Her Wiradjuri parents, Frederick Freeman, tracker and stockman and Sarah Jane Freeman (née Broughton), midwife, had moved to Brungle from Gundagai where their first two children were born. Brungle was a large managed station in Wiradjuri country near Tumut where the Freemans were a significant family and Fred Freeman was a well-known "Black Tracker" (Read, 2000, p. 56). (Wiradjuri are Australian Aboriginal people "originally from the land that is bordered by the Lachlan, Macquarie and Murrumbidgee rivers in Central New South Wales. The name Wiradjuri means, 'people of the three rivers." See http://about.nsw.gov.au/encyclopedia/article/wiradjuri-people)

As a child Aunty Violet was forcibly removed from her parents under the Aborigines Protection Act 1909 and placed in the Cootamundra Domestic Training Home for Aboriginal Girls. Aunty Violet's daughter, Ngunnawal Elder – Aunty Agnes Shea, described her mother's response when they asked what it had been like in the Girls' Home: "She only told us a couple of things. She said she didn't want to poison our minds. … She said she'd get up at four o'clock in the morning, and she'd have to go and milk the cows with another young girl. She said they had no shoes, and on a cold frosty morning her feet would be nearly frost bitten, and they used to have to wait until the cows urinated so they could stand in it and warm their feet." (Brown, 2007, p. 93). Aunty Agnes said her mother would say, "We went through it. We survived, and we were lucky enough to come home and find our families and our parents" and then she would 'close like a book.' (Brown, 2007, p. 93).

Aunty Violet subsequently spent much of her life working in domestic service apart from one period when she worked as a stockwoman on her traditional lands and assisted her father in rounding up brumbies (*Auslit*, 2011). During the times she worked with her father he taught her to play the autoharp, button accordion and piano accordion.

Aunty Violet was 25 years old when she married Edward Walter 'Vincent' Bulger at Brungle on 13 October 1925. Presbyterian Minister A. Crowther Smith celebrated the wedding; the witnesses were Ada Rose Freeman and Aunty Violet's father, Fred Freeman. Aunty Violet and Vincent Bulger moved to Oak Hill near Yass where they lived in a one-roomed earth floor *gunje* with no electricity or running water in open land on the stock route. For warmth they lined the *gunje's* stringy bark walls with corn bags from the local mill and newspaper supplied by the bread deliveryman. Water for washing and bathing was collected from a local dam. Around 1938 the family were moved to the Hollywood Aboriginal Reserve (commonly referred to as the Hollywood Mission) in Yass where they were provided with improved housing. ("In 1883 the Aborigines Protection Board was established to manage the reserves and control the lives of the estimated 9,000 Aboriginal people in NSW at that time. The Board took over the reserves at Maloga and Warangesda. After the Australian Capital Territory was established in 1911 the Board compelled all Aboriginal people in the Territory (including those who had been granted land for farming) to move to the Egerton Mission Station at Yass. When that mission closed two years later the residents became fringe-dwellers on the outskirts of Yass until another forced move to Hollywood Mission in 1934. The few Aboriginal children who lived in the ACT came under the control of the NSW Protection Board." See

http://www.hreoc.gov.au/social_justice/bth_report/report/ch3.html for more detail.)

At a time when Aboriginal women were not permitted entry to maternity hospitals, Aunty Violet's mother Sarah 'Sal' Freeman (née Broughton) who had been trained as a midwife by a Tumut doctor, taught her daughters midwifery skills so that they could handle emergencies on the reserves where they lived. Many women at the Hollywood Reserve benefited from Aunty Violet's skills.

Vincent Bulger died suddenly on Christmas Eve 1939, leaving Aunty Violet with eight children ranging in age from teenagers to toddlers. She was given special permission to take on domestic work in town. When rheumatic fever forced her to give this up, her second eldest son – Vincent Bulger junior, left school so he could work and support the family. The family was able to stay together at this time thanks to the intervention of the Reserve schoolteacher who encouraged Aunty Violet's eldest daughter, Agnes (now Ngunnawal elder, Aunty Agnes Shea) to bring the preschool siblings to school with her. Once Aunty Violet had recovered, Aunty Agnes recalls "the authorities came and told her she had to be moved off the Mission, because she was now a single mother and she was a bad influence on the rest of the community. So they moved us." (Brown, p. 86. This was clearly the family understanding. To date research has not found a record of any such official policy but unofficial local policies were not unknown on Aboriginal Reserves.)

Aunty Violet and her children moved to Oakhill on the outskirts of Yass where they "managed to build a rudimentary house… Times were tough for a widowed mother with young children." (*Catholic Voice*, September 1993). There was no social welfare provided in those days. Aunty Agnes Shea recalls that "mum was lucky enough to get recognised and respected by the community and was given permission to do domestic work for non-indigenous families by the authorities." (AIATSIS NTRU Conference 2010). Son, Vincent Bulger, laughed when he remembered how they supplemented their diet with what they could catch – "You'd go out and get two rabbit, clean them and salt them and have them for Sunday dinner in the camp oven." (Locke, 2010).

Aunty Violet's eldest child, Walter, was taken away from the family when he was a teenager because the authorities deemed home conditions unsuitable for him. Walter was placed in homes in Goulburn and then Sydney where he died. Aunty Agnes Shea remembers visiting her brother in the homes, and her mother's heartbreak that she was not permitted to care for him at home.

Some of Aunty Violet's family had moved back to the Tumut-Brungle area in the 1940s and she followed them there in the 1970s. Later, during the mid-1980s "as advancing years and ill health took their inevitable toll" (*Catholic Voice*, September 1993), Aunty Violet moved to Canberra where she was respected by the local Ngunnawal people as an Elder. Initially she lived on her own at Isabella Plains, then with her younger son Joseph before moving to Monash where she lived with her daughter Aunty Agnes Shea. Aunty Violet's declining health coincided with health issues for Aunty Agnes who, after family consultation, established her mother at Morling Lodge in Red Hill where the family organised a roster that ensured Aunty Violet had family for company every day. Aunty Agnes says her mother was treated by Morling Lodge staff with as much respect as if she were a queen.

Aunty Violet died in Red Hill, Canberra on 31 July 1993 leaving her five (of eight) surviving children, fifty-six grandchildren, 196 great-grandchildren and fifty great-great-grandchildren. The *Catholic Voice* reported that "the large numbers of people at her funeral, at St Augustine's Church, Yass on Friday 6 August was testimony to the love and respect Violet Bulger inspired." (*Catholic Voice*, September 1993).

Two of Aunty Violet's children are respected Aboriginal Elders and activists. Daughter, Aunty Agnes Shea OAM, is a Ngunnawal elder in the ACT and son Vincent Bulger OAM is a Wiradjuri elder in Tumut NSW (*Koori Mail*, 2007, p. 4). (Wiradjuri Elder Vince Bulger, of Tumut, was awarded a Medal of the Order of Australia (OAM) for service to the community of the Tumut Shire through activities promoting Indigenous culture, tradition and reconciliation, teaching appreciation of the natural environment, and through support for elderly and infirm people. Mr Bulger performs traditional smoking and Welcome to Country ceremonies. He has been a foundation member of the Tumut Shire Council's Aboriginal Liaison Committee for many years. He is also a current foundation member of the Brungle/Tumut Aboriginal Land Council and a former ATSIC regional councillor. The subject of a documentary 'A Walk With Uncle Vince – A Matter of Respect' by J Walker and M Campigli, Mr Bulger speaks to schools and community groups about Aboriginal culture. He organises housing, transport and shopping for older Aboriginal people.)

In December 1993 under the ACT Public Place Names Act 1989, a 5787m2 park between Marungul Avenue, Patten Street and Samuels Crescent in the then new ACT suburb Ngunnawal was named Violet's Park in Aunty Violet's honour.

Published resources

Site Exhibition
From Lady Denman to Katy Gallagher: A Century of Women's Contributions to Canberra, Australian Women's Archives Project, 2013,
http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/ldkg

Book Section
Agnes Bulger Shea, Brown, Carl, 2007

Freedom and Control on the Southern Institutions, New South Wales, 1879-1909, Read, Peter, 2000

Newspaper Article
A Life Lived for Love of Family, 1993

Honours for Two Elders, 2007

Public Place Names Act, 1993,
http://www.legislation.act.gov.au/gaz/1993-S263/19931215-34935/pdf/1993-S263.pdf

Magazine article
Deaths - Bulger, Mr Vincent, 1940

Resource Section
Stolen Generations Factsheet, 2012,
http://reconciliaction.org.au/nsw/education-kit/stolen-generations/

Wiradjuri People,
http://about.nsw.gov.au/encyclopedia/article/wiradjuri-people/

Bringing Back the Inland Fish, Locke, Sarina, 2010,
http://www.abc.net.au/rural/content/2010/s2823285.htm

Meet Some Elders - Agnes (Bulger) Shea OAM, 2010,
http://www.aiatsis.gov.au/ntru/nativetitleconference/conf2010/culturalprogram.html

Report
Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Report: Bringing them Home, Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families, Australian Human Rights Commission, 1997,
http://www.hreoc.gov.au/social_justice/bth_report/report/ch3.html

Book
Aboriginal Women's Heritage - Brungle and Tumut, Hamilton, Fiona and New South Wales Department of Environment and Conservation, 2004,
http://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/nswcultureheritage/AboriginalWomensHeritageBrungleTumut.htm

Resource
Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Author Details
Niki Francis

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