Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE5982

Walley, Mavis

(1921 - 1982)

Born	19210526, Carnamah Western Australia Australia
Died	19820322, Dowerin Western Australia Australia
Occupation	Photographer

Summary

Mavis Walley was a Ballardong Noongar Indigenous woman who lived in the southern parts of Western Australia. An amateur photographer, Walley documented the lives of the Aboriginal people with whom she lived on a reserve in Goomalling, taking thousands of photographs between the 1950s to 1970s. These images offer a significant and rare perspective within the historical archive – a view of Aboriginal life from an Aboriginal person that is neither anthropological nor ethnographic in style. Walley used a Box Brownie camera.

Details

Mavis Walley was a Ballardong Noongar Indigenous woman who lived in the southern parts of Western Australia. She photographed the lives of the Aboriginal people who lived with her on the reserve in Goomalling.

She was born on 26 May 1921. Her father was Martin Walley, a labourer, and her mother was Julia Reece. Mavis' grandfather on her mother's side was a white American named Edward Reece. He married an Aboriginal woman named Nancy Bangalan, who was from Esperance. Mavis's grandfather on her father's side was John Walley, who married an Aboriginal woman named Tundap, and both of them came from Bunbury. .However, Martin's mother's father was the son of a European man and an Aboriginal woman named Watbanga who had been living with her family at the Benedictine Mission in New Norcia (Biographical Dictionary, Carnamah Historical Society and Museum).

In 1945, Mavis married Hubert Earnest Phillips, and the couple went on to have 11 children. They lived and worked on the Smith family farm, where her husband worked as a slaughterman and Mavis helped out and raised their children until, like the rest of their community, they were moved to the Aboriginal reserve in Goomalling.

It is unclear as to when or how Mavis received a Box Brownie camera, and it is speculated that she may have been taking photographs as early as the 1930s. What is definitely known, however, is that despite not being able to read or write, she became an enthusiastic amateur photographer who took thousands of photographs of the people of the Goomalling community, where she lived in the 1950s to the 1970s. At that time it was practically unheard of for an Aboriginal person to own a camera. Her daughter, Dallas Phillips, said that Mavis took more than one thousand photographs during this period, of which 325 negatives have survived. These are now part of the Mavis Walley Collection, held at the State Library of Western Australia. All 325 images have been digitised. Her daughter has described her mother as 'walk[ing] around with her old camera and tak[ing] pictures. She didn't look through the eye piece, she just clicked away' (Laurie).

Mavis Walley's photographs are documentary in style. They are carefully and deliberately posed but they do not appear 'staged' or in any sense idealised. Rather, they capture her people as they really were in their daily lives. Subjects include 'women on wildflower-picking outings, beaming children in their Sunday best after their first Holy Communion, men chopping wood, a girl dreamily leaning on a car bonnet and healthy toddlers sitting in the scrub' (Laurie). Mavis may not have received any instruction in the use of the camera, nor the dark room, but she appears to have had a natural flair for composition, and her images tell stories of immense human interest, with many bespeaking a wicked sense of humour.

This is in contrast to those taken by the European photographers of the time, many of whom were missionaries or teachers. Damien Webb, the Indigenous liaison officer with the State Library of Western Australia, has noted that their photographs were ethnographic and anthropological in style and were 'agenda-laden,' depicting Aboriginal people in one of two ways: 'as traditional spirits or savages, or as people in missions, dressed to the nines and doing writing exercises' (Laurie). For the curators of the museum the most remarkable thing about the collection of Walley's photographs is that 'it offers a perspective rare in our historical archives: a view of Aboriginal life through the eyes of indigenous people' *(The Australian)*. For the CAN community, the prime significance of the collection is that it has enabled many to 'reconnect with relatives' and to affirm the strength and resilience of their people. The photographs show precisely how much joy and fun existed in the community even when they were living at the reserve *(The Australian)*.

For Mavis, life did not end on the reserve. In the mid-1970s it was closed and the Aboriginal community was moved on, this time to state houses with running water. And some were even able to claim pensions. Mavis Walley died in 1982, aged sixty-one.

Collections

Mavis Walley (Phillips) Collection, State Library of Western Australia

Events

1940 - 1979
Active as amateur photographer

Published resources

Resource Section
Mavis Walley/Philips, Carnamah Historical Society and Museum and North Midlands Project, http://www.carnamah.com.au/bio/mavis-walley

Goomalling Yarns: Rare Photographs Capture Life on an Aboriginal Reserve, http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/booksandarts/goomalling-yarns/6640758

Mavis Walley Collection: Glimpse of Indigenous Life as it Really was Lived, Laurie, Victoria, http://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/indigenous/mavis-walley-collection-glimpse-of-indigenous-life-as-it-really-was-liv

Newspaper Article
Mavis Walley Collection: Indigenous Life before Ravages of Welfare, Rothwell, Nicholas

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