



← Far left: AWB studio portrait of Linda Fernando, 1920s;  
Reproduced with permission of George Rose, Walgett

← AWB studio portrait of Ida Fernando;  
Reproduced with permission of George Rose, Walgett

In June 1977, the official records of the former New South Wales Aborigines Welfare Board were transferred to the care of State Records, the NSW Government archives institution. Along with the Board's correspondence, reports and ledgers, there were approximately 1000 loosely stored black and white photographs of Aboriginal people taken between 1919 and 1966. These images are the surviving photographic records of the NSW Aborigines Welfare Board

# Official Records / Personal Lives

The Aborigines Welfare Board photographs do not provide a complete picture of Indigenous life from the 1920s to the 1960s. Some people and places are represented by many photographs; others by a few or none at all. However, the process of meeting with Indigenous communities to research, develop and present the exhibition has begun to bring new life to those historical records that have survived.

Although little contextual information accompanied the photographs on their arrival at State Records in 1977, it is clear that most were taken to document the work of the Aborigines Welfare Board and to promote its policies. The collection includes images of children from the bush visiting Sydney for annual summer camps; wedding photos of couples getting married on reserves and stations throughout Western NSW; and studio portraits of young Aboriginal women.

Knowing today that most of these women were taken as girls from their families and trained at Cootamundra Aboriginal Girls' Home as domestic servants leads us to wonder about the true personal experience of all the people captured in the official public images. Other photographs more clearly reveal the poverty and hardship of children's homes; the bleakness of official housing and education; and the hard labour for men and boys working on the land.

And yet, there is also evidence of pride, resilience and joy, despite the intrusion of the authorities in every aspect of Aboriginal people's lives. Some photographs with personal inscriptions were sent by young women back to the matrons of homes they had grown up in. Other photos were submitted by the readers of *Dawn* magazine (published by the Board between 1952 and 1969), with hope they might be published and seen by lost relatives.

## Family, Community, Culture

Much of the detail we do know about the images comes from personal and official inscriptions which appear on the reverse sides of about half of the photos, and from links that have been made since with other Aborigines Welfare Board records. Important information is also coming from the memories and experiences of people pictured in the photos or from the confirmation of their families and communities. All of this valuable detail is going into a photographic database, which will enable visitors to the exhibition to search for individuals, places and institutions pictured in the images.

Though the policies of successive governments aimed to dismantle Aboriginal culture, Indigenous people have always found ways to reunite with family and community and to create contemporary links to their culture. Today the Board's written records and photographs are valuable for the leads and clues they may provide to help in this process.



## Consent, Advice, Support

Decades after the photographs were taken, they still produce mixed emotions for Indigenous viewers — from the delight of seeing rare evidence of community and culture to the sad reminder of loss and separation. Because of these sensitivities, the entire exhibition process involves the consent, advice and support of many strands of the Indigenous community, including the NSW Department of Aboriginal Affairs for guidance and protocols; an advisory group for ongoing input and support; and the approval and contribution of individuals and communities represented in the Board's photos.

Whilst all of the photographs are open to the public, permission is required to tell individual stories or to highlight the photos in promotional materials and the media. The exhibition team has met with Elders, families and communities around NSW to gain approvals from people pictured in the photos, their oldest surviving relative or representatives of their community.

The exhibition team includes three staff members from State Records. Kirsten Thorpe, Archivist — Aboriginal Liaison, is a Worimi woman who has worked at the archives for seven years, assisting Indigenous people to research their family records. Sue Newman, Project Officer

— Aboriginal Liaison, is a Dungatti woman, who also works with the Indigenous records. Creative Producer, Susan Charlton, curates State Records' exhibition program and edits its magazine *Vital Signs*.

Indigenous photographer Mervyn Bishop has also joined the exhibition team to consult with NSW Aboriginal communities on different ways the photographs displayed in the exhibition might come to their area. Personal photos of families and communities taken by Merv during road trips around NSW for the exhibition will be an interesting counterpoint to the Board's official photos. Also part of the team are Indigenous designer Alison Page and her colleague Margie Rahmann.

Members of the Exhibition Advisory Group include Lola Edwards and Glendra Stubbs from Link-Up, Keith Munro from the Museum of Contemporary Art; Melissa Jackson and Ronald Briggs from the State Library of NSW; and Tracy Bradford and Richard Aldridge from the Department of Aboriginal Affairs.

↙ *Department of Aboriginal Affairs Archives Officer Richard Aldridge and Pilliga Elder Noel Hames, Pilliga, 2006, photograph by Mervyn Bishop; Reproduced with permission*

↑ *Exhibition team meet with Moree community, launch of Indigenous Unit, Northern Regional Library, Moree, 2006, photograph by Mervyn Bishop; Reproduced with permission*

## FREE Events @ State Records Gallery

**4 Saturdays in September** Bring your favourite photo of yourself to be copied into our digital Visitors' Book

### **SORRY DAY COMMITTEE** 2pm, Saturday 9 September

Members of the Stolen Generation host an afternoon tea and viewing of the exhibition. Indigenous photographer Mervyn Bishop will also be available to take your photo for the exhibition Visitors' Book

### **MERVYN BISHOP** 2pm, Saturday 16 September

Mervyn Bishop will take us on a tour of two exhibitions he is currently involved in: *In Living Memory* at State Records Gallery, followed by his own show at Customs House, *Access All Areas*, curated by Tess Allas

Exhibition Talks & Tours are available for small groups of 10–20 people, weekdays between 10am and 4pm  
Ph: (02) 8247 8660 for enquiries and bookings; see [www.records.nsw.gov.au](http://www.records.nsw.gov.au) for full details of exhibition & events

### **RECONCILIATION AUSTRALIA** 2pm, Saturday 23 September

Hear about the work of Reconciliation Australia and see photos from their All About Us photo project taken by students from Perth, Port Headland, Kununurra, Katherine, Cairns, Sydney & Wagga

### **FAMILY HISTORY** 2pm, Saturday 30 September

Staff from State Records and the Family Records Unit of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs will advise on family history research using the State archives and the records of the Aborigines Welfare Board