



*The life of
an Australian
Aboriginal
1900-1972,
as told to
Janet
Mathews*

The two worlds of Jimmie Barker



astronomy and other subjects of interest to me. My life was quiet; I seemed to have enough money and had very few worries. In the later years I felt the work was almost too hard for me: frequently I was far from well. Additions were built on to the hospital; as it became larger the work increased. There is little of interest to remember from those years. Football games and pubs did not appeal to me; it was a peaceful and monotonous life.

It was a shock when the doctor told me that I was not well enough to continue with my job. He told me that I should stop work and apply for the pension. I refused, but the doctor was firm and insisted that I was not strong enough to continue doing the heavy work. For a couple of weeks he kept telling me that I must take his advice and eventually I agreed. It was an upheaval in my life and I felt horribly lost and bewildered. It was two years before I was due for the old-age pension, but the doctor assured me that there was no disgrace in taking the invalid pension when it was essential for me to stop work. This was in 1963; I had been working at the hospital for seventeen years. Bert was also working there, but his jobs were only temporary until after I left. He has continued working there for many years.

More decisions had to be made. I knew that I could go across the river and live near Bert. Jack lived farther along the Barwon River, and I could live there. I decided to move to Bert's place. I was more familiar with it, as I had always stayed there when he was away from home. It was only six weeks after I left the hospital that my first pension cheque arrived, and it has been coming regularly ever since. It is not very much, but it is much more money than I had in my early days. It is a great help to me. Some people say that I have worked hard enough during my life to have earned it. I do not really worry about money, and have never bothered about it too much. I suppose that is my Aboriginal way of thought. It is good to have enough, that is the main thing.

After years of work I found it hard to adjust myself to doing nothing. The time at the hospital had passed without incident, and I think I had expected to work there for ever. Bert owned five acres on the other side of the river and I moved into a shed near his house. There were always a number of odd jobs to be done and my time was reasonably

occupied. I saw more of my family and spent a lot of time fishing in the river, but this was not sufficient and I needed some additional interest.

I have always loved opals and had often wanted to go to Lightning Ridge. In 1908 an old woman called Culgoa Mary had shown me my first opal; it fascinated me and I had thought of looking for them ever since. When my pension was arriving regularly I bought a tent and moved to Lightning Ridge. Roy came with me and stayed for eight weeks before returning to Queensland. I did not know anyone at the Ridge and after Roy left it was rather lonely. The local policeman was both helpful and good to me. It was unusual to be called 'Mr Barker' and to be treated with some respect. He did not seem to mind the colour of my skin. When I was registering my claim and getting a miner's right he took the trouble to give me some advice. 'Drive your pegs in well,' he said. 'Make sure those pegs are right down.' At that time I knew nothing about the way claim papers had to be displayed at the top of a stick. He told me that the papers could be thrown away after seven days. By then the claim could be presumed to be mine if no one had disputed ownership. He told me also to refer to him immediately if anyone tried to move on to my claim. He said that interlopers had been doing this to dark people and that he would remove anyone if I had trouble.

I felt reasonably well, and staked my claim at Cantwell's, a field close to the town. I lived in the tent and was able to do quite a lot of digging. I had been there for some time when Val Mingo, an Aboriginal friend, came to the Ridge. He did not have a claim but worked with others. One day when we were chatting he talked about getting a claim on Cantwell's. I pegged out a place next to mine for him and he registered it. Later we started working together, and we continued to do so for several years.

I had brought a motor from Brewarrina and made a puddler; it did not take long to collect the necessary equipment. I found a lot of opals but knew very little about their value or how to treat them; I am sure I broke a lot of good stones through my ignorance. I made models of the dumps with smashed opal and just gave them away. Later I learnt that I was breaking up good opals. This was after I had