

# Living Aboriginal History of Victoria

*Stories in the Oral Tradition*

Alick Jackomos  
Derek Fowell

Museum of Victoria

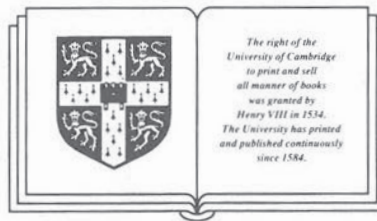
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## Bevan Nicholls

*We had moved around in a circle, right back to where we started.*

I was born in 1933. It was starvation and poverty at Cumberagunja Reserve at that time. We used to stand in line for rations, and they would hand out a bit of flour, a bit of tea. There wasn't any sugar or butter or anything like that. When they ran out, the people that were left in the line just missed out and had to go from place to place borrowing.

Even when the Manager killed sheep and cattle, the people on Cumberagunja never got the good meat. I was just a boy and I didn't ask and I didn't know. I thought it was right that the good part of the meat went somewhere else and the guts was thrown out to the people and the kids would be there grabbing for it.

In 1939 there was the big Walk-Off at Cumberagunja. We left our home and everything in it, got into a little boat and went across the River Murray to Barmah. The boat was full of the belongings we could carry but the valuables handed down from my grandparents to my parents are lost because we were afraid to go back over there.

People set up home on the banks of the river. Everyone had to put up bag humpies and find a few tins here and there to put up places. Then we had starvation at its worst. It seemed a long time before we got anything to eat. It has always been a poor area for bush tucker. There wasn't anything there then, and there

isn't anything there now. You might get one or two rabbits which are dogs. Fish? Well, like they are now, they wasn't plentiful. They would bite one day and not the next.

We had nothing to eat. Then, all of a sudden, food arrived from Sydney. Who sent it, I don't know. But it arrived. Tins and tins of dried oysters. There was oyster soup in the morning, oyster soup for dinner and oyster soup for tea. It just seemed to go on and on.

One day, somebody came from Shepparton and said, "All come to Shepparton. There is plenty of work over there".

So the people able to, walked the 40 or 50 miles to Shepparton. They walked in the group to the river flats at Mooroopna where they camped.

We kids were left at the Barmah camp with two old pensioners, Auntie Eadie and Uncle Bob, who looked after us while our parents made camp at Mooroopna. After a couple of weeks, we followed on. We set off with an old, covered wagon and an old horse. Us kids had to walk all the way. It seemed a long way because we were still small. Miles and miles. It was warm too.

We made three camps before we arrived at Mooroopna Flats. People was busy putting up their places with bags — cutting up wheat bags into strips and sewing them together. Food was more plentiful then because our

parents were working picking fruit. But it was seasonal work and never lasted long.

Then it was all over. Winter came and the police told us to move out because the flood waters are coming. The people decided to move back to Barmah but there was hardships there again through the winter months. And there was always the worry that the Aborigines Protection Board would come along with the Welfare Nurses to take us kids away.

In them days, a couple of great big policemen would come in a big vehicle and take away the little kids. Always, while growing up, there was fear of the police. Many a time we kids hid in the bush all day and ate whatever we could. There was a few witchetty grubs around and, when we could get it, we had goanna. That is how we lived on the Barmah side of the river, between Picking Creek and Shepparton.

We got through that winter and it was time for fruit picking around Mooroopna again. People were sick of moving back and forwards between Mooroopna and Barmah and some of them said, "Ah, look, we will stay at the Mooroopna Flats permanently". And that was the beginning of the community which grew on the banks of the Goulburn River, near Mooroopna. It came to be known as The Flat.



*Bevan Nicholls  
outside a chaff-bag  
humpy.  
Photo courtesy of:  
Bevan Nicholls.*



*Bevan's mother,  
Gladys.*



*Bevan and Lettie  
Nicholls.  
Photographer:  
Derek Fowell.*

As time went on, a lot of us moved to Melbourne and Swan Hill and other places. When we were in Melbourne my father died on us, killed in a car accident. Hardships again! Nobody seemed to want us! Mum couldn't work because she had to stay home to look after us but Old Auntie Nora Charles come to our rescue. She moved in and Mum was then able to go to work at the munitions factory.

During the war, Mum remarried. I never had too much to do with me father, Dowie Nicholls. He was always working away, shearing sheep. And when Mum married Doug Nicholls, Dad's brother, it was the same. He was always away helping somebody else, never home. So I never missed them much at all. It was poor old Mum who was always home.

I think I was 14-and-a-half when I moved to Swan Hill and started working. With my background and poor education, it was pretty hard to get work. It meant going out to farms and

doing the work of a 20-year-old man. Otherwise, they wouldn't employ you.

I got married around that time. (I forget the date. Aboriginal people don't worry about dates. I wonder why we don't worry about dates?) My wife, Lettie, and I lived on the river flats in a bag humpy. Back on the river bank! It seems as though you move around in a circle with the same old story. The river bank is always there for us when we are in trouble.

If you try to live in the town, white people say, "Well, look, you have got to pay to live in town. You have got to pay for everything we give you".

They don't know that after you have paid for it you are back to the days when you waited for the ration hand-out at the Mission. You're still on your bread and butter because you can't afford to buy anything else. And do you think you can get through their thick scones that this is still happening today? We are still facing hardships.

You might live in a house in town, but if you have got a poor job there are lots of things you have to go without. If you can't go grape picking to get some extra money, you miss out on clothes, underclothes and other things. So you get further and further down. It goes back again to poor education Our kids

could do better but when they come home from school and ask about homework, you can't help them. Their mums and dads are still home in that same environment and if dad is working, he has poorly paid work.

We moved from the river bank into a house owned by the Aborigines Welfare Board in Swan Hill. These houses were a lot cheaper because they catered for the Aboriginal people and we was able to live a little bit better than we are living now. That was alright. But we moved from there because somebody in Parliament said, "We will help any Aboriginal capable of running a business or a farm. We will help them all the way".

I thought, "Well, goodness me! I've worked for farmers and I've worked for other people. I'll have a go at that".

So I did, and I was the first Aborigine in Victoria to be placed on a farm. It was at Piangil and we borrowed \$28,000 for the place.

There was 250 acres of ground and the house was falling down on top of us. Me and my eldest boys worked all day, sometimes

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all night, laying this place out because . . . well, this is going to become our own. We had a mixed farm of 200 sheep, 40 head of cattle and we grew vegetables. We thought we were right but we had a mice plague and wool prices went down. You couldn't sell your sheep for love nor money. We couldn't make our first loan repayment. So they came along and said, "Finish up, you are a bad farmer".

So, of course, we had to leave. We had to repay the loan on the farm and find money to pay rent for a new place. We couldn't meet our commitments. I was on Social Service and couldn't get work. We made one payment of \$700, it took all our money and, a couple of weeks later, another payment was due, another \$700. We walked away from it all with nothing.

We moved up back to Barmah and put up an old tent and, with a few tins from the tip, made a decent sort of a place there. The Council came every week, telling us to move. I got a job as a gardener at the Shepparton Hospital and somebody at the hospital said, "There is a house coming up, Bevan. It belongs to the hospital. Why don't you move over here? The rent is cheap".

The hospital warned us that one day the houses would have to be sold and that I should put in for a Commission house. We did that but in the four years I worked for the hospital, a house never came up. In the end the hospital houses were being sold and we had to get out again. But the hospital had some houses for sale at Mooroopna which had to be moved off the site. They offered to sell me one for \$300 and I could pay it off every week. That was good, but it was going to cost \$5000 to move the house.

I thought, "Well, it's a \$48000 home and I'll be getting it for \$5300. I'll ring up the Department of Aboriginal Affairs in Canberra". They said "We haven't got any money for that sort of thing". We couldn't do anything about it and we had to move back to Cummeragunja Reserve. We had moved around in a circle, right back to where we started.

About four or five years ago we came up here fruit picking and I put my name down for Social Security but a position came up at the Pioneer Settlement. I am a cleaner, gardener, and I talk to school groups about Aboriginal culture. People read in the papers that millions of dollars are spent on Aboriginal affairs. They say, "You people should be better off than you are". And, yet, here we are, still on the edge of town. When my mother went in that ration line at Cummeragunja for something to eat she said, "If there is nothing there, then we go without". This is how we are. That is the way we have always been.