"Noongars camped all around the bush here. Used to be our home."
– Noongar Elder Mervyn Abraham
I feel at home. I can feel the presence of my people.

Kaya! (Hi!)

Uncle Mervyn Abraham was born 109 years after the life of Noongars (the Aboriginal people of south-west Western Australia) was changed forever by the coming of white people. Mervyn's stories about life at Koompkinning on the Hotham River give a glimpse of what life was like for many Noongars during the twentieth century. Wheatbelt NRM respectfully thanks Uncle Merv for sharing katadjin (knowledge) and photos in this storybook. We also thank Gary Bennell and Alice Collard for their contributions. Noongar katadjin belongs to and remains the intellectual property of the Noongar communities who shared it.

Noongar language is used in this book. There are many different Noongar language groups and it was an oral language (not traditionally written down), so different words and spellings exist. This storybook is one of a series that aims to inspire you to learn more about our unique boodjar (country) and Noongar culture, and help deepen respect, love and care for our kwobidak (beautiful) country.

I'm Mervyn Abraham. [In] 1938 I was born, under a tree. We was camped there, and dad – Sam Abraham – was working there. We only had horse and cart them days and they reckon it was too far to go to town, so I was born in the bush.

Most of my relations were born in the bush. Some of them were born at Pumphrey's Bridge.
Ngala mia (our camp)

Noongars camped all around the bush here. Used to be our home. My old Uncle Fred Little and Aunty Frances used to have a tent right here. In the front, outside the tent under a shelter, they had a kitchen where they cooked their meals. This is how we used to live. You could have a wash down the river there. Everything was pretty good. Oh, we used to be happy in them days, I know that. No hassles. No power bills, water bills or nothing. They lived there for quite a few years then they moved to Pingelly.

Standing next to the campsite where my Uncle Fred and Aunty Frances Little lived. The upright Mangart / Jam Tree / Acacia acuminata posts in these photos are the original tent posts.

Bilya (river)

The Noongar name for around Pumphrey’s Bridge is Koompkinning — it means plenty of water. The water used to be fresh in those days. Fresh water for drinking, you could drink it, have a cup of tea out of it, wash in it. It’s completely different now. It should be alright when it’s raining, running water, it’s pretty good. But when it stops, that’s when the salinity comes into it. It’s brackish now, gone all brackish.

Gary Bennell recalls: “We used to learn to swim in that river. We used to go from here in Pingelly out that way. That would have been in the fifties [1950’s].”

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Noongar</th>
<th>English</th>
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<tr>
<td>Korn / kaylap /</td>
<td>Camping / dwelling</td>
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<tr>
<td>karla-mia</td>
<td>place</td>
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<tr>
<td>Karla</td>
<td>Fire</td>
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<td>Karl-boorn</td>
<td>Firewood</td>
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<td>Burong / djart</td>
<td>Rain</td>
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<td>Kep koorliny</td>
<td>Rain coming</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bilya</td>
<td>River</td>
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<td>Maar</td>
<td>Cloud</td>
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<td>Mari warabiny</td>
<td>Rain cloud</td>
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The water used to be fresh in those days. Fresh water for drinking, you could drink it, have a cup of tea out of it, wash in it. It’s completely different now. It should be alright when it’s raining, running water, it’s pretty good. But when it stops, that’s when the salinity comes into it. It’s brackish now, gone all brackish.

Gary Bennell recalls: “We used to learn to swim in that river. We used to go from here in Pingelly out that way. That would have been in the fifties [1950’s].”
The spring's next to the old bridge, on the north side. You get that fresh water all year around there. We’d clean around it, get all the scrub and all the grass from around it, and you’d get the clear, fresh water. Needs to be cleaned up and the water will come up again.

Gary Bennell remembers: “We had an uncle who had some mental issues. Uncle Jack Bennell. He was very quiet, you know. He was a big, tall man. He was in a mental institution in Perth. He came home and Dad – Andy Bennell – used to take him out there on the weekends, to sit down and spend time with him. Us boys would be down the bottom swimming and Dad would be up the top the other side near the spring. Sit down quiet and just yarn all day, you know. When we did go near them we’d be very quiet. So Dad kind of brought him back into the community. Work his way back into the community. Like therapy, you know.”

Gary Bennell says: “Dad used to dance there in the corroborees when he was a young fella. Grandfather Ned was working up there on the hill and Dad met Mum there. Dad used to dance there and camp across the road. Ned is Merv’s grandfather too, and Christine is our grandmother. You feel all the spirits there. They’re there.”
Moort (family)

Noongars worked around here, shearing and all that on farms, clearing, fencing, all farm work and that. Yeah, they was the ones got the farmers going. They cleared all that land around that area.

My grandfather worked Langie’s farm. He worked there just for food. I remember he never used to have any money.

When I left school and started working, it was pretty good then. Clearing land, cutting trees down. Cutting fence posts, jam tree fence posts. Mangart trees cut into fence posts. That’s the main things farmers used to build fences.

I used to be a good axe man. I enjoyed it. Keep you fit. Wherever there was work they camped. Some people camped on farmers’ properties. On reserves around that area.

Gypsies. Camp to camp. You had no permanent home them days. Before European colonisation, Noongars travelled wherever there was food, you know. Hunting for food wherever there was plenty, you know, that’s where they’d go.

Quite a few families camped around here, quite a few. There’s Abrahams, Bennells, Winmars, Littles, Hills. You know the boys play footy in Dockers and Eagles? They’re from the family around this area. They’re all my relations, they are. Steve Hill’s Dockers. Josh Hill’s Eagles. Nicky Winmar’s from here, it’s his grandparent’s place. Rosie Winmar was Nicky’s aunty and Linda Winmar (nee Abraham) was Rosie’s mum. Noongars camped here year round.

Gary Bennell says: “Merv and Jock Abraham were involved in organising the Pumphrey’s Bridge Reunion in 2009. At the reunion they had fires going everywhere, the cover band Red Ochre, plenty of food. Noongars could get up and sing. Plenty of dust flying there. They were doing the jive and all this and that.”
Margaret River. only found in the
Hairy Marron (Cherax tenancius) but it’s
only found in the Margaret River.

**Smooth Marron**

Cherax cainii

There’s also a critically endangered
Hairy Marron (Cherax tenancius) but it’s
only found in the Margaret River.

**Djilgies**, they were lovely. Get a bucket. Same as you
catch crayfish. Put some meat – kangaroo or rabbit,
whatever meat was available – in the cage, put it in the
water, come back and pull it out. Half a dozen or more
in there. Same as catching **marron**.

Marron: Dark brown, black and
even blue, marron are an iconic
south-western Australian species.
Growing up to 38cm long, marron
are the largest freshwater crayfish
in WA and the third largest on
Earth. They have ten legs including
large claws for grasping food,
hunting and moving. They live in
rivers and dams with permanent
water, fallen trees and submerged
leaves, especially rivers with
well-vegetated catchments and
banks. Marron eat living, dead and
decaying plant and animal material
on the river or dam bed and are
important components of the aquatic
ecosystems. Water rats, tortoises,
birds, fish and bigger marron eat
marron. Salinisation of many rivers
such as the Hotham has reduced
their range; marron are also
threatened by habitat loss, climate
change, reduced river flow, low
oxygen, fishing and feral yabbies.

Djilgi: Light to black-brown
coloured freshwater crayfish that
grow up to 14cm long. djilgi
are endemic to WA’s south-
west, occupying a wide range of
environments including wetlands,
streams and rivers. Similar to
marron, they eat a wide range of
living and decaying organic matter.
Permaculture gardeners use djilgies
in ponds and pools to help clean
the water. Like koonacs (Cherax
preissii and less common Cherax
glaber), djilgi burrow down and
become dormant to survive drought.
While more tolerant than marron to
low oxygen, they have also been
impacted by salinity, habitat loss
and introduced species.

Feral yabbies: Introduced to
WA from eastern Australia in the
1930s, yabbies (Cherax destructor)
grow fast, reproduce at a young
age and can breed several times in
one season, so they can out-compete
WA native freshwater crayfish for
food and habitat. They are an
important aquaculture species for
many farmers. However, if you catch
a yabby in a river, don’t put it back,
eat it!

**How to tell the difference:**
The WA Department of Fisheries Fact
Sheet called Identifying Freshwater
Crayfish shows you how.

The pool there on the
north side, clean all the
sticks out of there and
walk through there and
muddy all the water.
So that when the **djiljit**
(fish) – perch and cobbler
— couldn’t breathe, (you)
grab them, chuck them
into a bucket, or a bag,
or something.

Easy as that. Didn’t have
to fish for them, just grab
them. We’d cook them
on the fire, on the coals,
or whatever. Some wrap
them in a bit of brown
paper, put them in the
ashes. Beautiful. The last
time I fished in that river
was about fifty years ago.

**Djilgies**

Cherax quinquecarinatus

There’s also another
common freshwater
crayfish species,
the koonac (Cherax
preissii).

The shop

This is what’s left of the old shop.
We bought flour, sugar,
tea, all that, butter, tin
food and all that. They
were good people.

Alice Collard (nee Jones) recalls: "When the parents
come to visit their
children at the Wandering
Mission they used to leave
some money, so if you go
for a Sunday drive
to Pumphrey’s Bridge

you could buy ice cream or
whatever out of your own
money. But if you didn’t have
none you didn’t get none.
So that’s how it went – most
of us, we didn’t have money.”

Ducks, twenty-eight parrots, pigeons. Used to
be good eating, pigeon stew. Tastes like chicken.
Pluck the twenty-eight parrots, gut them and
cook them. Simple as that.

We used to catch them with shanghais
(slingshots). To make a shanghai you get a stick
and rubber tyre tube, cut two little strips out,
pull them on the stick, and BANG. Good life.

Take the rabbits or parrots in our belts. Carry
them along. You put the rabbits’ heads through
the belt, same as the parrots too, and carry
them along, rabbits and parrots hanging all
around you. So instead of carrying them
put them in the belt, have your hands
free, get some more.

Used to get **bardi** (witchetty grubs) in the
**mangart**. Bardi taste like cheezels
when you cook them up, crunchy.

Onlyfungus you eat are mushrooms.
Alice Collard (nee Jones) remembers: “When we were put in the mission I was six years old. I would have been seven or eight when we went down to Pumphrey’s Bridge from Wandering Mission. That’s where we used to go once a year to have our picnic, and have a swim for the day. We enjoyed it being away and swimming and that. We also enjoyed our little drink of cordial and a biscuit for the day which was really a lot for us at the time. We enjoyed ourselves while we were there and enjoyed going out for the day. It was really fantastic. We all were loaded on the back of a truck, like a sheep truck, that we had to all stand on. Girls up one end, boys up the other. Wherever we had to go, that’s what we were taken in, a truck. They had the railings, so you’d stand and lean on the railing. When the truck was going around with all the kids on the back, I’d think it was going to go over sooner or later, but no it never. Where the old bridge is, that’s where we used to go swimming there, and jumping off the rope from the tree into the water. Used to be a lot of water there. Cos otherwise you wouldn’t be able to jump because of all the trees. They said to watch for the trees that’s fallen into the water. You’d get stuck underneath.

We all went exploring up and down while we were there, having a look around to see what was there. Always had Pumphrey’s Bridge in my mind for years but never ever went back there until recently, just to have a look, see what was there. I went there pretty late then, didn’t I? The new bridge has been built and the old one’s gone.”
There was a school there five miles away at West Popanyinning. The bus came and pick us up. It was freezing. I was barefoot. Oh, my toes were blue. Didn’t know what shoes were.

We weren’t allowed to go to the Pumphrey’s Bridge School, because that was all for the white people. No Noongars were there, only wadjalas (white people).

Nine children from four families – Marshall, Donaldson, Watts and Mackwell – went there.*

They’re the same age as me, them mob. We used to play with them but not at school. They came to Pingelly School after. The school bus used to come pick...
The falling stones

"Poltergeists have been blamed for the mysterious fallings at Pumphrey’s and Boyup Brook this week”,
Sunday Times, 1955*

When I was 12 or 13, everyone was telling me about the stones. They were falling out the back of Pumphrey’s Bridge out at Donaldson’s farm. My Uncle Kevin Ugle and Aunty Alma lived in a tent there and stones came straight through the tent, leave no holes. They moved from there to a farmhouse verandah, stones are still coming through. Don’t know how that happened but people come from all over the world. People come there. Pick the stones up, stones were still warm to hot. So where they come from... even all the big shots didn’t know where they were coming from. Crikey.

I saw the stones, we went around and had a look. Picked the stone up. Some were golfball sized, some were a bit bigger than a golf ball. Leave no holes there, come straight through the tin or whatever it is. One hit you on the shoulder, bounce off, still warm. Unbelievable.

And a couple of others, Cyril and Lorna Penny, a couple of days, they were gone. They left the place. They went to Narrogin. Yes, unbelievable.

I can’t explain what happened. Nobody had any theories. All the science and that they did, where the stones were coming from, took them to a lab and analysed them. Very strange.

* Overview - Explanations for the ‘Falling Stones’ © Jag Films, for ABC Australia, 2005
The three news articles are part of this book thanks to sources listed in Tony Healy and Paul Cropper’s book Australian Poltergeist published in 2014 by Strange Nation.
Gary Bennell says: “We still tell the young ones about it. We take them out there and show them where the place is. We tell them about the stones falling and they look at you, say, ‘No, I don’t believe you.’ But then you tell the story, and someone else. They’ll back you up and say, ‘Yeah, it’s true.’ Till they see something like this newspaper article here, then they believe it.”
There’s quite a few graves around. At Pumphrey’s Bridge, where they camped just up the creek, there’s a burial site there up the riverbank, but the farmers ploughed over it. My old Grandfather used to talk about all the graves there, but no one seemed to worry about it. They used to have sticks to mark the graves – they’re all gone. All the markers are all gone. My Uncle Mervyn was born in 1911 and died of pneumonia in 1923. His grave (pictured) is on a nearby farm, where he passed away. My family was camping around there somewhere. We put stones on the grave up out there, about 30 – 40 years ago. This sign was only put up about five years ago. My Uncle Stuart Humes is going around doing all the graves and that, put crosses on them.

Years ago we used to camp around here on the corner of Phillip and Naylor Street in Pingelly. This was our reserve. Come on the weekends, camp around here. From country area. We had a few families living here all the time permanent – my aunties and uncles. They used to go work the farms, come back at night. Farmers pick them up and take them out, bring them back, or they had their own horse and cart to go out. Camps right through here, that whole area. Tents, patched up tin and all that, right through here. Old home. Happy memories.

We come back and watch a movie in town, walk back home, sleep. Next morning go to the bush again. On the weekends, couple of nights rest here, somewhere, and back to work on farms. I was about 12 years old], 13, that age, 14, 15, 16. Clearing land. Still our land. Still our reserves. Noongars gradually moved away from Pumphrey’s to this reserve here in Pingelly. Later, from here we moved to the other reserve on Phillip Street. Family moved there. Old tin houses there, concrete and tin.

Noongar | English
---------|---------------------
Djoorlu    | Deceased bones
Mundung/moondoong | Ghost / spirit
Wirn       | Spirit
Djin-djin  | Good spirit

Old Uncle Charlie Hill bought a block on Phillip Street

Gary Bennell explains: “The Noongars were looking for somewhere to build a church so my Grandfather Charlie Hill just donated his piece of land. They all built that. It’s got hessian bags on the inside and I remember the gravel floors. The church lasted quite a few years. They didn’t have any power or anything, see. They had lanterns for the night time services, but mainly the services were done through the day. That’s one of the first churches in this town. For the Noongars. I remember going to this church. I was only a little guy.”

See a possum scratch here? (On the tree on the left.) They climb, scratch, scratch, scratch. The way the old people used to trap possums: put a stick across there from the ground to a low fork in the tree, and little copper wire tied around there, near the top of the stick, and put a noose on it. Possum come down, get caught, strangled. Go next morning and pick all the possums up. That’s when the possum skin trade was going a while back, years ago.
Noongar language sources used in this book include us storytellers and:

- **Nyungar Budjara Wangany:** Nyungar NRM Wordlist & Language Collection Booklet of the Avon Catchment Region, Wheatbelt NRM. Available at www.wheatbeltnrm.org.au

- **The Nyoongar Legacy: the naming of the land and the language of its people** by Bernard Rooney © Batchelor Press 2011


“Gary Bennell says: “We all get together and bring the young blokes and take them around the old tracks and tell them stories around the campfire.”

Dryandra Woodlands not that far from here. There used to be lots of kangaroos, tammars, numbats, possums there. Beautiful. There’s not so many there now.

Before land clearing around here, it used to be like Dryandra.

All this land here. You had to burn for fire breaks, clean it up. That’s what we’re going to do with this project for the rangers – care for country, clean up. Rangers make fire breaks, clean up mess, replant trees and that. Get rid of feral cats and foxes and whatever, weeds, all that.

Noongar English

Kwadjet koorl Go forward

Doyntj-doyntj Together
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