

**Understanding Aboriginal Perspectives  
of History and Heritage in Wyndham,  
Western Australia**

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# Understanding Aboriginal Perspectives of History and Heritage in Wyndham, Western Australia



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A thesis submitted as partial fulfilment of the requirements  
for the degree BA (Hons) in Warawara – The Department of Indigenous Studies,  
Division of Society, Culture, Media and Philosophy, Macquarie University.

November 2001

\* Cover illustration uses authors own photographs of Wyndham and includes a photograph of a display in the Wyndham Museum depicting chained Aboriginal prisoners

## Abstract

Many members of the government and the general public still view Aboriginal heritage only in terms of a static, pre 1788 way of life. Aboriginal heritage and history, like Australian history since 1788, has never been static. It has been in a continual process of adaptation and evolution. The case study and research undertaken in Wyndham, Western Australia was designed to demonstrate on a small, local scale how Aboriginal history and heritage has evolved and endured. Aboriginal heritage is associated with the distant past, but it is also about the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries, and about yesterday and today. Interviews were designed to facilitate a dialogue between members of the Wyndham Aboriginal community and the researcher, to expose the false paradigm symbolised by the rejection of the Aboriginal heritage claim associated with the Cyprus-Hellene Club (a relatively contemporary building) and to gain a better understanding of one group's views of their history and heritage, a heritage that proved to be firmly grounded in the past, and in a modern, geographical sense of place. There is an Aboriginal history and heritage, very much alive in the minds of the Aboriginal community in and around what many might incorrectly think of as 'Whitefella' Wyndham. It is, in reality, just Wyndham, a site with an indigenous and a non-indigenous heritage. It is a place where two histories – indigenous and non-indigenous, meet with the interaction of cultures. However the Aboriginal history of the area needs to be acknowledged before the creation of a 'shared' history can be considered.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the people of Wyndham who participated in the study. These interviews were invaluable in so many ways. Thank you also to the friends I made up there who helped me with open hearts. In particular Diana Spyker, Edgar Price and Dexter Birch. You're all champs! Thanks also to all the people in the town and also the Kununurra-ites who made my visit memorable.

I would also like to thank family, friends, and especially my supervisor, Jim Kohen – without whom the project would not have been possible. Thanks to Mr Dennett and Paul who helped with editing and formatting. A special mention to Paul also for his ongoing friendship. Long chats, good times and even roganing with you kept me sane. Throughout it all you were there. Thanks matey. Thank you everyone.

# Table of Contents

<b>Abstract</b>	ii
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	iii
<b>Table of Contents</b>	iv
<b>List of Figures</b>	vi
<b>List of Tables</b>	vi
<b>Certificate of Authenticity</b>	vii

## Section A: Introduction

<b>Chapter 1: Attitudes Pertaining to Aboriginal History and Heritage</b>	1
1.1: Introduction	1
1.2: History and Reconciliation	3
1.3: Attitudes Towards Aboriginal History in Australia and their Origins	5
1.4: Attitudes Towards Aboriginal Heritage in Australia	6
1.5: The Cyprus-Hellene Club – What Did the Case Reveal?	8
<b>Chapter 2: Examining Aboriginal Perspectives of History and Heritage in Wyndham</b>	11
2.1: Historical Background of Wyndham	11
2.2: Wyndham Today	14
2.3: Why do a Study on Wyndham?	17
2.4: Methods	22

## Section B: Aboriginal Histories of Wyndham

<b>Chapter 3: General Themes and Issues</b>	26
3.1: Introduction	26
3.2: Traditional Ownership	27
3.3: The Stolen Generations	29
3.4: Life at Forrest River Mission	32
3.5: World War Two	38
3.6: Equal Pay Legislation	42
3.7: School and Play	43
3.8: Major Events	46
3.9: Daily Life	47

<b>Chapter 4: Specific Issues</b>	50
4.1: Introduction	50
4.2: The Afghans	50
4.3: The Early Days	54
4.4: Citizenship	58
4.5: Alcoholism	61

## **Section C: Understanding Personal Concepts and Values Relating to Aboriginal Peoples' Views of History and Heritage**

<b>Chapter 5: History</b>	64
5.1: History and Reconciliation	64
5.2: Conveying History	67
5.3: Re-examining Wyndham's History	72
5.4: Notions of a 'Shared' History	77
<b>Chapter 6: Heritage</b>	79
6.1: The Relationship Between History and Heritage	79
6.2: The Range of Perceptions of Heritage	80
6.3: Preservation Issues	88
6.4: Warri Park	90

## **Section D: Discussions and Conclusions**

<b>Chapter 7: Discussion and Conclusions</b>	96
7.1: Local Perspectives	96
7.2: Aboriginal Perspectives of History and Heritage	97
7.3: The Importance of Place and Space	99
7.4: Aboriginal History and Heritage of Wyndham	105
7.5: Closing Statements	109
<b>References</b>	111
<b>Appendix A: Human Ethics Form</b>	116
<b>Appendix B: Outline of Questions put to Interviewees</b>	118



## List of Figures\*

Figure 1.1: Rock Art, Deception Range, East Kimberley . . . . .	9
Figure 1.2: The Cyprus Hellene Club, Elizabeth St, Sydney . . . . .	9
Figure 2.1: Wyndham's Position in the Kimberley . . . . .	11
Figure 2.2: 1889 Wyndham Port Area . . . . .	12
Figure 2.3: Map of Wyndham . . . . .	18
Figure 2.4: Historic O'Donnell St Precinct at Wyndham . . . . .	19
Figure 2.5: View of the Port and Gully Areas from the Bastion . . . . .	19
Figure 3.1: Map of the Traditional 'Tribal' Groups of the Wyndham Area . . . . .	28
Figure 3.2: Women's and Men's Work Parades, c.1930, Forrest River Mission .	33
Figure 3.3: Smoking a Tree at Forrest River Mission . . . . .	34
Figure 3.4: Massacre Memorial at Forrest River Mission . . . . .	37
Figure 3.5: Parry's Creek (Marlgu Billabong) . . . . .	47
Figure 4.1: Camels Carting Corrugated Iron from Wyndham . . . . .	51
Figure 4.2: Chained Prisoners on Route to Wyndham . . . . .	56
Figure 5.1: Prison Tree, King River Rd . . . . .	73
Figure 6.1: Old Wyndham Gaol/Hospital . . . . .	83
Figure 6.2: Graffiti on Piers Under the Wyndham Gaol . . . . .	84
Figure 6.3: Wyndham Gaol . . . . .	84
Figure 6.4: Repair Plans for Hospital . . . . .	85
Figure 6.5: Boab Nut Carving . . . . .	87
Figure 6.6: Afghan Cemetery at Wyndham . . . . .	90
Figure 6.7: Dreamtime Statues at Warri Park . . . . .	90
Figure 7.1: Mudflats and Hills of Wyndham . . . . .	102

## List of Tables

Table 2.1: Timeline of Wyndham's History . . . . .	15
Table 2.2: Basic Details of Participants . . . . .	24

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\* All photographs were taken by the author unless otherwise specified

## Certificate of Authenticity

This work has not been submitted to any other university or institution.

Bronwyn Lawton

5<sup>th</sup> November 2001



# Section A: Introduction

## Chapter 1: Attitudes Pertaining to Aboriginal History and Heritage

### 1.1 Introduction

*“The problem inherent in the concept of Aboriginal history can only be clarified from a transdisciplinary perspective” – Coltheart 1998:179*

During 2001, a series of comprehensive interviews, related site visits and archival research were undertaken in and around Wyndham. The information gained was designed to shed light on two aspects of heritage and history. The first was to test, in a specific case study, a number of the paradigms developed and presented by a range of authors (eg. Thorley 1998, Menage 1998, Byrne 1996 and Reynolds 1999) concerning heritage, history and Aboriginal studies. The second was to identify for the Wyndham region the specific heritage concerns as perceived and expressed by the indigenous population. The outcomes of each of these objectives were fulfilled. Many of the conceptions of heritage identified in earlier research became evident from the interviews conducted. Findings such as the importance of place in interpretations of heritage, the trauma associated with the violent ‘frontier’ and ‘stolen generations’, and the importance of re-addressing history and heritage in the reconciliation progress were issues also addressed in previous studies. Beyond this however, the interviews revealed a number of distinctive perceptions of heritage and history that were *sui generis*. Interviewees for example, made a clear distinction between the importance and role of history and heritage for traditional and non-

traditional owners. Non-traditional owners often saw themselves, at least initially, as without history, as outsiders, taken away from their traditional culture. Ideas such as these have not previously been explored. Unique to the Wyndham study was also a distinctively Aboriginal perspective on World War Two and an insight into Aboriginal people's relations with the Afghan camel men, an area where research has been considerably limited.

The indigenous interviewees of Wyndham manifest an interesting multi-dimensional concept of heritage. They recognised that their heritage and the heritage of the non-indigenous population were presented (by the non-indigenous population) as distinct and virtually separate. It was as though their heritage ended with white occupation. Uniformly the interviewees saw their own heritage as profoundly linked to a sense of place. Location was as fundamental as monuments and relics appeared to be in manifestations of white heritage. This notion of place had significant consequences for ideas of reconciliation and land rights. Access rather than ownership appeared to be the central concern (though ownership can be seen as a way of ensuring access). Interviewees also identified the need to present their heritage, both pre and post white occupation, in different ways. As cited above, indigenous heritage for the older generation of the indigenous population was most profoundly reflected in place, simply having access to sites of importance appeared to be sufficient. The presentation of heritage for the younger generation of the indigenous population and for the non-indigenous newcomers was, however, seen as different. A written record, statues, monuments and markers were seen as important in helping the indigenous younger generation and the non-indigenous population understand their history. There was a striking sophistication therefore, in the interviewees conception of history and heritage. They distinguished history as simply the past as opposed to history as a remembrance

or record. They also distinguished between heritage in a traditional indigenous sense and the function of heritage as an engine of education and of cultural renewal.

The following is designed to provide a chronological and conceptual framework to create an appropriate context for the issues associated with Aboriginal history and heritage. Once the framework is established specific analysis of the Wyndham findings can be considered.

## **1.2 History and Reconciliation**

The Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation (1994) highlighted the potential of history to help in the reconciliation process. Readdressing history, it argued, could help create a better understanding both of the experience of many Aboriginal people in Australian history and a better understanding of Aboriginal culture. Henry Reynolds (1999:171) questioned whether reconciliation would be possible at all without “*some convergence of histories*”. In Australia however, Aboriginal history has often been overlooked. Fundamental questions such as how the coming of European colonizers to Australia should be viewed still exist (settlement or invasion?). How these historic events are viewed has ramifications for the present.

Reynolds (1999:170), referring to Philip Ruddock’s speech on ABC radio (October 1998) where he stated that there could never be a treaty between indigenous and non-indigenous Australia as there had never been a war between them, writes “*If... there was no war, how can we explain the bloodshed..? If the Aborigines did not die in ... warfare then they must have been murdered. Why should we consider this a more attractive way of seeing frontier conflict than viewing it as a kind of war?*”. The point is, there are different ways of viewing Australian history. Academic and

indeed social discourse is necessary to create the 'shared' picture of history that the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation (1994) suggested.

In delving into the pasts of Aboriginal people there has been a fear of perpetuating a so called 'black armband history'. Historian Geoffrey Blainey coined this phrase claiming that it reflected an excessive preoccupation with 'supposed wrongs' done to the indigenous population (Reynolds, 1999:153). This fear must be carefully balanced so that Aboriginal history is not rejected altogether. The history of Aboriginal Australia has the potential to reveal a wealth of information. It may help those who were dispossessed from their country to have their stories heard; it may help Australians as a whole to understand, or it may simply give Aboriginal people a sense of pride, being able to pass one's story on to children and grandchildren. To add to this historical aspect of reconciliation, interviews were conducted with Aboriginal people of Wyndham, a town in the East Kimberley Region of Western Australia. The perspective of the Aboriginal people interviewed revealed a sense of history that was almost always linked to a sense of place. The stories they told of places were often touching and very revealing. There are places all over Australia waiting to have their stories told. If there is anything we should remember perhaps the words of Young (1996:51) sum it up best of all.

*"In interpreting a historic place, we are telling stories about it, potent, politically charged stories. The first question we should ask is not 'Which story should I tell?' but 'Whose?', for should a class or gender or any other social group be banished to the fringes of history it is dispossessed. Instead of achieving the dignity accorded to the 'actors' of history, members of such groups are relegated to the realms of the 'acted upon'.* (Young, 1996:151)

### 1.3 Attitudes Towards Aboriginal History in Australia and their Origins

Traditionally Aboriginal history in Australia has been relegated to the 'prehistoric era'. Aborigines were seen by many European settlers as a stone aged people, a 'dying race' who would soon succumb to evolution (Byrne, 1996). They were a people of a past long ago, not fit to be seen in the likes of modern history. Byrne (1996:83) suggests the attitudes of the first European settlers in Australia were colonial-centric. Aborigines, he argued, were perceived as *"passive recipients of European ways and products"* and thus Europeans failed to observe *"the process by which Aborigines were recontextualising or Aboriginalising elements of European culture"*(Byrne, 1996:83). As traditional ways were abandoned, it was seen as a collapse of culture rather than the *"emergence of dynamic and adaptive forms of Aboriginality"*(Byrne, 1996:84). As a result there has been an underlying perception that Aboriginal history ceased in 1788.

Many histories of Aboriginal people are waiting to be told, or waiting to have inaccuracies corrected (Taylor, 1996). Davison (2000:98-99) discusses the need for Aboriginal people to renew their history. He particularly focuses on the strong links of Aboriginal people to family and the effects on many who were denied their family history and knowledge of their links after they were taken from their families. Davison (2000:99-100) cites Iris Clayton, a Wiradjuri family historian, who wrote, *"As Aboriginal people become more aware of their lost lands, lost heritage and culture, they are increasingly feeling the need for their lost family genealogy...[if they can find it]... Pride in their ancestors and culture will replace oppression...hopefully our future*

*generations will have a rich and living heritage to look back on*". Re-examining Aboriginal history has the potential to give back some identity to Aboriginal people.

In re-addressing Australian history there is a need to understand that multiple layers can exist. This does not mean that a complete abandonment of previous histories is necessary. New cultural landscapes do not have to replace the old, but can overlay or overlap them (Menage, 1998).

#### **1.4 Attitudes Towards Aboriginal Heritage in Australia**

Like history, perspectives of what constitutes heritage for Aboriginal people in Australia have been traditionally confined to the prehistoric era. In Australia, notions of heritage in general tend to take a very categorical approach, being broken up into areas such as natural, historic and indigenous heritage (Australian Heritage Commission, 2001). This differs markedly to what we know of Aboriginal conceptions of heritage. As Boer writes, "*Aboriginal heritage can be said to encompass every aspect of Aboriginal culture... concepts of European cultural and natural heritage have a much more limited meaning than that found in or derived from the Aboriginal cosmology.*" (Boer, 1989:52). Russell (1997:71) argues that the categorical divisions in Australia's heritage system contribute to it being seen by many as a "*narrowly conceived system in the sense that it is not readily embraced by the public at large, and does not relate well to vigorous public concerns for the environment*". Colley and Bickford (1996:6) believe that these categorical divisions have "*curtailed... understanding the process of Aboriginal-European contact*".

It could be argued that this categorical approach has also contributed to particular conceptions of what constitutes Aboriginal heritage. Aboriginal heritage, following on from the treatment of history, is seen as being confined to the relics of ‘traditional’ life, to the prehistoric landscape (Dillon, 1983; Ah Kit, 1994; Warren, 1991; Menage, 1998; Byrne, 1996). Again, this is often the result of the same “*colonial-centric paradigm*” (Menage, 1998:121) utilised in the treatment of Aboriginal history. It is a paradigm that fails to recognise Aboriginal culture as living and dynamic. Cases like that of the heritage claim in 1992 by Aboriginal people on an urban building in Sydney – the Cyprus-Hellene Club (site of the 1938 Day of Mourning and Protest) are helping to challenge old perceptions, revealing the role of Aboriginal people in the nation’s recent history, and rallying for broader views of Aboriginal heritage (Menage, 1998).

### **1.5 The Cyprus-Hellene Club – What did the Case Reveal?**

The heritage claim on the Cyprus-Hellene Club revealed that challenging attitudes towards Aboriginal history and heritage is relevant today. The treatment of the claim illustrated that the colonial-centric view of what should constitute Aboriginal history and heritage is still rife. Indeed the claim itself, on a building where an event that was indisputably of major social significance occurred, was threatened because of these perceptions. Would-be developers of the site refused to acknowledge that a European building could constitute Aboriginal heritage. They challenged all aspects of the application for a permanent conservation order. The lack of attention paid to post contact Aboriginal history in society contributed to the lack of awareness that “*Aboriginal people have interacted with the European built environment since 1788, and*



*that a range of places in the urban, suburban and rural areas, have consequently become significant to Aboriginal people.”(Menage, 1998:129). In 1994 The Aboriginal History Committee (The AHC, now the NAHHC - National Aboriginal History and Heritage Council) was formed to help gain the maximum legal protection for the building whilst simultaneously “obtaining legal recognition that Aboriginal history did not end in 1788 and that Aboriginal heritage is not restricted to traditional sites and relics... (and) achieving our broad objective for the legal elevation of Aboriginal history and heritage to the same level given to white history and heritage.” (Menage, 1998:129).*



Figure 1.1 Rock Art, Deception Range  
East Kimberley



Figure 1.2 The Cyprus-Hellene Club  
Elizabeth St, Sydney

What is Aboriginal Heritage – ‘Pre-historic’ sites, ‘historic’ sites or both?

Cases like that of the Cyprus-Hellene Club, and even applications for heritage listings of more ‘traditional’ sites, not only reveal narrow perceptions of Aboriginal history but inadequacies of heritage practise in Australia. Indeed, when a permanent conservation order (PCO) was initially

granted for the building it was on the basis that the club was used as a meeting ground for various cultural groups – groups that had not appealed for the listing by the Heritage Council. The AHC had to fight long and hard to have their case heard, yet the groups to whom the club was an ‘important meeting place’ made no submissions. In one submission by the AHC they addressed these inequities. *“The inclusion by the Heritage Council of unsubstantiated European heritage values in this test case amounts to saying that a PCO cannot be applied to an urban building on the basis of an Aboriginal heritage claim in its own right”* (Menage, 1998:127-8). Indeed in NSW Aboriginal heritage is still seen largely as part of the natural environment, under the jurisdiction of the National Parks and Wildlife Service. Various suggestions have been made to improve both state and federal systems (Russell, 1997; Menage, 1998; Byrne, 1996; Boer, 1989; Ah Kit, 1994; Godwin et al., 1999). At the heart of all these suggestions is a reassessment of what constitutes history and heritage. National awareness over Aboriginal beliefs about history and heritage needs to be created. This can only occur when there is an awareness of cultural underpinnings which may affect interpretations.

In this thesis I will be examining the types of issues highlighted in the Cyprus-Hellene Club case, in particular, issues surrounding differing and/or multiple perspectives of history and heritage. These issues will be examined in a broad context and in the context of a case study. The case study area is the town of Wyndham, situated in the East Kimberley in regional Western Australia. Through interviews with Aboriginal people of the town, a general picture of what Aboriginal people perceive their history and heritage to be was established. Aboriginal people of Wyndham were also asked to contribute their personal histories of life in Wyndham, to create an alternative, Aboriginal history of Wyndham. Such a history is valuable in its own right, but it

also creates the opportunity to further explore issues at the centre of Aboriginal history in Australia. Issues surrounding the theory and philosophy of Aboriginal perspectives of history and heritage in general are also explored.

## Chapter 2: Examining Aboriginal Perspectives of History and Heritage in Wyndham

Figure 2.1 Wyndham's Position in the Kimberley

(available online at Kimberley Tourist Information <http://www.ebroome.com/kimberley/>)

### **2.1 Historical Background of Wyndham**

It is possible that Wyndham was never intended to be a permanent settlement but merely a temporary base for inland exploration. Indeed, Durack (a member of the famous pioneering

family), drawing on diary accounts of her ancestors, writes that a government surveyor at the time was surprised when returning from his travels to find a shantytown had almost arisen (Durack, 1997a:292). The discovery of gold at Halls Creek and the growing cattle industry lead to the initial establishment of stores and hotels at what would become the Port Town (Scott-Virtue 1999a:9-10). The geography of the area made the establishment of the town challenging. Durack's description of how some of the early storekeepers (out only to seek a profit and then move on) may have viewed the town, reveals something of its physical features. Wyndham is described as a "*sweltering, mosquito-infested little town with its feet in the mangrove mud for good and all*" (Durack 1997a:292). Indeed, there was little room for development at the Port, the mudflats leaving little flat ground between them and the steep, rocky hills (see figure 2.2). When the town expanded due to the construction of the Meatworks (opened in 1919) there was a corresponding increase in population - possibly around 2000 people compared to the current figure of around 900 (Western Australian Planning Commission, 2000:75). Most development occurred at the area known as the Three Mile because of the special constraints at the Port. The Three Mile is seen as the major centre of Wyndham today (see figure 2.3), the Port Town being but a shadow of its former self.

Figure 2.2 1889 Wyndham Port Area (Green, 1995:91)

During the early 1900s “*Aboriginal people were rarely seen in the town except as prisoners in chain gangs*” (Yu & Hudson, 1988:50). In the early 1900s many Aboriginal people were imprisoned for cattle spearing, or were killed or injured by pastoralists protecting their stock. Pastoralists also became targets of Aboriginal violence in pay back for attacks. In 1913 the Forrest River Mission was established, Yu and Hudson arguing it played a significant role in the breakdown of traditional life. Children from all parts of the Kimberley were removed from their homes and taken to the mission under the 1905 Aborigines Act (Yu & Hudson, 1988:52).

In the 1930s Wyndham came to prominence with the search for two lost German aviators and also as the starting point for Kingsford Smith’s record-breaking attempt to fly to England (Cassidy et al., 1986:11). Aviation was to become part of Wyndham’s history. The town also became known in World War Two because of its involvement in the attempted rescue of the State Ship Koolama, which managed to limp into the port before sinking. Wyndham also received recognition during the war as a consequence of Japanese bombing.

The 1960s were a time of economic growth for Wyndham. The official opening of Stage One of the Ord River Irrigation Scheme was in 1963. This development was to have a significant impact on the town (Cassidy et al., 1986:13). Throughout the 1960s the town’s infrastructure also continued to improve with the opening of the swimming pool, a new hotel (but at the cost of losing the old hotel building which had stood since the gold rush) and the completion of the bitumen road between Wyndham and Kununurra. Wyndham’s economic future seemed positive but in the 1980s, with the growth of Kununurra, Wyndham began to lose most of its services to

that town. In 1985 the meatworks also closed, the town losing a significant part of its population and one of its few economic assets.

The 1960s were times of great social change within Wyndham largely because of changes affecting the Aboriginal population. The 1965 and 1968 equal pay legislation, combined with the closure of missions like Forrest River, contributed to the establishment of *'the fringe dwelling communities'* (Scott-Virtue, 1999b:10). In discussing this era, Scott-Virtue concludes *"For Wyndham, these early legislative moves, were above all others, to have a profound impact within the Wyndham Community on Aboriginal/European social infrastructure throughout the 70s and 80s."* (ibid.).

## **2.2 Wyndham Today**

During the 1990s it became clear that Wyndham was experiencing a decline. As a result, the Wyndham Watershed Project was initiated to examine the problems within Wyndham. Wyndham's position was summarised by the project as *"the only town in the Kimberley currently expecting a population decline. It has continued to lose services and other functions over the past two decades and the effect of this process has now reached a point where the survival of the town is at stake"* (Hudson, 1990:i). Wyndham was seen, and to many still is, *"suffering from living in the shadow of Kununurra"* (Hudson, 1990:11) which prospered under the Ord River Scheme with the addition of services taken from Wyndham.

### **Timeline of Wyndham's History**

**Pre Town** – Debate whether Aboriginal people led a sedentary or nomadic lifestyle. May be they were becoming less nomadic and therefore there was more competition for resources when Europeans came. Explorers were a feature of this period. There is some resistance to settlement.

**1884** – Ships become a regular site in Cambridge Gulf. The first cattle drive arrived

**1885** – First Store – View Hill

**1886 – 1890** – 10,000 prospectors through Wyndham and Derby to Halls Creek.

**1887** – Prospectors start leaving, many set up in towns as they cannot afford to go back home.

**1889** – Much land taken up by pastoralists – local Aborigines generally not employed at this time. Overland Telegraph reached the town (Aborigines removed ceramic insulators for spear heads – this led to arrests and the use of Aboriginal chain gangs used to construct early roads). In the late 1880s missions report birth rate dropping. Is this due to health or to a change in traditional life?

**1890s** – Afghan traders on the increase. Afghan men marry Aboriginal women. After 1890 Aboriginal people begin to work on cattle stations. It wasn't till the 1920s however that this became common. There was a change from the use of traditional areas in the dry to using them in the wet in order to fit in with station owners or managers.

**1905** – The Aboriginal Act of 1905 brought the policy of removal of many Aboriginal children.

**1913** – Meat Works project commenced – completed 1919, in 1986 most of it burnt down.

**1913/14** – Forrest River Mission and School. By 1915 the mission was self sufficient and even supplied food to Wyndham. Until 1960s most Aboriginal people lived in missions and stations, not the town.

**1915** - An Aboriginal missionary, James Noble and his wife came to Forrest River Mission

**1916** - Pumping station for water completed (from 1890 water had been carried from the well at three mile into the port town). With the coming of water Boabs planted in main street

**1917** – First real school opened (one was opened in 1907 but was closed for lack of interest)

**1926** – Forrest River Massacre

**1929** – Pioneer aviator Kingsford Smith lands at Wyndham

**1932** – Search for missing German aviators - Aboriginal people integral to their discovery.

**1938** – A Jewish State is proposed for the Kimberley

Cont.

Cont.



<p><b>1939</b> – WWII – Wyndham officially evacuated. Aboriginal people from Forrest River Mission brought to Wyndham. During WWII Aboriginal stockmen were permitted to enter the town for the first time (previously they had to stop at the stockyards)</p> <p><b>1941</b> – Ord river survey for agricultural potential</p> <p><b>1942-43</b> – Bombings</p> <p><b>1942</b> – Sinking of the Koolama – Wyndham residents try to keep ship afloat.</p> <p><b>1949</b> – Kimberley Research Station established</p> <p><b>1950s</b> – Bus and taxi services established</p> <p><b>1960s</b> – Shire pool established, privatisation of meat works</p> <p><b>1965 and 1968</b> – Equal Pay Legislation (establishment of ‘fringe-dwelling’ communities, nomadic days gone)</p> <p><b>1968</b> – Forrest Mission closes – Aboriginal people move closer to town</p> <p><b>1972</b> – A group of Aboriginal people go back to Forrest River, renaming it Oombulgurri. The population is not fixed, with many people moving between Oombulgurri and Wyndham, even today. Fringe dwelling communities become overcrowded.</p> <p><b>1970s</b> – Economic development in the town, Prison opens at the Port and creates new jobs.</p> <p><b>1980s</b> – Outward movement of population. Relocation of government departments to Kununurra. Rural and Industries bank leaves, withdrawal of daily bus to Kununurra, downgrading of hospital</p> <p><b>1985</b> – Meatworks closed – 272 people out of work, 300 leave. Wyndham loses a lot of its white population, Royal Flying Dr Service closes radio base – moves to Derby 1990</p> <p><b>1988</b> – Incorporation of Joorook Ngarni to help build an economic base for Aboriginal people in Wyndham</p> <p><b>1990s</b> – Tradespeople in Wyndham unable to compete with Kununurra</p> <p><b>1993</b> – Closure of prison. Wyndham Action Group led fight but joined by many individual Aboriginal residents. Loss of more families with jobs. There is a move to target tourism. Top of the West Festival re-established. Community initiated projects. Tourism businesses started. Focus on heritage, inventory created, adaptive reuse of buildings etc</p> <p><b>1996</b> – Visitor numbers to town had trebled. By 1997 however things had changed and the visitors centre closed. The Ord River Scheme seems to have ensured the ports future however.</p>
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Table 2.1 Timeline of Wyndham’s History

There have been times where Wyndham has seemed to be improving. In 1996 tourism was a growing industry for the town with visitor numbers multiplying considerably. In 1997 however

most of the tourist ventures had closed or moved elsewhere in the Kimberley and the tourist information centre also closed (Scott-Virtue, 1999c:6). However, tourist ventures seem to have increased again in the last few years. In many ways the 2001 census may help reveal Wyndham's current development status. A number of new business ventures such as Aquaculture are currently being seriously considered for the town. Scott-Virtue notes that many of these decisions, such as the development of the Port, although positive economically for the town, might be at the expense of *"the very history and community spirit that has made Wyndham so unique"* (Scott-Virtue, 1999c:6).

### **2.3 Why do a Study on Wyndham?**

*"The Cambridge Gulf is the arsehole of the Earth, and Wyndham is sixty-five mile up it" –*

(Keene & Moussalli, 1986: appendix xiii)

Cassidy, who was involved with writing 'A Brief History of Wyndham' for the Shire Council (Cassidy et al., 1986) and was known as an historical 'authority' on the town, noted that for some people, it is hard to see Wyndham's merits (Keene & Moussalli, 1986: appendix xiii). Keene and Moussalli note that *"Wyndham comes in for its fair share of criticism because of its harsh environment. The heat and isolation have sometimes been unbearable to residents and visitors"* (ibid.). Wyndham's historical O'Donnell St Precinct is quite different from Sydney's sandstone heritage precincts, the historic buildings largely consisting of corrugated iron 'shacks' - not as 'pleasing to the eye' as perhaps the architectural heritage of Sydney (see figure 2.4). As Cassidy notes

Figure 2.3 Map of Wyndham (adapted from Wyndham Telecentre)

however, the town has a “*rough thrusting charm that grows by association*” (ibid.). Though they may not be immediately apparent, there are many potential benefits in locating such a study in Wyndham.

Figure 2.4 Historic O'Donnell St Precinct at Wyndham

(Western Australian Planning Commission, 2000:20)

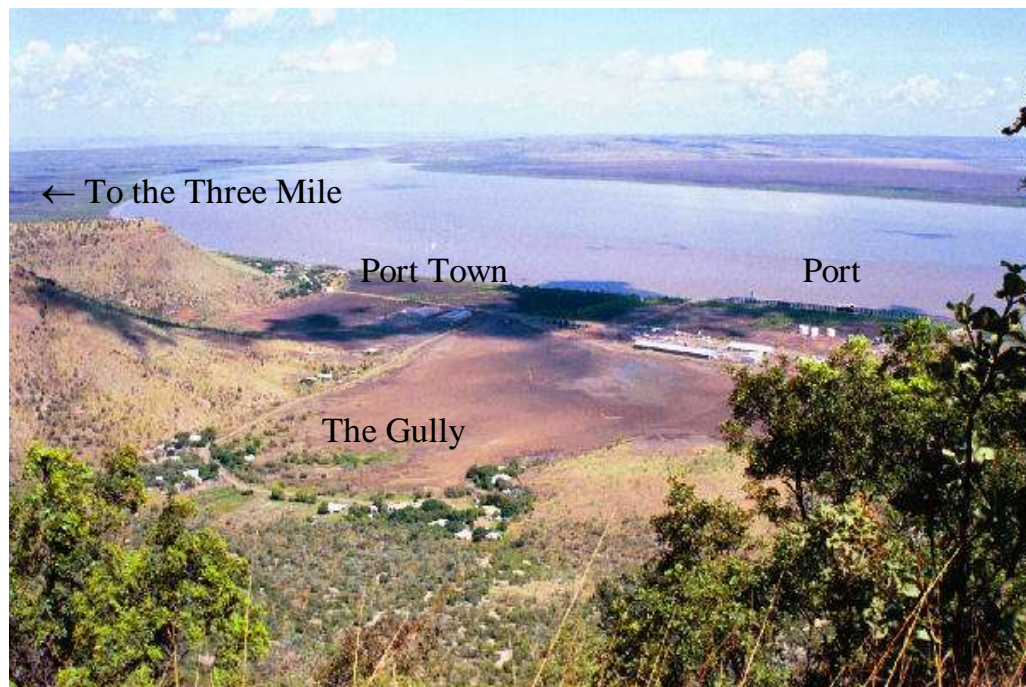


Figure 2.5 View of the Port and Gully Areas from the Bastion

Researching history and heritage in Wyndham may provide a case study illustrating how a colonialist view of history has been perpetuated. Wyndham was primarily established in 1885-6 for mining and pastoral purposes (Dillon, 1985). It is these sorts of activities that form the

backbone of what Menage (1998:121) sees as the *“historic colonial landscape”*. Menage believes that we use a colonial-centric paradigm to construct spatial identity. We see space as belonging to certain categories. The Cyprus-Hellene Club discussed previously for example, was seen as an urban, European space, and thus the heritage claim by Aboriginal people was a *“challenge to the spatial imagining that grounds Australian identity.”* (Menage, 1998:121). Researching Aboriginal history and heritage values in a rural environment, famed for a post settlement history that largely consists of (European) men working the land, may help previously unheard histories come alive. Aboriginal space also tends to be seen as on the fringes. Examining Aboriginal heritage values in the town of Wyndham itself rather than more remote areas may help challenge such assumptions. At the very least, an Aboriginal perspective of the more recent history of the town may be achieved.

Examining Wyndham’s history raises issues about the importance of local history in Australian history as a whole. Taylor (1996) highlights the particular importance of writing inclusive local histories. She writes, *“Knowledge of our local history has enormous value in changing peoples attitudes.”* (Taylor, 1996:7). History can help shape identity. If Aboriginal people do feel *“dissatisfaction with the marginal status of Aborigines within towns like Wyndham”* (Dillon, 1985:5), acknowledgement of their role in the history of the town may be a step toward improving their status. Examination of historic and heritage values may challenge conceptions of what constitutes Aboriginal history and heritage. The nature of the Aboriginal community of Wyndham also means that a wide range of Aboriginal perspectives may be obtained. In Wyndham, changes in the 1960s brought together Aboriginal people from all over Australia, who had traditionally been spatially separated. Traditional owners, members of the stolen

generation, and families who travelled to Wyndham in search of work or other family members were all brought together, forming a new social environment.

Also, it should not be ignored that as a “*permanent base component of the Wyndham economy*” (Dillon, 1985:12), Aboriginal people may well have a great role in the economic future of Wyndham, which suffers many of the problems of smaller country towns. The Kununurra-Wyndham Area Development Strategy (Western Australian Planning Commission, 2000:2) states that the extent of Aboriginal involvement in the town’s development will be a measure of the success of any future development. Understanding Aboriginal perspectives of the past may shed some light on the present state of Wyndham’s development and help stem any population outflow from the town. This may have advantages for the town as a whole.

Examining Aboriginal history and heritage concerns in Wyndham also provides the opportunity to review the situation in the state of Western Australia as a whole. In the past, Western Australia has been subject to criticism for its policies regarding Aboriginal cultural heritage (see Dillon, 1983 and Boer, 1989: 56-59). It is by no means the only state to have suffered such scrutiny. Indeed, the Tasmanian Aboriginal Relics Act 1975, gave protection only to those relics that could be dated as pre 1876 (a date known for the death of the last ‘full blooded’ Aborigine in Tasmania). Such legislation shows a narrow conception of Aboriginal heritage. Western Australia’s initial 1972 Aboriginal Heritage Act showed a much broader definition of Aboriginal heritage. The 1980 amendments restricted this definition, taking the power away from Aboriginal people to determine what was their heritage and giving it to the Minister (Boer 1989:56-7). Studying Aboriginal heritage in Wyndham allows for further exploration of these policies.

Above all, it is a chance to see what the Aboriginal community considers to be their heritage and history, to delve into the layers of history in order to illustrate a living, evolving culture; to attempt to create a 'shared history' and in doing so, reveal stories that may otherwise go unacknowledged.

## **2.4 Methods**

Before conducting interviews it was necessary to consult a number of intermediary Aboriginal organisations within Wyndham. The approval of the project by these bodies ensured the success of the study by providing access to a wide range of people. It was also necessary to go through these organisations as they are seen as the appropriate 'channels' for a formal study. Organisations consulted included Joorook Ngarni Aboriginal Corporation (operates the Community Development Employment Program), Balangarra Aboriginal Corporation (which represents the Traditional Owners of the area) and the East Kimberley Business Enterprise Centre. The organisations assisted with introductions for interviews. These were needed under ethical requirements, as the interviewer was always to have an intermediary person present, to ensure participants were not pressured into participation. These organisations also provided links to others such as the historical society and thus access to museum records.

Beyond the organisations however, what became evident during the study was the importance of interviewing different family groups. Social organisations are important, but of greater importance is family, extended family or clan ties. Members of the same family groups tended to have similar stories and perspectives on history and heritage issues. Consequently, it became



important to seek interviews with all the major family groups within Wyndham in order to achieve a more balanced perspective of Wyndham as a whole. A gender balance in the interviewees was also sought. Overall 15 people from the community were interviewed, 9 men and 6 women, all over the age of 18.

Participants were asked to give a short background on how they came to be in Wyndham and a brief life history in order for the interviewer to gain a sense of their context. They were then asked generally about their role in Wyndham's history, events that were important in their lives and events that were considered important to Wyndham's history. A discussion about the role of history and heritage was also initiated along with questions relating to places they considered important or part of their heritage or history (An outline of questions posed can be viewed in appendix 2). Interviewees were also questioned as to how the role of Aboriginal people in the town's history could best be recognised. Participants were given the option of being identified in the study. As most participants chose not to be identified, this study will refer to information gained in the interviews according to a number given to each interviewee. Transcripts of the interviews will not be added as an Appendix in order to maintain participants' anonymity, as in a small community the identity of an informant can become quickly apparent through incidental details revealed in the transcripts. Basic details of the interviewees are recorded in the table below.

<b>Interviewee Number</b>	<b>Sex</b>	<b>Approximate Age*</b>
One	Male	40's
Two	Female	49
Three	Male	41
Four	Female	50's
Five	Female	53
Six	Male	60's
Seven	Male	58
Eight	Male	60's
Nine	Male	38
Ten	Female	40's
Eleven	Female	Elder 80-90
Twelve	Female	59
Thirteen	Male	34
Fourteen	Male	62
Fifteen	Male	36

Table 2.2 Basic Details of Participants

\* Some participants revealed their age, others did not reveal it, or did not know it

The following two chapters (3 and 4) have been devoted to recording Aboriginal histories of the Wyndham area. It is intended to provide an insight into the aspects of history that were seen as important to the local Aboriginal people. The history centres around a series of themes that came up again and again during the interview process. Largely, the histories are made up of the same key events that were important to Europeans of the area, yet they are interpreted through a different set of experiences. Some key events were unique to the Aboriginal history of the area.

Certainly these events (eg the coming of equal pay legislation and the Forrest River Massacres) had an effect on the white population, but it was the Aboriginal population who suffered the bulk of the consequences. Chapters 5 and 6 are then devoted to a discussion of what the Aboriginal people interviewed felt about history and heritage in general. This allows information disseminated in Chapters 3 and 4, to be used to discuss the role of history for local Aboriginal people. This information will also be used to help answer questions such as what constitutes heritage for those interviewed and what its importance is. A discussion of the results of the major historical findings in conjunction with the results of the study into heritage and history theory will then follow. An overview as to the place of history and heritage for Aboriginal people in Wyndham may then be achieved.

## Section B: Aboriginal Histories of Wyndham

### Chapter 3: General Themes and Issues

#### **3.1 Introduction**

Given the limits of an honours thesis, it is not possible to write a truly comprehensive history. To do that would require many more interviews and many more words than are available in an honours report. It is however possible to consider and to relate stories. This is fitting, because the dominant view that emerged from this study, regarding both history and heritage, was that it was the stories associated with places and events (more so than the physical reminders of the past) which were important (this will be discussed further in Chapters 5 and 6). There are stories of intrinsic importance, and there are stories that reflect the day-to-day realities of life for Aboriginal people around Wyndham.

The stories related in the interviews were predominately of families working to make a place for themselves in Wyndham. These stories were seen as important to pass on to younger generations so they could know the struggles involved. In this sense the value of history was very personal. History helped shape family identity. Knowing this ‘modern’ history also seemed particularly integral to those families who had no links to the traditional owners of the Wyndham area. These individuals felt an attachment to place and yet could not say that Wyndham was their ‘country’. In this sense, knowing one’s family history was a strong force in helping shape identity where dispossession had occurred.

The passing on of this history of movement and struggle, and the bringing together of people and place at Wyndham, became a way of gaining some identity. Knowing history was also seen by many interviewed as a way to make ‘White Australia’ realise the hardship of Aboriginal Australians. It was believed by many that re addressing history is an important step forward for Australia. Passing on the lessons of the past was seen as being important. Yet despite this there

was a sense that even though Australians as a whole should have an understanding of Aboriginal history, there were histories that were largely only for Aboriginal consumption. Many people in the town, for example, felt a real sense of pride in the history book, *The Oombulgurri Story* (Green, 1988). Oombulgurri is an Aboriginal community near Wyndham, which was also once the site of the Forrest River Mission. Many copies were purchased with pride because parents and relatives feature in the book. It could be shared with non-Aboriginal people, but its primary role appeared to be the promotion of community spirit through a common history. This chapter relates some of the stories, as told by those interviewed, of the common history of many Aboriginal people in the Wyndham area.

### **3.2 Traditional Ownership**

There is some debate as to who are the traditional owners in the Wyndham area. Certainly at least one of the participants interviewed (interviewee 11) identified herself as a traditional owner of the area. Others identified themselves as being related in some way to traditional owners of Wyndham or other areas. Indeed a large part of the community identified as being of Gidja descent (Gidja people were traditionally from the Warmun or Turkey Creek Area, around 200km south of Kununurra). Interviewee 1 suggested that the families who were traditional owners of the area had largely left long ago. He argued that it was the people of the Oombulgurri area who used Wyndham during the wet. There was also a theory that Wyndham was a meeting ground for several groups during the wet and not really utilised in the dry. Many of those interviewed recollected stories of corroborees held in the Three Mile area that may substantiate this.

Figure 3.1 Map of what were thought to be the Traditional 'Tribal' Groups of the Wyndham Area

(Green, 1995:21)

Regardless of what it was originally, Wyndham certainly became a melting pot of Aboriginal cultures. The focus of this thesis is not a pre-contact history of Wyndham, or on debating traditional ownership, but on the modern history of the area. This is a history that includes all Aboriginal people, traditional owners and otherwise. In part it is the history of how Wyndham's Aboriginal community became such a mix of cultures.

### **3.3 The 'Stolen Generations'**

One of the major contributing factors to the diversity of Aboriginal people within the Wyndham area was the official policy, under the 1905 Aborigines Act (Aboriginal Affairs Planning

Authority Library, 1993:2) of the removal of children in the early 1900s. Forrest River Mission, established in 1913 (Haebich, 2000:213) took children and in some cases families, from all over Australia. Five of the people interviewed had spent a period of their life living at the Forrest River Mission. Others had one or both parents who grew up at the mission. Generally, only younger interviewees had been born in Wyndham and lived there the majority of their lives (periods of absence for this age group, approximately 30-40 years old, were usually for education or employment purposes).

Stories relating to the forcible removal of children are often tragic. As Haebich suggests, family networks are at the centre of Aboriginal society and the fragmentation of these networks, both through official governmental policies and the removal of children for labour, cut to the bone of Aboriginal society (Haebich, 2000:13). The Aboriginal community of Wyndham has many stories. Interviewee 6 related how his parents were taken to Forrest River Mission – a considerable distance from their traditional country – his father from the West Kimberley and his mother from near the Western Australian and Northern Territory Borders. He spoke of himself, as a descendant of stolen generation parents, as being a “nobody”. Traditional owners were the only people in the area who could be acknowledged and had real status. Interviewee 6 saw this as the way it should be, but found it difficult being a ‘non traditional owner’ as he had no rights. Political influence, both within Wyndham and further a field, was one way where he felt this could possibly be countered. Interviewee 6’s story certainly showed that the sense of dislocation did not necessarily stop at the generations who were physically removed.



Interviewee 2's story also reflected the idea that the ramifications of the removal of children from their families, continued to be felt throughout the generations. Interviewee 2 spoke of her father keeping a rifle constantly at his side and teaching his wife how to use it. Station owners had attempted to take the wife as a young child, to have her grow up as a domestic on a station. Having experienced it personally, they knew the threat was very real and it was vital that this should not re occur.

Apart from the removal of children to missions other children were taken from their families as soon as they were old enough to learn the appropriate tasks (usually cleaning for girls and stock work or labouring for boys) to work on stations. The practise of taking children to work on stations had been in place since the first pioneer families arrived. Reynolds (2000:165) notes Durack's description that "*within a few months of their arrival in the Kimberley's (they) had 'somehow acquired a few native boys between eight and fourteen years old...'*". Durack (cited in Reynolds, 2000:165) went on to write "*how they got hold of them was nobody's business, but whether by fair means or foul they (the boys) were to stand a better chance of survival in the years to come than the bush tribes people.*".

Despite the many tragic stories surrounding the removal of children, there were also stories of triumph. Interviewee 2 related such a story regarding the attempted removal of her mother. Stories such as this, are very important to relate, as it is often only stories of oppression that gain prominence. It is just as important to realise the many ways in which Aboriginal people stood up against the injustices they faced. One of the reasons the Cyprus-Hellene Club case was so influential was that it highlighted a moment in history where Aboriginal people were not seen as

a “dying race”, but a race of peoples who were standing up for their cause. Many of the places noted in association with the history of Aboriginal people in Australia are sites of dispossession, murder and massacre. Sites commemorating resistance are rare, though stories of resistance are gradually becoming more widely known. Stories of resistance help create a sense of pride. Interviewee 2’s story was as follows... *“My mum... they took her away when she was four and her brother went and stole her back. Took her through the desert. They used to take them and grow them up where they could work on the station.... All night they walked in the desert back of Balgo.”*

Overall, it was apparent that every interviewee had been affected by forcible removal – either personally or by other family members having been dislocated from their country and/or family.

### **3.4 Life at Forrest River Mission**

The Forrest River Mission, now Oombulgurri, was and still is, a great local influence. Today there is a ‘floating’ population between Oombulgurri and Wyndham. At different times of the week many people can be seen waiting at the jetty for the barge to go back to ‘Oombi’ as it is affectionately known. Life at Forrest River Mission was difficult, yet many found it enjoyable. Interviewee 3 discussed his unending sense of surprise over the respect that many Aboriginal people who lived at the mission felt for the missionaries. Interviewee 1, who had not lived at the mission, recognised the controversial nature of any discussion about the missionaries. Some groups felt they were a help to Aboriginal people in hard times, others thought their role was more questionable. Interviewee 1 felt that they had altered Aboriginal culture. *“Before the missionaries came Aboriginal people never wore clothes. The missionaries taught shame and*

*that is still with Aboriginal people today. Aboriginal culture had no shame before. They imprinted that.*” (Interviewee 1). Interviewee 6 also reflected on some of the terrible aspects of the life his parents endured at the mission, constantly working in the gardens or cleaning. Work parades were held daily (see figure 3.2) .A particular story that stood out for him was the degrading job the girls were given of fanning the missionaries as they ate around the dinner table. His mother was tall so always received that job, because the fans were mounted in the centre of the table and she was able to reach over them. She hated the job. Interviewee 6 also reflected that his parents were only able to marry at Forrest River (after the proper period of courtship) because they were both of ‘mixed’ blood. Marriage to full bloods or European people was not permitted.

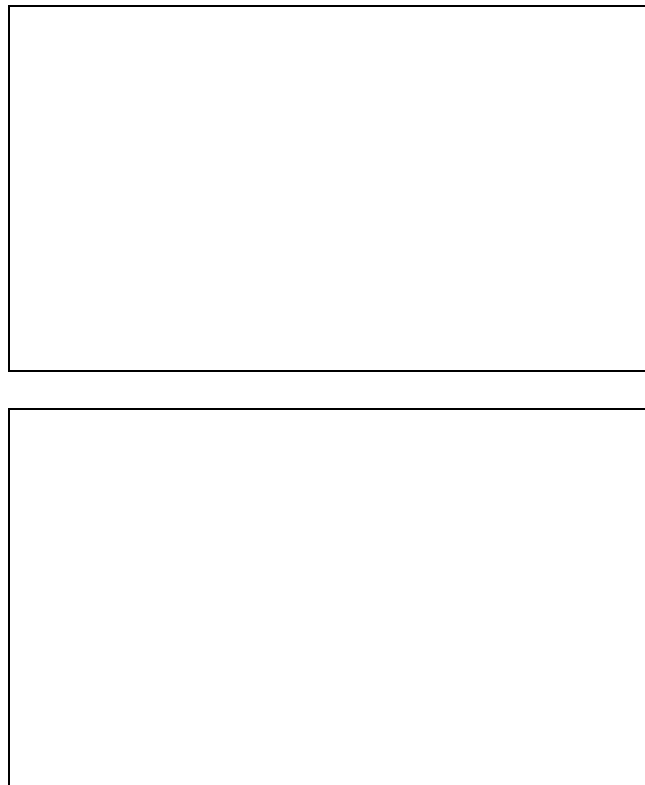


Figure 3.2 Women’s (top) and Men’s (bottom) work parades c 1930, Forrest River (Green, 1988:72)

Some remember the days of the Forrest River Mission as the ‘good old days’. The older population particularly has this sense as it was a time when there were no alcohol problems for Aboriginal people (Interviewee 5 and 11). Also, a certain amount of traditional life could be fitted into the routine at the mission (see figure 3.3). Interviewee 5 related the day-to-day activities – most of which can be confirmed by Green (1995) in his account of the mission. There was a daily routine. Boys and girls were kept in separate dormitories at the mission, they attended school daily, and when school was over they had to return to the dormitory to do their chores. Clothes would be washed for the next day. Adults at the mission attended working parties, tending the gardens, which sometimes even supplied Wyndham with food. In the school holidays however, children were able to go bush with the old people. Girls went with the old ladies and boys with the men. Boys would be taught to spear kangaroos and girls were taught fishing, cooking damper and picking bush fruits. Sports days were also a feature and were held right from the early days through to the mission’s closure in 1968.

Figure 3.3: Smoking a tree at Forrest River Mission (Green: 1988:103)

The Forrest River Massacres were significant in the lives of those connected with Forrest River Mission. Historically the massacres were thought to be, in part, retaliation for the murder of William Hay, one of the owners of Nulla Nulla Station, by an Aborigine called Lumbia, following a dispute about cattle spearing.

Currently, the written histories of Wyndham pay little or no attention to these massacres, and yet they have left a huge imprint on the Aboriginal population of the area. The Wyndham histories may have neglected the massacres for a number of reasons. Perhaps at the time of writing the events rated little importance in an official history, or were even covered up, or perhaps it was merely beyond the scope of smaller works. Many of those interviewed believed however, that the

Forrest River Massacres were of such importance to local Aboriginal history and yet they have not been properly acknowledged. There has however been a gradual acknowledgement of other massacres in the north of Australia. For example, in June 2001, the then Governor-General, Sir William Deane, travelled to Mistake Creek in order to properly acknowledge a massacre (Deane, 2001).

Some interviewees knew of the book Neville Green had published - 'The Forrest River Massacres', but felt that what had happened should be more widely recognised. This also links to the idea some interviewees professed that it was not so much the writing of history that was important (as many people would never read the book) but getting the stories across – either verbally (linking with the oral tradition) or otherwise. Written histories could work if they were written in a way where people would be compelled to read. Interviewee 1 noted that someone (Rod Morgan) had written a book trying to disprove the massacre and felt that this was “*criminal*”. It took too long trying to get such things accepted into society to have someone attack them.

Interviewee 11 spent some of her young adulthood at Forrest River Mission. It is unknown exactly when she was born, but it is feasible that she was at the mission when the massacres occurred, and at an age where she could comprehend what was happening. She gave an account of one of the massacres. She had vivid recollections of hiding in the hills, waiting till they could see the policemen had left, before they went home. She also recalled when they found out about the murders.

*“Just other side of Forrest River. Not far from there – yeah you can walk there. You can see all the horses track. But you can’t hear the shot too far. And they chuck all them old people in the water. Kids and all. It was really cruel. I don’t know where the policemen came from. Maybe somebody’s from some country along the way. But nobody did know, until this one young man went up there and said I’ll go and see them people. Go talk with them. When he went there nobody was there. He saw blood everywhere, horses track, but no body – they threw the body in the water. It’s cruel ay.... they was killing them right there.... Two men was going hunting and they looked – nobody home, no people, and they ... saw all the body lying – little kids and all so they went back and told Jack Gribble and James Noble...People they gotta go up there and see all the bodies up there... and they took them to see all the bodies. And they picked them up, took them to Forrest River and where you see a big long hill like this, you got big cross there – and all those bodies are there – everyone went down to pick them up. They buried them up top. Not far. Over the hill there and roadway up you see a big cross.”*

Many of those interviewed who have been to Forrest River/Oombulgurri during their lives recount the very powerful experience of visiting the site where the bones of those murdered were buried. It is a very tangible part of their recent history.

Figure 3.4: Massacre memorial at Forrest River Mission (Oombulgurri) (Green 1995:4)

The Forrest River Massacres have been recognised in official counts of history. It is important to note however that it is unlikely these massacres were ‘one offs’ in the area. Others may be hidden from history. Interviewee 3 for example revealed the following story.

*“I’ve also been told that massacres happened on stations south of here. One pastoralist wanted to get rid of large groups who were living traditionally on the land. He sent word that he was going to give them a good feed. He cooked up damper and laced the treacle with poison. It was only because they wouldn’t come into the station to work. 30-40 died. He threw them on the fire. Nothing grows on that ground. I’ve been there. Oil from the bodies killed the grass. That might have been in the 1940s so it was still recent history.”*



### 3.5 World War Two

World War Two served to reinforce the feeling amongst the Aboriginal population that they were of no significance to Wyndham or indeed Australia as a whole. The white population living at Forrest River Mission and many living in Wyndham, were taken south on boats for safety during much of the war period. The so-called 'bush' Aboriginals were told to return bush and those living at Forrest River Mission were taken across to Wyndham and 'dumped' (Interviewee 6). Despite this feeling of abandonment by the white population, for most, this was an enjoyable time as families were able to return to a near traditional life, learning skills off bush people and an understanding of culture. Stolen Generation children were taught hunting skills by the bush people. Though there were people from different areas, a common sense of unity was passed down *"What I remember most I guess was the massing... together of part Aboriginal people. It was pretty important to me because all of a sudden we had relatives. We had Aunties and Uncles that we never ever saw"*(Interviewee 6).

The war also gave an opportunity to discuss their common situation, to make sense of all that had happened to them. *"I remember quite well my parents sitting together with other people – sitting together and talking about these things.... It stuck in my mind and that's why I talk and write about them today. It eventually provided some sort of direction for them on how to go about getting themselves sorted out – and they did that."* (Interviewee 6). Interviewee 6 went as far to say that what was created during the war in Wyndham was a *"new generation of (Aboriginal) people.. .who were educated on the mission... (but)... used the Aboriginal culture to support their lifestyle and grow"*.

Despite the benefits it brought, the war was at times a scary experience. Interviewee 8 remembered as a child, throwing a blanket over his head, so that he did not have to see the planes which made the terrifying noise. Soldiers were continually present (Interviewee 6). To some, the soldiers were frightening, however, others remembered positive interaction with those posted at Wyndham. Interviewee 11 recalled soldiers, on the lookout for Japanese planes, talking to Aboriginal people whilst they sat out their watch. She also suggested that the planes that succeeded in bombing Wyndham did so because they came from a different, perhaps unexpected direction. Interviewee 11 was at the Nine Mile when Wyndham was bombed. Not much was revealed about the bombing of the airfield. However, a considerable number of bombs seemed to have fallen on the mudflats. Other interviewees support this and apparently some bomb craters still exist.

The war continued to make its presence felt in Wyndham long after its official end. Interviewee 3 told how trenches, helmets and bayonets could still be seen in the 1960s. Shells and intact ammunition were also found on the marsh. An old bomb hole can still be seen near the King River and there is a rumour that an old bomb still exists on a block out of town (Interviewee 1). These remnants from the war were fascinating for kids around Wyndham and caused them to get in considerable trouble at times. Interviewee 3 related the following story... *“When I just started school some kids were wagging... they found a live bomb and brought it up to the edge of the playground to show it off. They got in so much strife when the principal found out!”*

The Second World War is acknowledged in Wyndham through a number of public memorials and plaques. It is however an almost exclusively ‘white’ remembrance. The people interviewed had their own memories and their own stories to tell about the war years. One of the pivotal events in the ‘white’ history of Wyndham during the war was the loss of the state ship Koolama. The fatally damaged Koolama limped into Wyndham Harbour and a predominantly white group of people unsuccessfully attempted to keep the vessel afloat. This event, which features prominently in the written record of Wyndham at war, was notably absent from the recollections of the Aboriginal war-time residents interviewed. Their story was different. It revolved around the day-to-day experiences of life in the bush during the war years.

My research stay in Wyndham included Anzac Day – a public holiday in Australia. For the Aboriginal people of the town a funeral was to be held the day before Anzac day. The largest employer of Aboriginal people in the town – the CDEP organisation Joorook Ngarni, allowed employees to work on Anzac day and have the previous day free for the funeral. This says a lot about the priorities of Aboriginal people in the town. It is family and friends that truly matter, kinship circles. A public holiday that reflects on those who gave their lives in war is seen as a very white institution. Interviewee 1 expressed *“The Australian Government hasn’t properly recognised yet the role of Aboriginal people in World War II”*. Until such recognition comes about, Anzac day will likely remain irrelevant to many Aboriginal people.

Beyond their own personal experiences, the stories of Aboriginal people in Wyndham during WWII have the potential to reveal small, but valuable insights about the war itself,

things that may even be of international value in terms of the history of WWII. Interviewee 6, for example, related that Japanese planes were seen along the North-West Coast of Australia long before what would be traditionally expected. *“Our parents were talking to bush Aboriginal people over at Forrest River Mission, which is say 30-40km as the crow flies westwards, about Japanese being there long before 1942. There are stories about Japanese moving around that area in the late 30’s. So they’ve been around. Japanese planes and Japanese submarines. Up to 5 years before the war.”* (Interviewee 6).

Interviewee 8 also suggested that the Japanese had women pilots in their planes. This does not seem to fit with the patriarchal nature of Japanese society. If the story were substantiated it could be explained either through a shortage of pilots at the time, or perhaps the pilots were simply young boys, as young suicide bombers have been found previously to be, merely mistaken as females. Certainly this point raises some questions.

### **3.6 Equal Pay Legislation**

Just as WWII provoked a movement of Aboriginal people into the town when they were taken there from the Forrest River Mission, so too did the coming of Equal Pay legislation. Although this legislation could be considered a step forward for Aboriginal people, the way it was enacted caused many social problems.

Dawn May believes that Aboriginal labour could be 'employed' at 4 times the rate of white labour because it was so cheap - usually only in exchange for tobacco, food and clothing (Reynolds, 2000:67). Aboriginal labour was a vital part of pioneering Australia. Some cattle stations may arguably never have been created if they had to utilise white, full cost labour (Reynolds, 1999:237). Also, Aboriginal people brought with them a knowledge of the land beyond that possessed by any European stockman. An additional advantage for cattle stations 'employing' Aboriginal labour was that in quieter times, when the labour was no longer needed, Aboriginal people were sent bush, no longer requiring upkeep by the station as white stockman would. The biggest advantage for Aboriginal people working on the cattle stations was that many people could remain on their traditional land. During the Wet season in the Kimberley, many could also return to traditional lifestyles. Though sites, which were previously visited in the dry often had to be visited in the wet, so some changes to traditional life had to be accommodated (Interviewee 3). This semblance of traditional life was however valued. All those interviewed, whether discussing their own experiences or those of their parents, believed that although the work was hard, being in touch with the land helped give structure and meaning to life. When equal pay legislation suddenly meant that station owners could not keep Aboriginal people on – even those they had grown attached to - it devastated many people as they were evicted from their traditional lands.

Interviewee 13 encapsulated the affects of this move on his father *"My parents used to work on a station. My father was one of the greatest horsemen around. Bringing him into town was the greatest heartbreak of his life. He was a bush/station person. He didn't have the education for town living."* As prohibition of alcohol for Aboriginal people had also been lifted many

Aboriginal people turned to drink. Jobs also became even scarcer for Aboriginal stockmen when those who were involved in droving began to be replaced by the use of road trains in the late 60s (Interviewee 6). It was not until 1966 that the bitumen road between Wyndham and Kununurra was completed (Cassidy et al., 1986:14). The Public Works Department or the Main Roads employed most men who got work. Almost all work was hard manual labour. Many women took in washing or did cleaning work to help make ends meet.

### **3.7 School and Play**

For many of those interviewed, schooling played a large role in their life in Wyndham. Of course there were those interviewed (largely in an older age bracket) who had little or no schooling, but for the majority of interviewees school was a part of daily life as a child. Originally the school was in the Port Precinct. Interviewees 6 and 12 both remembered attending the school at the port. Their situation was in some ways unique however (this will be discussed in Chapter 6) as both their parents had citizenship rights which allowed them access to such services before other Aboriginal people were given these rights. Younger interviewees remembered attending the school at its current location at the Three Mile.

Many events centred around school. Interviewee 6 recalled the flying padre from the Salvation Army landing on the mudflats near the school at the port. He came and taught the children songs whilst *'trying to convert us then and there'* (Interviewee 6). Interviewee 3 felt that there was very little racism at the school when he attended it at the Three Mile. There was some rivalry in play – 'wars' between the black kids and white kids – (usually after watching some movie) but on the

whole relations were good. Interviewee 3 recalled that it wasn't until he went to the cinema at the Port that he was aware of the different standards of treatment of black and white people within the town. Aboriginal people had set seats, and indeed there were times that only those recognised as respectable blacks within the town, those who worked hard, could attend (Interviewee 6). Many interviewees commented on the cinemas as one of the most direct ways in which discrimination was obvious within Wyndham. Others also commented about having to wait in the shops until all the white customers had been served, and if new customers came in the waiting just had to start all over again. Keene and Moussalli (1986) showed the discrimination that was present in the town when they noted the "*concession*" to the swimming pool opening in 1965. The pool was built through funds donated by Reverend Watts who stated that the pool had to be "*kept accessible to the Aborigines*" (Keene & Moussalli, 1986:43).

One thing that was particularly memorable for all interviewees was the time they spent playing. Many reflected that this was a feature sadly lacking in younger age groups. Even in relatively recent times play was very important to children. Interviewee 3 attributed some of this to the fact that Wyndham only received television in the 1980s. Children played all sorts of games on the mud flats and went fishing or hunting. Many were taught traditional hunting or gathering ways by their parents, and weekends were a great time to take off and live off the land. *On weekends we'd take off with just a box of matches and a shanghai and whatever we caught we'd cook and eat. We learnt to catch fish by breaking up certain mangrove branches in pools – it makes a froth and takes the oxygen out of the water so the fish come to the surface*" (Interviewee 3).

These adventures, along with general chasing games, even took children up the steep hills of the township, something that even today amazes those who did the playing. *"We were like mountain*

goats!’ (Interviewee 12). The mudflats were also very popular. Interviewee 12 remembered many picnics and sports days (including softball and foot races) held on the mudflats along with special events like the Guy Faulkes Day fireworks. Interviewee 14 also recalled Guy Faulkes Celebrations as a memorable occasion. Neither interviewee recalled when or why the celebration of this day stopped. Certainly it has not been a feature of recent times. Interviewee 3 related some of the games that were played when he was a young child. These games relied heavily on imagination but also revealed a sense of Wyndham at the time. One game he played was “stations”. Played on the edge of the marsh, trucks were created out of oil-cans and pushed around of the edge of the tidal flats, stopping for fuel at the next station.

### **3.8 Major Events**

There were several major events in Wyndham, to which people looked forward. The races were one such event. Held once a year since 1886, in the early days all the station workers were given the day off (Keene & Moussalli, 1986:47). In this sense, most Aboriginal people remembered it as a time of family reunion. People came from all the different stations. Interviewee 3 remembered the experience from a child’s point of view.

*“Station workers had a holiday and would come in. Like an annual holiday meet up with all the relatives and we’d go and visit all the camps. Each station had their own camp and their own racehorse. Everybody started crying when they saw each other. That is the way they show they are happy to see you. People used to get paid when they went to the races so they could buy clothes etc. Kids got given money so they came away with like \$30 (a fortune then) from*



*everyone giving them \$1-2. Now everyone sees each other all the time cause we've got good roads etc."*

Interviewee 15 noted that throughout the history of the town get togethers such as the races have been important. The Parry's Creek picnic was an important occasion where the whole town got together, staying out at Parry's Lagoon (see figure 3.5) for a few days. To the sorrow of many of those interviewed the event can no longer be held there due to a ruling by CALM (Western Australian Department of Conservation and Land Management) since the area was Ramsar (Convention on Wetlands of International Importance) listed. The Munumburra music festival was recognised by some interviewees as becoming an occasion of similar importance. Interviewee 15 noted a positive change in the involvement of Aboriginal people in these sorts of events. In the last 20 years Aboriginal people have become more involved in organising and assisting with events. In the early days, for example, when the races were popular, they merely attended an event white people organised. Interviewee 6 however believed that the Munumburra music festival had evolved only through the actions of a non-indigenous organisation, and was therefore inappropriate.



Figure 3.5: Parry's Creek Nature Reserve (Marlgu Billabong)

### **3.9 Daily Life**

Daily life consisted of many things for Aboriginal people around Wyndham. For employed Aboriginal men, particularly during the 1960s and 70s, it meant hard physical labour, usually with the Public Works Department or the Main Roads Department. Indeed, it is arguable that in terms of the creation of the physical town seen today, Aboriginal people were the real pioneers. Interviewee 4 recalled her husband constructing many footpaths, the pool and the water supply pipeline. Prior to this, hard physical work was demanded on the stations, work which may well have made the establishment of the cattle industry in the Kimberley possible.

Before, and in some cases, even after the introduction of Equal Pay Legislation, Aboriginal people, particularly those not on stations, had to be self sufficient in terms of food and shelter. Interviewee 2 recalled that her father had built their house and also grew vegetables for the family to “get by”. Tea and sugar rations that they received were sometimes swapped with the

people from the Forrest River Mission for seeds so they could get their vegetable garden well established. Aboriginal elders were also regularly given fresh vegetables from the garden by Interviewee 2's father in order to ensure their welfare. Hunting and gathering activities were continued, not only to preserve culture, but for survival. This was particularly the case during World War Two.

Interviewee 4 recalled that when she was younger they had lived in tents. Once they lived at the 7 mile with a lot of the itinerant meatworkers. Water was carted from a well in buckets and lights were constructed from tin cans that were filled with fat and had a wick inserted. They never went to the pictures. The considerable distance to town didn't stop them so much as a lack of money. Occasionally, when there was money, they might go into town in a taxi to do some shopping. Usually any town supplies were fetched on a bicycle. The Shire eventually removed them from the 7 mile, declaring it only a temporary camp. Interviewee 1 referred to the constant shifting of Aboriginal people within the town by the authorities. In particular he noted the relocation of Aboriginal people to near Parry's Creek (marshland) as perhaps one of the most mismanaged moves. It was an *"out of sight out of mind sort of thing. 30km out. The road was impassable in the wet. And people lived out there"*.

Day to day life was often difficult, but where they were able, families stuck together and worked through the hardships. Many of those interviewed reflected how their past made them appreciate things many younger people take for granted today - things such as a roof over your head and food for the table.

## Chapter 4: Specific Issues

### **4.1 Introduction**

The following themes were discussed by just a few individuals interviewed. They are still however, an integral part of the history of the town. Interviewees came from different backgrounds and age groups. Younger interviewees did not have experience of the early days of Wyndham's history, and, apart from stories that their parents may have told them, found it harder to offer judgements about significant events from the early days. Older interviewees, and in particular Interviewee 11, who was considerably older than other interviewees, therefore had some unique stories. Similarly, people such as Interviewee 13, had some different opinions

because of their upbringing or beliefs – in this case strong religious beliefs. Themes such as alcoholism were not discussed by all interviewees. This may be a result of the sensitivity of the issue. Those that did speak about it saw it as a major problem within the town.

## **4.2 The Afghans**

Afghan traders were recognised by many of those interviewed as responsible for bringing most building materials into Wyndham. Little else was known by the majority of interviewees as they had a limited experience of the ‘camelmen’, having grown up in later eras. By 1908 Afghan camel teams were replacing bullock teams, taking stores to the various towns and stations in the Kimberley (Durack 1997b:203). The Afghans were renowned for their speed and reliability. Durack (1997b:203) attributes some of this to their refusal to drink alcohol as part of a Muslim lifestyle. In the early 1900s, Afghan’s became a feature of Kimberley life, interacting with the Aboriginal population in camps like that at the Four Mile (Interviewee 7).

Figure 4.1: Camels Carting Corrugated Iron from Wyndham (Durack, 1997a:76)

Rajkowski (1987:167) believes that there is a lack of documentary evidence about the relationships between Afghan and Aboriginal people, and outlined her major conclusions about the Afghan Camelmen and Aboriginal people. Some Aboriginal men were employed by the Afghans and Afghan men did marry Aboriginal women, but overall, it is assumed that their influence was minimal - they shared some nomadic characteristics and got on reasonably well. Afghan men, according to Rajkowski (1987:168), even considered Aboriginal women more suitable for marriage than European women. There is however some reason, to question these assumptions. Rajkowski (1987:167) comments, for example, that the Afghans expected low wages from Europeans, and in turn paid Aboriginal men less, or even just fed them. The problem with Rajkowski's work is that it merely considers the Afghan perspective, and not an Aboriginal one. Thus she concludes that

*"The contact between the Afghan camelmen and the Aborigines over a period of just under fifty years was one of mutual recognition and acceptance, and not of competition and a will to dominate. The Afghan employer did little to raise the status of his Aboriginal employee, but the functioning and peace of the Aboriginal community was not threatened by the Afghans who cohabited in the bushland with them."* (Rajkowski, 1987:169).

Perspectives gathered in Wyndham during interviews however leave some very different opinions on this topic. Interviewees 6 and 11 gave the most detailed accounts of the Afghans, and showed two, contrasting, perspectives. Interviewee 6 gave a fairly negative account whereas interviewee 11 was more positive, being of Afghan descent herself. These differing perspectives

are indicative of the diversity of views on a range of topics during this study. The two accounts given, were as follows.

Interviewee 6 talked about the Afghans using Aboriginal women as a means to pass easily through the country, literally as an *“insurance policy”*. He believed that many Aboriginal women who became Afghan wives were mistreated. European people did not treat Aborigines well at the time, but Interviewee 6 suggested that the Afghans treated Aboriginal people even more poorly. What is more, whilst many white people within Wyndham developed a more positive attitude to Aboriginal people over time, the Afghan attitude did not change. Interviewee 6 also discussed some of the apprehension that was felt towards the Afghans because of their different ways. At the Four Mile, a Mosque had been built. As a child, his parents had warned him not to go near the *“strange church”*. The kids used to throw rocks at the Mosque. *“We thought, gee there is a big spirit there, some ugly thing that they are locking away from us so we’d go down and dare it to come out and frighten us”*. Interviewee 6 concluded *“to me they were ugly, vile smelly things just like the camels. That’s my recollection as a child of the Afghans, and I remember clearly what they look like.”*

Interviewee 11 commenced her discussion of the Afghans in a classic, story telling fashion. *“They were good people the Indian people”* she started, and continued with her personal story. The focus was very much on family links and recognition. Her story stressed that ties to family go beyond religion. Indeed, Interviewee 11 herself grew up with a Roman Catholic upbringing. Interviewee 11 had a sister who was taken to Pakistan to grow up. She recalled the emotional

story of meeting her sister's son in Kulumburu, never having met him before, or seeing her sister again – she passed away in Pakistan. He came up to her after a church service.

*“‘Hey – what’s your name?’ (he said). .... You know that. (she said) ‘You look like my mother’ he said to me. ‘Did you or any of your sisters went to Pakistan?’. I said ‘yeah, one was taken away and sent to Pakistan’. And that’s her son now watching – he was looking at me that hard! When the service finished, we all saying happy Christmas and all that he came straight to me. ‘You know I was looking at you’. ‘I know I was watching you’ I said. ‘Why was you looking at me’ I said. And he said’ you look like my mum’. ‘She went to Pakistan for schooling’.”*

Interviewee 11 spoke of her people ‘knowing’ her. That she could walk anywhere and either party would know when they were in the presence of a relative, even if they had never met.

*“There’s a bloke there in Perth called Jaru?. He’s an Indian man. He know me. There’s another one again – Father Sebastian, Sebastian is his name, but he’s a part - he’s a black man.... And there’s a man up there called Charlie Kalangary. He had a camel. Alu, had a camel. See, I know. Charlie Kalangarry used to ride up the Ord River and get the load in with his camel.”* Strong, even spiritual, family connections were evident in families of mixed Afghan and Aboriginal descent. Whether these came from the aspects of Aboriginal culture, Afghan culture or both is unknown.

#### **4.3 The Early Days**



*“I have read some accounts of settlement or invasion as some people prefer to call it. The store at View Point being established – I read this account of encountering some Aboriginal people at Parry’s Lagoon hunting ducks. They shot some Aboriginal people when they challenged them. He described it as though they were shooting down tin cans” – Interviewee 3*

The early days of ‘settlement’ or ‘invasion’, depending on one’s perspective, involved considerable amounts of conflict. Pashley (2000:17) believes this was a result of the settlers who *“neither approved nor understood (the) ‘common ownership’ aspect of Aboriginal culture.”* Thus clashes occurred over cattle and sheep spearing and also over the telegraph line. Most interviewees recounted the story of Aboriginal people stealing the insulators off the overland telegraph line. The insulators were used to make spearheads that were sharper and easier to shape than stone. Pashley (2000:17) also notes that although cattle were speared for food Aborigines initially posed little threat to settlers. It was only when settlers, frustrated by the lack of official police action, decided to take the law into their own hands that the situation got out of control. Shots were fired at Aborigines who would often retaliate, especially when one of their number had been killed.

Many Aboriginal men were taken as prisoners for crimes related to cattle spearing. The police cells however were at times uninhabitable because of excessive heat (Pashley, 2000:502). En route to Wyndham Aboriginal prisoners were usually chained together and lead in lines (see figure 4.2). Interviewee 1 referred to the use of Boab ‘prison’ trees by police to confine prisoners, particularly overnight, whilst travelling for days through the bush. How exactly the trees were used is a matter of some controversy and will be discussed further in chapter 5.

Figure 4.2 Chained prisoners en route to Wyndham (Green, 1995:39)

Interviewee 11 provided the most information (and most of it from personal experience) about the early days within Wyndham. She started her story as follows...

*“The old people, long, long time ago, my mob, they didn’t know nothing about English when they came here. They wanted someone to go work for the butcher. Mum was working there... mum had me in old butchers shop out of town there... I don’t know what year. That man never tell us... we used to walk around here when I was little. No houses just the river – no jetty – nothing. It was bare bush”*

Younger interviewees often talked about drovers taking the cattle around the outskirts of town (behind the hills) to the meatworks. Interviewee 11 recalled the cattle being taken through the

middle of the town early on, perhaps before it became established. Certainly she recalled times when white people were a rare sight in Wyndham.

*“At the 4 mile we found one man walking – a white man... Gaddia –they call them Gaddia you know for white people... they didn’t kill him or harm him or anything. We asked him where you going – ‘I just looking around country’ he said. We said ‘yeah OK’. He looked around and then he went back. I don’t know where he came from. Maybe over the hill. There wasn’t no road.” –*

Interviewee 11

A regular feature of the early days seemed to be settlers either persuading Aboriginal people to work for them, or in some cases, the forcible removal of Aboriginal people to work for whites. Interviewee 11’s mother and sisters were approached to work in the butcher’s shop. Interviewee 11 also referred to another example of a white man trying to appropriate Aboriginal labour.

*“he found a man there (near Nulla Nulla) – he ask him, with his wife, can I take your wife – she wash my clothes. And the man didn’t like it see. When he got on the horse he put the lady in front and he was at the back. He threw the spear at him.... the horse went straight to the yard.. and these two boys, they said ‘what’s wrong with this horse? – It’s got blood on it’.. and that old man came up and they ask him ‘did you kill that Gaddia?’ and he said ‘yeah, he humbug my wife’”.*

Interviewee 2’s story confirms these sorts of occurrences, her mother being taken from her family to work on a station.

#### **4.4 Citizenship**

Interviewee 6 and Interviewee 12 were brother and sister (their permission was given to be more extensively identified). Their circumstances were in some ways unique in the town as their father and mother, both 'part' Aboriginal, applied for citizenship rights under the West Australian Natives (Citizenship Rights) Act 1944. Interviewee 12 could recall very little detail of how her father came to gain citizenship rights, concluding that he "*must have applied for it*". Gray (1998:II), in his paper on citizenship reveals some detail about the act. The Act was introduced during a time when Aboriginal people were demanding more rights. Aborigines had served in WWII and yet were still not considered citizens of their own country. This act was seen as rewarding those who served and those of "*good standing*" (Gray:1998:II). The onus was on Aboriginal people however to apply for the rights and also "*renounce his/her Aboriginality*" (Gray, 1998:II). Further restrictions included being able to speak and understand English. Citizenship could also be revoked under a number of circumstances including "*habitual drunkenness..., (contraction of) leprosy, syphilis, or two convictions for any offence, for example being on an Aboriginal reserve without permission*" (Gray, 1998:II).

As children, Interviewees 6 and 12 came under their parent's citizenship until they were 21 years of age. Both Interviewees were questioned regarding whether they felt their lives were different to other Aboriginal people in the town because of these rights. Interviewee 6 discussed the idea that having citizenship rights meant their family suffered rejection at times from both the white and black community. The fact that they were not always accepted by the Aboriginal community may however have had more to do with their mixed background than the citizenship application. As Interviewee 6 said "*Aboriginal people didn't accept us because we were part Aboriginal.*

*That was a new thing on the scene - part Aboriginal people. One time here there was only the white and the blacks and now they are all suddenly the brownies (part Aboriginal people). It was a bad thing."*

Interviewee 6 identified the basic rights citizenship granted to them. The family was allowed to move freely around Wyndham, have access to other towns, the parents were eligible to vote and to educate their children at the public school. There was always the problem of the children not being readily identified as belonging to a family of citizens. "If the police people didn't know who we were at a glance – and they didn't – they never recognized... (who we were)... *we were chased out just like everyone else at Sundown. You know Aboriginal people weren't allowed in town after sundown.*" (Interviewee 6). Sometimes it seemed that the family received none of the benefits of being white or black as a result. "*we never got any services from the native welfare department because we were never classified as natives. But white people always called us natives anyway. I just didn't know where I was going.*" (Interviewee 6). At times it was very confusing. In contrast interviewee 12 remembered with fondness some of the opportunities the rights gave her. Going to the cinema and the dances was special. "*I was also the only black kid to go to the dances. The Friday dance. Dad had to be there while I was there.*" .

Citizenship rights were sometimes denied even when proof of their existence was given. Interviewee 12 recalled the following incident from around the time Kununurra was starting to become a major town. "*The (pub) manager refused my father to be in there cause he was black. He didn't care whether he had citizenship or not.*". Applying for citizenship was also looked down upon by some Aboriginal people. "*Dad had two brothers who wouldn't get citizenship.*

*They said they didn't want to be like a dog with a dog collar” (Interviewee 12). Interviewee 12 however seemed generally happy that her parents had taken their chosen path. “Citizenship wasn't about getting drink. But about being accepted. We were accepted more than other black kids” (Interviewee 12).*

When other Aboriginal people started to move into town from the late 50s onwards, the family's position in the Aboriginal community changed. As interviewee 6 said *“Because we were accepted (in the white community), people sort of came through us. They lived behind us and around us – at least another three or four families. Then they started to go to the school in the 50s. And then it was 50% Aboriginal and then I guess 60 – 70% Aboriginal”*. Things gradually seemed to get easier. Citizenship issues did however inspire interviewee 6 to become active politically, particularly with the turmoil created by the 1967 referendum. When he turned 21, he was expected to apply for citizenship, (having been a citizen under his parents application previously) which involved the process of sitting before a magistrate and having checks made for a possible criminal record. *“I thought if they want me to do that they can just go and get stuffed – I never applied. They ended up sending it to me by mail... in 1965 and I've got a copy of it. So by the time the 67 referendum came around I was already a citizen...but that meant nothing to me. And I said to my wife...we don't need this, We don't really need to do all these things. I was very strong in my ways then. I said I'm going to work and prove...we are citizens in this country. So...we set on a political path for the rest of our lives” (Interviewee 6).*

Interviewee 6 worked with ATSIC but has now returned to Wyndham *“because I know we can't achieve anything there in a political sense. The only way you can achieve anything is to get back*

*and talk to local people and change the image of Aboriginal people through a reconciliation process at the local level” (Interviewee 6).*

#### **4.5 Alcoholism**

Interviewee 13 is a pastor of the People of God Church (his permission was given to be identified). His perspectives on the history of the town highlighted many social issues facing Aboriginal people. Alcoholism was perhaps the most prominent of these issues. The Aboriginal people’s history in Wyndham, was directly linked, by Interviewee 13, to the problems he saw. *“Our history is full of pain. They blame white men for alcohol but he doesn’t force them to drink. My people are dying from alcoholism. I see the cruelty of alcohol. It’s a hard thing forgetting about the past but it (doesn’t) help our future”* (Interviewee 13). Interviewee 13 had personal experience of alcohol problems. Interviewee 13 recalled the history of the Forrest River Mission. The people worked hard, chopping pine trees and carrying them back up to the mission. *“How fit they must have been. The old people would roll in their graves knowing what has happened to their people. Alcoholism - Mozelle is the favourite. It’s cheap and there’s lots in it”*. When asked about important events in the town, Interviewee 13 highlighted the improvements to Warri Park as being development that may help, in small ways, to tackle the alcohol problem. Munumburra festival and its drug free, family atmosphere was also a positive event. The really important events for interviewee 13 personally however were funerals and weddings. *“Every time I go to a funeral it is important. To know someone I knew died of alcohol. Even if it is drink driving or murder. It makes me think about the people this is happening to. Going to a wedding where people are uniting too is important. A precious event. Brings families together.”*

Interviewee 13 believed many Aboriginal people had turned away from traditional values to more selfish lifestyles. *“Once upon a time they had heart which really cared for one another. Now the mind is on money and more opportunities for “good living”. People become cruel to each other. It’s really sad.”* (Interviewee 13). A lack of exposure to adequate education for some was also expressed. There was hope however in organisations like Joorook Ngarni. Interviewee 13 believed, at least initially, that Aboriginal people needed to work within the systems that were in place. *“Jesus Christ was never a white mans religion, they had to learn it too. Learn the law for your benefit I tell them.”*. Interviewee 13 was trying, through the church, to fulfil his aim of helping his people help themselves.

Other interviewees who referred to the problems of alcoholism included women interviewees 2, 4, 10 and 11. It seemed that it was easier for women to talk about the problem, perhaps because some women of the town were also affected by other effects of alcohol such as domestic violence. These women, though not necessarily living in families which were directly affected by alcoholism, had witnessed its effects throughout the town. They often referred to the days before alcohol was available to Aboriginal people nostalgically, despite all the other problems faced in this period. Interviewee 4 in discussing the issue noted *“Today they don’t worry about their culture, they worry about drinking. The Aboriginal people really lost their culture.... Aboriginal people have changed. They used to be really well behaved people. They were a hardworking people one time ago. Now they sit drinking under trees. We didn’t have ... social security... so we had to go and work. Even helping doing washing and ironing for someone or*



*gardening. Only the old people lived on rations from welfare.”*. Interviewee 10 also noted with sadness the many alcohol related deaths that had occurred in the town.

## Section C: Understanding Personal Concepts and Values Relating to Aboriginal Peoples’ Views of History and Heritage

### Chapter 5: History

#### **5.1 History and Reconciliation**

One of the first questions posed to interviewees was whether they thought readdressing history was important and whether rewriting history would help in the process of reconciliation. All the interviewees believed that many of the previous histories written in Australia, and more locally in Wyndham, had some inaccuracies when dealing with Aboriginal people, or that they failed to deal with Aboriginal perspectives of events. Interviewees in the younger age bracket (30-40) formed some of their conclusions about history at Wyndham District High School. Interviewee 3 highlighted the inadequacies of the written histories students worked with. *“In school I found out that history can be written in a way that justified people's actions. I understand why they (The Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation) want to rewrite it”* (Interviewee 3). In contrast, the practice of the teachers during this period, showed interviewee 13, the realities of the history of Aboriginal people of the area. *“As far as education goes though it was the best at Wyndham District High. We grew up knowing our history - even the terrible things. We were taken for a trip to Oombulgurri, to the place where the bloodstains are. We were shown where they had an old hanging tree near the 3 mile hospital. They didn't hang them though there – they just tied them up and left them to die there”* (Interviewee 13).

Most interviewees, after concluding that rewriting history was beneficial, felt it followed logically that the rewriting would then help reconciliation. Interviewees 6 and 15 were notable exceptions. Interviewee 15's conclusions were based on the complexity of Aboriginal culture. *“The problem about rewriting history for Aboriginal people is that it's not a culture, but cultures. You'd need to rewrite the world map first ... Wyndham has so many cultures here”*(Interviewee 15). Certainly this multiplicity of cultures needs to be taken into account when trying to write a history. Whether or not it precludes all attempts at documenting a history

is debatable. The work of the historian becomes more challenging given multiple perspectives, but this is not to say that it becomes unachievable. Interviewee 15 was also sceptical of the nature of reconciliation, and whether the movement was really doing anything or whether reconciliation was simply *“a politically correct word for the 90s”*(Interviewee 15).

Interviewee 6 had formed strong opinions on the reconciliation process during his political career and in particular his involvement with ATSIC. In essence, he believed that the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation should not have had Aboriginal members on its board. He felt that non-indigenous Australians should have had total responsibility for the past and the council. *“The total responsibility should have been with non-Indigenous Australians because they’re the ones that made the distinction if you like, of their current position being the new owners of this country. So they’re the ones said to have the obligation to set things right. They completely wronged the whole thing by giving that responsibility back to Aboriginal people”*(Interviewee 6). The Council needed to establish meaningful action through the government and non-indigenous Australians. Instead, Aboriginal people were on the board *“and all we did with our position was to say the things that we’d hoped would come through for us. But it never ever did because all it had become was an assessment of the European colony and the European existing society, so it would just be a new dream for Aboriginal people which never ever came true in the last 10 years. So in a nutshell that responsibility should have been left to European peoples”* (Interviewee 6).

Overall, the major issue was whether the interpretation of history has the potential to influence the future. Most interviewees were fairly optimistic on this issue, believing that history did have

this potential, and that if more accurate accounts of Aboriginal history could be achieved there would be clear benefits for Aboriginal people. Interviewee 6 highlighted his concern that really accurate histories of Aboriginal culture, at least in the Wyndham area, could never be written. It was, in effect, too late because too much of the culture had already been lost. Histories of his generation could be produced, but he saw that as the ‘wrong generation’ to gain an understanding of Aboriginal culture. *“We are at least three decades away from a time when we had a true picture, a true image of what we should have kept as an Aboriginal understanding of our past dreaming. Right now there is only a European perspective of what we have to keep. That’s always being done now in line with the European thinking of reserving the sort of ruling we have on our sacred attachments. It’s too far removed. In other words we are probably about say 30 or 40 years too late to protect what really should have been there”* (Interviewee 6).

Interviewee 6 believed that there was no real opportunity to reclaim the history of these early generations. His parents’ generation had been taken away as young children and they had missed growing up in their own culture. His generation therefore had suffered in terms of understanding their own culture. He was however thankful for the cultural experiences he had had as a young child mixing with traditional ‘bush’ Aboriginal people during WWII in Wyndham. *“I can tell you our parents really had a harder go than what we had because they were taken away as 6 and 7 year olds. They had no culture. But during the war we had the opportunity again of going back to the bush and learning how traditional people lived. And that was really the situation here at Wyndham because there was traditional Aboriginal people living in the bush. So we had contact with them as children. Our parents had contact but they had no contact as children themselves. So we had the better opportunity. But what we’re learning from them is only a second rate thing*

*if you like not the true culture. Because it was already divided by 80 years of pastoral development in this area. Terrible” (Interviewee 6).*

## **5.2 Conveying History**

The issue of how to best inform the public about the Aboriginal history of the town, or indeed Aboriginal history in general, in some ways sparked a debate about the merits of written history (and indeed who should write such history) against the merits of oral history. The places where historic events occurred (a discussion of whether these should be called heritage sites will follow) also came under scrutiny concerning whether they could be used to help communicate the stories of the Aboriginal community. Overall, most interviewees tended to favour oral forms to convey their history. Those who preferred this method tended to feel that the written word could easily be ignored, but when spoken, stories had a certain power.

*“If we put up signs though, no one takes notice of that much. In a book they’re just reading the words that’s all. It is more powerful to tell them. But then again with the young generations it’s hard. Hard to get them to listen. There are important things to tell the younger generations. They should know how things were. That we lived in tents and stuff then” (Interviewee 14).*

Interviewee 1 noted also that merely preserving a place associated with stories from Aboriginal history would not help convey that history to the public without telling the story, and letting people know what it really felt like to ‘be there’. He particularly cited the case of the ‘black pioneers’- Aboriginal people who were involved in the physical construction of the town. Early

in the history of the town 'chain gangs' of Aboriginal men were used in building roads and other things. *"Halls Creek Rd was built by Aborigines physically laying down rocks through inhospitable country"* (Interviewee 1). The preservation of the road though, would do little to acknowledge its history. The road (the heritage place), retained little value without the story behind it (the history). *"A road is just a road when you look at it – it's boring - you need the story with it"* (Interviewee 1). Interviewee 8 appeared to be at a variance from others in advocating an Aboriginal heritage trail for the town, in which the historic places would be identified and explained through signage. *"Everyone would go to it. I'd be going to it too"*. This however may merely be a reaction to the lack of activities for people within the town, as it was followed by the comment *"There's nothing for our people. Things like that would keep their mind off it. Something like a night school 2-3 times per week. There is only a few sports for them here and that's all."* Setting up such a trail could be a potentially positive experience for the community and involve many, just as Warri Park and the giant crocodile statue did previously.

While individuals could easily tell their own stories orally, the advantage of creating a local community history based on a written record was recognised. Most individuals reacted positively to telling their stories in order to gain a picture of the collective experience. There remain however issues concerning who should write Aboriginal history, with some commentators believing only Aboriginal people should write Aboriginal history, while others are indifferent.

Interviewed on ABC Radio in 1990, historian Heather Goodall (University of Technology, Sydney) discussed this issue, believing that the call for exclusive Aboriginal authorship of history concerning Aboriginal people is a result of historians in previous years, ignoring, and at

times distorting Aboriginal history (Goodall, 1990). Goodall was supportive of Aboriginal people writing history but believed the idea that Aboriginal history should be treated separately from Australian history should be avoided, as this separation of history could be used to minimise Aboriginal history. Also, Goodall argued that Aboriginal history included a history of interaction, both positive and negative, with other Australians. The purpose of the history, Goodall argued, should also be taken into account when assessing appropriate authorship. Where a history is designed to help non-Aboriginal Australians understand Aboriginal history non-Aboriginal authorship can have a definite role. However the case for Aboriginal authorship can also be argued, particularly when the history is designed merely to disseminate the experiences of Aboriginal people. The value of Aboriginal voices in telling Aboriginal histories can be seen when examining the perspectives of those interviewed at Macquarie University regarding the first Aboriginal history course taught at an Australian university by Aboriginal scholars (Aboriginal History, 1982). In particular, the different approach to historical questioning of Aboriginal people was highlighted. The example of Aboriginal settlement of Australia was used to illustrate this. Aboriginal people did not ask questions of a scientific nature such as how, when or why they came. These questions did not matter as they had a belief that they were always here. Marcia Langton, when interviewed for this program, stated that Aboriginal historians were branching out from the intellectual traditions set out by white academia. When different questions are asked, or even when no questions are asked, a different perspective of history is obtained (Aboriginal History, 1982).

The term ‘Aboriginal’ history, it is suggested by some, should only be used when the authors are of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin. I have titled this thesis ‘**Understanding** Aboriginal

Perspectives of History and Heritage in Wyndham, Western Australia’ because I do not profess to write an ‘Aboriginal’ history as understood here. I am not of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin. This thesis is written from the perspective of a student trying to learn how Aboriginal people think and feel about history and heritage. I am not trying to assume what Aboriginal people think. Rather the aim is to create an understanding of what Aboriginal people from the Wyndham area feel about these issues, whilst simultaneously creating an understanding of their history, a history which may have helped shape their opinions on these issues.

There are inherent problems in writing about the history of Aboriginal people. Ariss (1988) refers to the work of Coe who wrote Windradyne – A Wiradjuri Koori, in 1986. Coe wrote in a European style, which many would argue is inappropriate. Ariss however claimed that the work was still ultimately accountable to Aboriginal people so it was a success. Ariss (1988:137) citing Langton, states that *“Any discourse about Aborigines must also be written for Aborigines, that is, be accountable. It is only when discourse is generated outside that community that it is questionable, non-representative, myth-generating and inevitably coloured by the power dimensions which are, because outside, inimical to that community”*. So it can be argued that as long as the history is written with considerable input, or even directed, by the participants, a balanced history may be produced.

Adequate consultation however should be a necessity. As mentioned earlier, Interviewee 15 raised the concern that Aboriginal history could not be written because there was no single Aboriginal culture. To create a history of such a diverse group of cultures it would therefore be necessary to establish a broad consultation base. Members of all representative groups need to be



involved in the process. Ariss (1988:138) suggests that promoting Aboriginal Authorship of history, often seen as a way to rectify such problems, is not a sufficient enough measure to ensure that the diversity of cultures is recognised. Ariss states that Aboriginal authorship alone will not solve the problem of recognising diversity, but consultation may. Interviewee 15 hinted at the need for consultation. He believed that what was important, when writing a local Aboriginal history, was to have local people write it. *“It doesn’t matter if they are black or white but they should be local as it gives you thorough knowledge”* (Interviewee 15).

Another problem confronted when writing Aboriginal histories is the issue of transposing the oral into a written form. Ariss (1988:140), utilising the ideas of Collin Johnson, suggests that because of its minority position in society, Aboriginal culture is forced into foreign forms like written oral history. This problem is extremely difficult to overcome, but it is important to at least be aware of the issue while writing. Perhaps Johnson is right to suggest that Aboriginal culture will develop its own means of expression within our society as the political position changes (Ariss, 1988:140). In the meantime, ensuring marked input by Aboriginal people in historical projects, is a necessity.

### **5.3 Re-examining Wyndham’s History**

Overall, the perspectives of interviewees relating to Wyndham’s history showed that there was a need to re-examine some of the key components of the town’s official history. When viewed from an Aboriginal perspective, an event such as WWII, which was traditionally seen as a major milestone for the town, was very different from the ‘official’ historical record. Other discrepancies in the town’s history existed for some interviewees. Interviewee 1 discussed these

issues. *“There are many ‘myths’ that need to be debunked. Take the prison trees (see figure 5.1) as an example. Everyone thinks the prisoners were locked up in the tree. The prisoners were chained up outside. They stood in the torrential monsoon rain, got bitten by the mosquitoes while the police stayed nice and dry inside.”*

Figure 5.1: Prison Tree, King River Rd  
(Photo Courtesy of Diana Spyker)

An examination of material held in the Wyndham Museum illustrates a number of problems with how the history of Wyndham is portrayed. Toussaint (1988), encountered the same problems in viewing archival material related to Moola Boola in the Kimberley. Aboriginal people were generally either *“‘left out’ of the history of the region, or primarily recorded in negative terms by the non-Aboriginal colonisers”* (Toussaint, 1988:3). Some of the most revealing pieces of material were a series of newspaper articles from 1932 and the search for two missing German aviators who had crashed in the Wyndham area. The transition in how Aboriginal people of the area are portrayed, after their involvement in the successful recovery of the aviators, shows

initially widespread opinion concerning Aboriginal people at the time, and secondly how invalid those opinions were.

A clipping from The West Australian, June 22, 1932 states *“That natives would have little hesitation in killing and eating the men if they encountered them is claimed by many men experienced in the ruthless wild ways of the Aborigines around the area North-West of Wyndham.”*. Article headings for the next few days, while the search continued, were *“Seaplanes at Natives Mercy”* (June 25) and *“Natives the Only Danger”* (June 27), despite the fact that much of the surrounding water was infested by Saltwater Crocodiles, in addition to other dangers on land. A rumour the aviators had been speared was also perpetuated on June 24<sup>th</sup> (West Australian). On the 5<sup>th</sup> of July, Aboriginal people from Drysdale Mission discovered the aviators, providing them with food and water to restore them. By July 7 a gift fund was being proposed for the Aboriginal people of Drysdale and Forrest River Missions who helped with the search. *“The natives of the North-West had been described as savages, yet those who came upon the distressed air men had straight away got food for them, and this kindly action should receive some recognition.”* (The West Australian, July 7, 1932). On July 8<sup>th</sup>, the Vice President for the Association for the Protection of Native Races stated that *‘during investigations by his organisation in the last ten years, extraordinary examples of the highest humanitarianism exhibited by the wild Aborigines had come to light. Some of these were almost unbelievable and frequently put white men to shame’* (The West Australian, July 8, 1932).

The search for the German aviators was one of very few occasions where Aboriginal people were mentioned in the archival records of Wyndham’s history. The archival records however

show a very one sided account of events. This illustrates the importance of recording Aboriginal perspectives of history in order to balance existing historical accounts. If Aboriginal people had not discovered the aviators they would have remained ‘savages’ in the eyes of much of the general population. Indeed, evidence contained in the police report of the event suggests that had the aviators not been discovered, several innocent Aboriginal people may have been imprisoned or hung. *“Sergeant Flinders gave me the names of five natives, whom he said would probably have to be arrested for the murder of the German Airmen.”* (Keene & Moussalli, 1986: appendix i). Recording Aboriginal perspectives of history is vital to balance and rectify these interpretations. The account of the rescue is even more admirable when supplemented by the stories of the participants in this study. Interviewee 3 offered the following account of the event *“One of the families at Oombulgurri are related to the one of the men who ran from Forrest River to Wyndham and swam ‘The Gut’ to tell the police. There is no flat ground in that run. It is some of the roughest, hardest country (that’s why they didn’t make stations there and the mission exists). These two guys did it in two days. It is almost a feat equivalent to the first Marathon run of Ancient Greece”*. Taking oral histories to record such information is vital. As Toussaint (1988:3) writes *“Ideally, the oral history will reverse this previously unbalanced picture, by recording and documenting the essential history and traditions of the many Aboriginal people who were born, and have lived and died (there)”* .

During the late 70s, there appears to have been some positive attempts to present the Aboriginal history of the town. Interviewee 13 in particular, noted the efforts of the school to show the ‘true’ Aboriginal history of the area. Some interviewees however expressed concern about declining standards at the High School, and it is therefore uncertain whether the school is still an influence in ensuring Aboriginal histories are taught. Activities and committees to recognise Aboriginal

people are a new feature at the school. Interviewee 3 discussed these issues. *“I believe the standard of education has gone down in towns like Wyndham, when I look back at what I was able to do... It is not a good learning environment here.. My younger boy actually asked to go away...There have been some good changes. Introducing Aboriginal Studies – but that is mainly in primary school... the ASPA committee – Aboriginal Students and Parents Awareness - they celebrate NAIDOC week... but in terms of literacy and numeracy standards it is way below what we had.”* (Interviewee 3). The status of the school is not helped by the high rate of staff turnover. Approximately 50% of incumbent staff transfer out of the school each year and the *“average number of years spent in the school is two with a significant number leaving after one year. The majority of staff are either graduate teachers or experienced teachers from different states for whom Wyndham is their first appointment in this state.”* (Education Department of Western Australia, 2001).

It was interesting to note that when recording the oral histories many participants did not initially see themselves as having a real role in the town’s history. When the issues were explored in the interviews however, they often realised that they, and members of their families, had contributed to the town in very significant ways. The desire to share this history, particularly with younger generations in their family, was noted. Most interviewees also felt that it was appropriate to share this history with non-indigenous people. There were aspects of culture that it was felt, were inappropriate to share, but the history of interaction between indigenous and non-indigenous people was seen as important to share as it would promote greater understanding.

#### 5.4 Notions of a ‘Shared’ History

Interviewees were also asked questions relating to the concept of a ‘shared’ history, that is, whether modern Aboriginal history should be integrated with the traditional ‘European’ perspective of Australia’s history, to produce a history to which all Australians can relate. Taylor (1996:9), writes that a “*shared history*” is a true acknowledgment of the participation of Aboriginal people in Australia’s history post 1788, both as an independent cultural force and as a culture that continues to interact with those around it. Byrne (1996:38), writing about a similar concept, a ‘post-national archaeology’, believes that the cultural interaction of Aboriginal people with other groups, or their ‘entanglements’, should be a part of our history, to highlight not only how Aboriginal culture adapted, but also the influence of Aboriginal culture on others.

Most interviewees felt that in principle, the concept of a ‘shared’ history was a good one. First, the problems associated with writing Aboriginal history had to be overcome. Interviewee 6 for example, did not see that only one Aboriginal history of the town existed, rather there were two. “*Two histories – because there are always the traditional people that lived around here – that we were associated with because we lived out of town. They would visit us at night... and pick up some supplies that my father stole from around the place... in return they gave us bush foods. So we had this sort of connection.*” (Interviewee 6). Interviewee 15 also had concerns whether or not the multiple Aboriginal cultures in the area could be integrated to form one history. Some interviewees, who felt that a ‘shared’ history could be created, were sceptical about whether it would help any process of reconciliation. “*Yeah I’d probably share it (history). But it depends on how I feel though. Don’t know if it will help reconciliation. It is important though.*”

(Interviewee 14). It seems that the success of the creation of such a history depends on the ability to acknowledge a multiplicity of perspectives. By achieving adequate acknowledgement a 'shared' history may be created.

## Chapter 6: Heritage

### **6.1 The Relationship Between History and Heritage**

The word 'heritage' has come to convey a variety of meanings. Traditionally it simply meant what we inherit from our ancestors. However, meanings now include the physical remains of the past in the form of buildings or relics; cultural traditions of the past or even the natural and historic landscape (Tunbridge & Ashworth, 1996:1-3). In a European context, the word 'history' traditionally has two connotations. First, it is the past and second "*the representation of the past in the work of historians*" (Tosh, 1989: Preface vii). Despite these definitions there is often a

considerable overlap between the two. As Tunbridge and Ashworth (1996:5) write, *“both history and heritage conceive of, and use, the past in similar ways”*. The major difference according to Tunbridge and Ashworth, is that *“in heritage, current and future uses are paramount, the resources more varied, including much that historians would regard as ahistorical, and the interpretation is more obviously and centrally the product that is consumed”*(Tunbridge & Ashworth, 1996:6).

In Australia, generally, it has been the non-indigenous population that has been given the opportunity to define just what Australian history and heritage is (Langford, 1983). Tunbridge and Ashworth (1996:93) argue for the need to readdress this, and the *“importance of cultivating a view of heritage which accepts human pluralism”*. Although Tunbridge and Ashworth (1996:93) suggest that broad definitions of ‘heritage’ are accepted today, Russell (1997:72) argues that the types of heritage sites given protection in Australia reflect narrow conceptions of heritage. It seems that new ground has been made in heritage theory. However, these ideas have yet to make their way into heritage practise. The Register of the National Estate, for example, according to Russell has *“long been well-recognised for large imbalances in historic interpretation”* (Russell, 1997:72). To assume, as was done in the past, that Aboriginal people have the same perspectives on what constitutes history and heritage as the non-Aboriginal population, merely adds to these narrow conceptions. Indeed, as Thorley (1998:8) writes, *“heritage itself is a cultural value. The decision to conserve or to pass something to future generations (and the form in which it is transmitted) is a matter of cultural choice based on preference.”*. Therefore, as part of this study, interviewees were asked for their perspective on



what constituted history and heritage and how history and heritage should be used and interpreted.

## **6.2 The Range of Perceptions of Heritage**

In recent years, what Australians consider to be our national heritage, and how that heritage is presented, has come under scrutiny, not only in court cases like the Cyprus-Hellene Club case but also in cultural expression. The 2001 Sydney Indigenous Film Festival provides a good example in a film, “Confessions of a Headhunter”, directed by Sally Riley. The film, based on a short story by Archie Weller, is a humorous, yet thought provoking examination of the representation of Australia’s history through “*colonial statuary*” (Rigg, 2000). In the film, two Aboriginal men travel Australia, beheading the statues of famous colonial figures, following the beheading of an Aboriginal statue. The bronze heads are melted down by the men, creating statues more meaningful to them – an Aboriginal mother and her children. Rigg notes that the inspiration for Weller’s original story came in 1997 when “*the Perth statue of the Aboriginal warrior Yagan, beheaded by white settlers in the 1830s, was itself beheaded. Twice.*” (ibid.). This action illustrates how controversial the inclusion of indigenous heritage into Australian society can be. The film addresses the idea that we need to create a more inclusive concept of heritage. Australian history has been widely depicted across the country in the form of statues of colonial figures and as a result indigenous perspectives are not acknowledged.

Some of the places identified by interviewees as part of their heritage, were already heavily promoted as heritage places within the town, largely because of their importance to the non-

indigenous population. Often however, interviewees offered a different perspective as to why the site was important. There were also sites listed by interviewees as being of considerable importance to Aboriginal people, that were not recognised as having historic value by the non-indigenous community. Overall, interviewees gave a very different perspective of Wyndham's heritage than the currently accepted, 'non-indigenous' interpretation.

Interviewee 13 was unusual in his repeated references to the meatworks as an important part of the town's Aboriginal heritage. The meatworks was one of the most promoted heritage icons of Wyndham, because of its role in shaping the town. When the meatworks was active the town's population multiplied. Throughout the study however, the meatworks was not commonly referred to by Aboriginal people. Interviewee 13 noted that when *"Many of our people were kicked off the station. The meat works and wharf provided work for them. The opportunities they provided were important, as they didn't have education. There was a lot of input in this town on the meat works. And they thrived"*. Most other interviewees' relatives seemed to be involved in work either with the Main Roads Department or the Department of Public Works. Interviewee 13's comments suggests that the meatworks and wharf may also be included as employers after Equal Pay Legislation came into action. The fact that other interviewees did not discuss this however, may suggest that fewer Aboriginal people were employed in these areas. For Interviewee 13 the meatworks became an important place because it made him and other Aboriginal people a part of the town. This was evident in his disappointment over the fire which destroyed much of the area. *"Someone went and burnt it down. They didn't realize what they had done"* (Interviewee 13). Interviewee 2 was one of few interviewees who also discussed the meatworks. She also noted the role of Aboriginal people there. She thought that it could be better

signposted to acknowledge the Aboriginal people who were involved in the work and that Aboriginal people also had a pioneering role in Wyndham's history.

Interviewee 1 highlighted the gaol as a place that would be important to the Aboriginal population. The building became a prison in 1975 and remained opened until 1993. Prior to this, the building was Wyndham's hospital, which moved from the Port to new premises at the Three Mile in 1970 (Cassidy et al., 1986:14). Hudson (1990:33) notes that almost all the prisoners were Aboriginal. Many Aboriginal people in Wyndham, along with Aboriginal people from all over the Kimberley, had spent a period of time incarcerated there. Interviewee 1 believed that some of those stories should be recorded before the building, due to be turned into a guesthouse, was restored.

Interviewee 1 revealed that there was a considerable amount of graffiti underneath the building (see figure 6.1), which could give an insight into the lives of those who were imprisoned. Graffiti revealed inmates came from as far away as Yuendumu, though many were from the Wyndham and Oombulgurri area. An interesting aspect of culture was seen in graffiti from the 1970s. Time was measured in terms of how many 'moons' an inmate was to spend in the gaol (see figure 6.2). This trend seemed to cease in the 1980s.



Figure 6.1 Old Wyndham Gaol/Hospital – building showing pillars underneath which have graffiti on them

The graffiti has the potential to provide a wealth of information, especially if combined with a formal study of prison documentation and perhaps interviews with past inmates. The prison was a minimum security prison. Gates were open all day so it was often tempting for inmates to walk out, especially when seeing relatives and friends walk by as part of their daily life at the Port (Hudson, 1990:33). The prison's location often came under criticism, because it made it hard for Aboriginal people to stay within the grounds. There could be a history of the prison itself. Unfortunately this is beyond the scope of this study. At the very least, a project, perhaps involving students from Wyndham District High School, aimed at accurately recording the graffiti before its removal, could be considered.



Figure 6.2: Graffiti on piers under the Wyndham Gaol



Figure 6.3: Wyndham Gaol – walkway between wings and the solitary confinement cell – inside and out.

Some interviewees' memories of the Wyndham Gaol buildings related to the time when it was a hospital. Interviewee 3 was born in the hospital but also had traumatic memories of a lonely time spent there as a child after fracturing his skull. Interviewee 3 also had fond memories of looking at the Drover's memorial seat in front of the hospital when visiting people in the hospital as a child. Aboriginal people were not always treated at the hospital at the Port. Plans reveal that the hospital had a separate wing for 'natives' (see figure 6.4), but ultimately, a special 'Native Hospital' was built at the Three Mile. Interviewees noted that at times this also acted as a

Leprosarium. The remaining buildings today are part of Joorook Ngarni. Many are succumbing to termite damage. Interviewee 12 remembered feeling scared of these buildings as a child. These places were not necessarily seen as ‘special’ by Interviewees, but places that should be acknowledged in the history of the town. Interviewee 13 summed this up, *“it is important to record them. If there was a way of showing them it would be good”*.

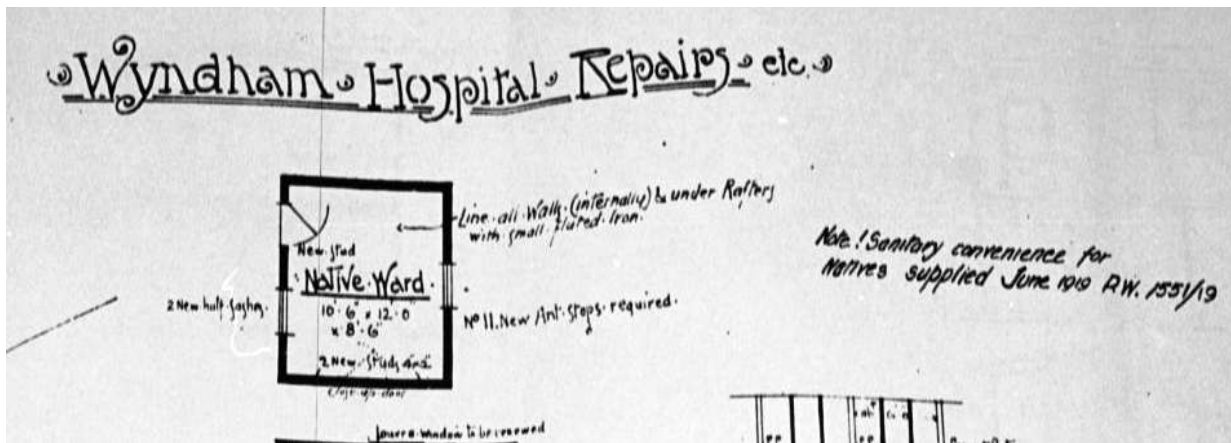


Figure 6.4: Repair Plans for Hospital (Note – “Sanitary convenience for Natives supplied June 1919”)

(Plans courtesy of Paul Cavanagh)

Other places highlighted by Interviewees varied. Interviewee 7 believed the only place that ought to be considered a ‘heritage place’ was the golf course. *“When all the missionaries left the Forrest River and the old people had to come into town, so they had to go stay up there. It used to be an army camp and they got a well there. That used to be a significant place for Aboriginal people.... maybe some sort of plaque should be put there”* (Interviewee 7). This is just one example of a place which is important to Aboriginal people which remains almost totally unrecognised by the non-Aboriginal population. Interviewee 14 believed that the only special place within Wyndham was the Bastion, the town’s notable high spot, where the Five Rivers Lookout is situated. An exception was perhaps a place special to the ‘old people’. *“Some old*

*people used to say that hill over there was special cause they used to run over there when the police was chasing them. How they got up there I don't know cause there is a cliff all the way around"* (Interviewee 14). Interviewee 2 confirmed the Bastion's importance. *"Around the Bastion there was a big camp when they came from Oombulgurri. And they used to wait there for those from the stations to come. They used to get together and meet all the station mob for the race meeting. Special thing getting together. My mum used to love it - always talked about it. They wouldn't have seen them for months"* (Interviewee 2). The landscape of the Gully area was also significant for Interviewees 12 and 13, having grown up there. Interviewee 11 gave a more traditional account of important places. *"The only important thing – this important thing is a men's secret. And they got a women's one too – you know where? In Turkey Creek. Women's place there. I don't know what it is. I've never been there"* (Interviewee 11). Warri Park was also considered important to many interviewees, however this will be addressed later in the chapter.

Perspectives on what constituted Wyndham's heritage were not just confined to places. Cultural activities were also included. One such cultural activity is the carving of Boab Nuts. There are groups of Aboriginal people who sit in the shade of trees and carve Boab Nuts, which are then sold to tourists. Recently, there has been some controversy within the town over *"allegations of hard sell tactics by Boab Nut carvers"* (The Bastion, June 2001:1). Perspectives of interviewees differed over the issue of Boab Nut carving being a part of Wyndham's cultural heritage. Whilst most interviewees agreed that the carving was in keeping with Aboriginal culture, the purpose was disputed. Interviewee 13 summed up the issues as he saw them, stating *"We all know culture today. Our people like to carve – but many just do it for alcohol"*. Interviewee 9, himself a Boab Nut carver, gave a different perspective *"My life now, I carve boab nuts. A lot of people*

*like to do their cultures again. We like to do Aboriginal Arts and Crafts. It is something that is really great for our future”.*



Figure 6.5: Boab Nut Carving

### 6.3 Preservation Issues

Opinions over the preservation of heritage places, like the opinions of what constituted heritage, differed markedly. Interviewee 6 discussed his opinions by using the remains of the old native hospital in the grounds of Joorook Ngarni as an example. *“In 1948 I first saw my father carting out bodies from there. It sticks in my mind because it used to be the leper colony for this area, that native hospital. They were going to take it out, it’s just a bad memory really. We want to record the history, keep it sacred if you like in the context of Aboriginal memory but it’s not important to us.”* For interviewee 6, and many of the other interviewees, it was knowing the stories associated with places which was important. Preservation of heritage sites could be useful however in getting the message across to outsiders like tourists. *“I’m not too sure about buildings. I don’t ever put any significance in buildings, museums and the like. Even though they*



*are sort of good for material expression and material display and can be used for tourist type things and we sort of intend to do that anyway as a private organisation. That's one of our aims."* (Interviewee 6).

Thorley (1998:6), in discussing cultural differences surrounding theories of what constitutes heritage, also notes cultural differences in attitudes towards preservation. He writes *"while all cultures possess values, the logical imperative to conserve does not necessarily flow from the attachment of value"*(Thorley, 1998:6). Perhaps concern for heritage preservation will grow after more pressing issues for Aboriginal people are addressed. Interviewee 6, for example, suggested *"the greater pursuit I think should be in trying to acquire lands. It sort of beats me why people in general just miss the point. Why they can't see that the land is significant to Aboriginal people. And why they can't see that just because somebody raises a flag they don't own all this. It totally loses me."*

There were however, places of heritage significance to individuals, that they clearly felt were important to protect. Interviewee 11, for example, particularly valued the Afghan cemetery (see figure 6.6) as part of her culture, and was saddened by vandalism that had occurred there. *"They had a big lovely black stone from India. They sent it over for them to put in head part of there grave. And this man – he was looking for it. Some white people stole it. Yeah, they shouldn't be doing that. Some people was a robber around here. They can steal anything"* (Interviewee 11). Interviewee 1 believed that the native hospital buildings should be preserved as a part of the Aboriginal history of the town. Interviewee 1 was resigned however to the destruction of the remains of the hospital as one of the buildings was riddled with white ants and there was no

funding to preserve it. Interviewee 1's beliefs concerning the preservation of the native hospital contrasted with interviewee 6, who saw little benefit in its preservation. Interviewee 1's main focus on preservation was however linked more to the remains of traditional life. The old camps near the Nulla Nulla area and also Parry's Creek should be preserved (Interviewee 1). This perspective, on preserving sites of earlier history, rather than those of more recent times, tended to dominate. Apart from the graffiti under the gaol, sites from the 70s onwards were not seen as particularly important to preserve.

Figure 6.6 Afghan Cemetery at Wyndham (Ingham 2000:27)

#### **6.4 Warri Park**

*“Warri Park is dedicated to those who prepared us for today. Built by Joorook Ngarni ... this monument was presented to the citizens of Wyndham.... 1989...Aboriginal spirits will always survive in this timeless and beautiful land.” - Plaque at Warri Park*



Figure 6.7 Dreamtime Statues at Warriu Park

Warriu Park was first conceived of in 1983 (Bridge, 1989). The aim was to promote cultural awareness of Aboriginal history within the town in a project that fostered community involvement. The idea was implemented with the help of Joorook Ngarni, local Aboriginal elders and family groups. The 'Dreamtime Statues', consisting of a traditional family group and various native animals, were unveiled in 1989 (Bridge, 1989). The statues of the family are approximately three times life size, and were modelled on local townspeople (Interviewee 2). Warriu Park was seen by most interviewees as a significant part of the Aboriginal peoples history and heritage within Wyndham. Throughout the year, Joorook Ngarni has been involved in upgrading the park and plans to incorporate an Aboriginal Art and Culture Museum on site (The Bastion, September 2001: 3).

Interviewee 6 has been involved with the Warriu Park project from the start. He recalled the motivation behind establishing the park. He saw Warriu Park as not being the sort of

representation of Aboriginal culture that would have traditionally been practised, but a necessary representation.

*“I think it is the vision that we as Aboriginal people must portray. To keep our images sort of projecting generation after generation. In other words trying to have a visual thing so our people can see that we need to have a connecting understanding of our cultural dreaming. To do that, seeing as all our cultural things are gone, we have to plant something in place. Now to have symbols like that is not Aboriginal. But our Aboriginal symbols in the dreaming places are there but they are classified as sacred. So we really can’t do that anymore. And again we have no access to them. So we have to put these symbolic things in the open. And I believe that and that’s what I have inherited from my family before me. And that’s my total understanding of our people before me – of generations before. So with the obligations that I believe I have inherited I went through the process of trying to find land within Wyndham. I was successful – a little bit of land that nobody wanted ... And we went ahead – it took me 8 years to raise the money and 9 months to build it and we’ve done that. It’s really more than a tourist attraction. A lot of people call it that but to me it’s a symbolic thing for Aboriginal unity” (Interviewee 6).*

Due to commitments to politics during the 90s, interviewee 6’s life took him away from Wyndham and the Warriu Park Project came to a standstill after the creation of the ‘Dreamtime Statues’. Interviewee 6, now back in Wyndham, has helped refocus the community on the project. Most interviewees were excited about the revival of the project. *“I believe Warriu Park is a big step to uniting this town together... Warriu Park is a big movement of culture, friends and unity.... I believe it is a big thing for our future, this town and the surrounding*

*communities.*”(Interviewee 13). Interviewee 2 saw the project as a great opportunity for young people. Many of the school children were involved in the creation of the Dreamtime Statues and the statue of a giant crocodile at the Three Mile. Interviewee 2 was excited that the children could be involved in painting a rock art mural. Interviewee 2 also saw the park as an important reminder of old times. *“It is a reminder of the old people. Things were still happening in the 70s a few places here. It's a good reminder I reckon....They used to have corroborees there. Everyone used to meet there. It was also a short cut to the shops”* (Interviewee 2). Interviewee 13 was hopeful that the redevelopment of the park site would once again restore its past value as a site for times of festivity, corroborees and sports carnivals. *“I can't wait till our first festival. We used to play football in the mud. Kids just running and jumping in the mud”* (Interviewee 13).

The site of Warri Park was significant to many interviewees because of its history. Interviewee 1 and 2 thought the area might have been used in the early days as a meeting area. Interviewee 6 however believed that the history of the site was only from more recent times, starting with the use of the area to the west for Aboriginal housing, probably in the 1960s. *“What they called type 64s were along there”* however these houses were later all condemned, demolished and moved aside (Interviewee 6). Interviewee 6 proposed that the area be built up by the Shire for recreational purposes. *“They said, ‘oh no, we don't want to put anything there because that's too close to where all the black fellas live.’. They said we don't know what to do with that land and in the next breath they said ‘do you want it?’, and I said yes. So it was the one time that we got land”* (Interviewee 6).

The families who acquired the land for the Aboriginal people, had a vision of creating a park but lacked the money, so they started out using the area for sport and cultural functions. Interviewee 6 believed this is how the land acquired social significance for Aboriginal people of the area. There were hopes of situating Joorook Ngarni on the land, but the Shire was opposed (Interviewee 6). Interviewee 6 attributed this to the tradition of the Shire permitting Aboriginal Development only in out of the way areas. “ *if you take not of the geography of this place, all the Aboriginal things are down wind, out of sight is out of mind. We are all on the west side of town. The wind (a very significant factor given Wyndham’s extreme heat) blows from the south east.*”. Interviewee 15 also noted this trend in the layout of the town. Indeed, Interviewee 15, although committed to the messages conveyed by the people who developed Warri Park, believed the location was inappropriate (see figure 2.3 for a map of Wyndham). “*The location is inappropriate. It is hidden in a back street. If it was going to be a predominate feature and represent culture it should have been where the crocodile was. But I would never disagree with what they thought originally. Improving land that was already destroyed (by buildings or whatever) is better than nothing. Better than letting it get burnt every year.*”

Interviewee 7 felt that Warri Park was an important step towards creating a shared sense of history and heritage for the people of Wyndham. He highlighted the work of school students, both non-indigenous and indigenous, working together to create the statues as an illustration of a growing community spirit. Interviewee 1 recalled the opening of the park, and the feeling of reconciliation that was inspired in the community. Of symbolic importance for Interviewee 1 was the raising of the Aboriginal flag by a non-indigenous boy and the raising of the Australian flag by an indigenous boy. Interviewee 1 believed that the park was vital to readdressing Aboriginal

history as *“it is the only significant statement about the past in Wyndham”*. Interviewee 3 noted this review of history stating that *“it depicts Aboriginal presence now and presence before invasion. It shows the contemporary well.”*. Interviewee 3 also felt that the park was important in displaying Aboriginal culture as it was not appropriate to promote other areas such as sacred sites. Overall, Warri Park seemed to represent the hopes of Aboriginal people for appropriate recognition of their culture and their history – both of traditional and more recent times.

## Section D: Discussion and Conclusions

### Chapter 7: Discussion and Conclusions

#### **7.1 Local Perspectives**

Examining the heritage concerns of Aboriginal people in a project for the National Estate, Thorley (1998:1) adopted a regional focus, because a national focus was considered too difficult. Interviewee 15 highlighted the difficulties of assessing and presenting the broad perspectives of Aboriginal people because there is not one, but many Aboriginal cultures. Divergent views between groups should be expected. Thorley's study looked at the region of Central Australia. Although a range of perspectives was found, some common themes did emerge. Meanwhile on an even smaller local scale, divergent opinions became apparent in Wyndham. However common ideas surrounding history and heritage did emerge. It is important to acknowledge the scale of this project – it is a local study, drawing local conclusions. Further local and/or regional studies would be necessary in order to draw conclusions about nation wide values, if this is indeed possible. Nevertheless the information related, despite being on a small scale, is valuable. Indeed Taylor writes that it is “*Only when... Indigenous history is reclaimed at the local level is*



*there any possibility of the overlapping histories becoming a shared history”* (1992:9). Work on a small scale certainly has its place in this field.

## **7.2 Aboriginal Perspectives of History and Heritage**

Despite similarities, Thorley’s study differed markedly from this study, in that it largely focused on archaeological sites as heritage sites, acknowledging that little work had been done to determine heritage concerns about sites from the ‘historic’ period (1998:35). This study however has focused on the ‘historic’ period, and included perspectives on history as well as heritage. Indeed, the range of perceptions over what constitutes heritage, was arguably influenced by history. Those interviewees who professed what might be identified as more ‘traditional’ Aboriginal views of heritage, views that revolved around the land rather than built heritage, were generally in an older age bracket, and had elements of traditional life in their upbringing. Younger interviewee’s tended to have perspectives of heritage which blended the views of these older people with what might be considered a more ‘traditional’ European perspective. Thorley (1998:47) noted these changing perspectives in the Central Australian study. *“Yet as a value, heritage is apt to change through time because values are not fixed but affected by changing social and political landscapes. Aboriginal views of heritage ... vary widely. Moreover, representing a coherent set of values which distinguish Aboriginal views of heritage from non-Aboriginal ones is difficult as both sides ‘feed-off’ the other”* (Thorley, 1998:47).

Western perspectives of heritage tend to focus on management and preservation of sites and relics (Thorley, 1998:47). Although a few places were acknowledged by interviewees as worthy of preservation, this was not a focus. It seemed that what was more important was to have the stories from these places preserved. Interviewee 6 in particular argued strongly against preservation, the buildings of the town having little significance. Certainly the stories of Aboriginal people were linked to the buildings, but it was often a painful history, and as such not one on which he wanted to dwell. Thorley (1998:33) wrote that whilst the '*attachment of emotion*' to sites for non-Aboriginal people can often provoke the desire to preserve them, in Aboriginal society it can sometimes act as a '*deterrent against preservation*', particularly where the site is a reminder of the dead. Interviewee 6 identified the buildings of the native hospital as associated with the dead, his father having had the job of carting out bodies when it was used as a leprosarium. Sites associated with traditional life, places where elders had lived, were seen as important to preserve. In this sense there was a sharp divide between perspectives of preservation depending on the time period associated with a site. Often, 'traditional' sites were seen as one of the last links with 'true' Aboriginal culture whereas more recent 'historic' sites were just associated with, an often painful, history. Thorley (1998:40) made the point that Aboriginal people interviewed in the Central Australian study found it easier to talk about the management of 'traditional' sites as they were on '*more familiar ground*'. Thorley argues that the heritage system has dealt with the protection of traditional sites for some time and thus Aboriginal people are more familiar with heritage processes in this context.

Whilst preservation of these 'historic' sites was not a central issue, almost all interviewees felt it was important to preserve the stories associated with these sites. While on one level this could

be interpreted as history (the stories) taking priority over heritage (the physical reminders of the stories), it is not necessarily that simple. In particular, it became evident in this study that it was not always easy to separate interviewees' perspectives on what constituted history and what constituted heritage, indeed it could be argued that the two cannot be disassociated. Heritage sites, for example were often seen as a form of history in that they helped 'tell' the stories linked to them. Yet the site itself was not always rated of high importance even if it was necessary to preserve the story. *"We want to record the history, keep it sacred if you like in the context of Aboriginal memory but it's (preserving 'built' heritage) not important to us."* (Interviewee 6). Preserving stories for Aboriginal people to pass on to younger family members is a high priority. Recording the history to share with non-Aboriginal people is also recognised as important. It is interesting to note that the preservation of heritage sites is a greater priority where the sites are seen as useful in educating non-Aboriginal people about Aboriginal history. However the sites are not seen as essential for educating Aboriginal youth. Telling the story is the priority.

### **7.3 The Importance of Place and Space**

Turner highlighted the importance of land in any conception of Aboriginal heritage. *"Indigenous peoples' connection to their ancestral lands is the underlying element that brings all other aspects of their heritage together"* (Turner, 1998:2). While this notion may be helpful in dealing with heritage associated with traditional life styles and traditional owners, the question remains, how valid is this statement for 'historic' heritage sites? In Wyndham, a high percentage of the Aboriginal population for example, was drawn from all over Australia. The area around Wyndham was not their ancestral land. The question then becomes, even when there was a lack

of an ancestral connection to the Wyndham area, does an association with the land still play a role in how heritage is perceived? Perspectives revealed by the interviewees would suggest that despite a lack of traditional connections to the local land, notions of place and space, and an attachment to country were fundamental in shaping their perspectives on heritage.

Interviewee 6 best summed up the importance of the land. *“Well to me, the most important thing, even though this is not my traditional land, the land space that I grew up around is the most important thing”*. Interviewee 11 still had strong connections with the land, as did Interviewee 3 who often went off bush with his children. Most interviewees conformed to this pattern. For interviewee 6 and many others interviewed however, Aboriginal people had neither appropriate access nor control over the land. Interviewee 6 discussed the problems of access to land *“Again white people are pretty clever at making sure that they sever that away from you. Because once that’s taken there is no spirit, there is no Aboriginal people. Bingo, it’s all gone”*. Interviewee 6 discussed walking through the country, which he is not legally allowed to cross because it has been divided by boundaries. The land ‘belongs’ to somebody else but Interviewee 6 believed it was a part of his culture to travel this country rather than be blocked by artificial boundaries.

*“So I still blatantly do that. I cross boundaries just like that. I will drive over something or walk over something. If anybody stands in my way I will still walk over them because that’s my right. It’s not a traditional right, because its traditionally not mine, (Interviewee 6 was not a traditional owner of the area) it’s a cultural right I have as an Aboriginal person. And my children believe in that. I have two daughters, two sons and they understand fully where I am coming from. Without a doubt I know that they are following the principles I have put there for them to*

*understand. And they have a choice what they do. I don't force anything upon them. For us space is very important. And I can't see where European people are coming from. How Aboriginal people are denied that. To go from here to Perth we drive along a highway. They have a 50ft buffer zone on either side. All the way from here to Perth. It's fenced from here to Perth. Nobody officially, legally can get off. That's for black, white and brindle. Why is this country locked up? One time you know there were dreaming paths, you could go from here to there and everywhere. You can't do that anymore. To go out here to El Questro you have to have a season ticket or pass or something like that. If you go to a National Park you can't kill a goanna. Like hell – I'll kill a goanna.” (Interviewee 6).*

Interviewee 3 also discussed concern over access to the land. El Questro Station in particular, came under scrutiny because fees were charged for Aboriginal people to visit rock art sites. *“To see some rock art sites at El Questro you have to buy a wilderness pass to visit. Traditional owners shouldn't have to pay to get permission to access their sites. He only has a cattle lease.... It is not morally, legally or ethically correct what they are doing. I refuse to do it”* (Interviewee 3). Interviewee 11, as a recognised traditional owner, did not have to pay an entry fee. *“You gotta have a ticket... You gotta pay money...but I don't have to because I'm owner of the country you see... only one person allowed not to have a ticket... that's me”*(Interviewee 11).

Many interviewees, when questioned about places of special significance to them in Wyndham, associated them directly to the land and ideas of space. The hills and mud flats (see figure 7.1) were most important, and represented what Wyndham meant to them. Interviewee 15 found even the Three Mile too crowded for him and loved the less populated area of the town known as the

‘Gully’. Interviewee 12 also had a special place in her heart for the Gully, because many of her childhood reminiscences were of its open spaces.



Figure 7.1 Mudflats and Hills of Wyndham

Interviewee 6 revealed a conception of space that, though rarely discussed consciously, was apparent with other interviewees including Interviewee 11, who were all in older age groups. This described the cultural need of Aboriginal people for space. The idea that obtaining land rights was not necessarily about ownership and control but about space. *“We are basic human beings too. With needs and requirements. Needs for land, for space. I talked to people my age and even younger, they sort of show little remorse. I show a lot of remorse. Because they need some understanding of space. That’s not there anymore. Slowly that’s moving away from our focus. People can’t visualize space. My family, they can’t visualize space the way I know it. They just hop in their 4WD vehicle, go out fishing, always they trespass, go on somebody else’s property, and then come back to their quarter acre block again. That’s not space, that’s forced*

*recreation. There has to be a better understanding of the requirements and needs of Aboriginal people. And what we need to have around us. And what we think we might have to own.”*. This idea of ‘space’ as opposed to place is interesting conceptually and quite difficult to grasp. Although place is considered important to note, ‘place’ is relative. Place has no meaning in conjunction with space. ‘Space’ seems to be a far less anthropocentric value.

Interviewee 6 gave the example of soldiers returning after the war and being granted land. Why was it not acceptable for Aboriginal people to obtain such a grant? This cultural need for space, Interviewee 6 argued, has never been fully understood. *“But nobody sees that. They think that we’re money grabbers. They think that we demand land, they think we steal backyards from people. That’s what’s advertised by the Liberal Party whenever there’s a campaign on.”*. Interviewee 6 viewed heritage and land legislation as restrictive in terms of Aboriginal access to space and land.

In discussing heritage legislation Turner writes that *“the devolution to the States of responsibility for heritage reduces protection for all heritage, as State land Acts and mining Acts override State heritage laws”* (Turner, 1998:4). Protection and access to land is therefore often out of the control of Aboriginal people. Interviewee 6 also noted that even the lands designated for Aboriginal use in Western Australia are held in trust by a government department, so officially no Aboriginal person owns the land at all. *“Contrary to what the government say ... the only time an Aboriginal person will ever own land is if they buy a free hold block. And there are a few people around here. We have status in this town. So because we don’t own any land officially – all these vast tracts that they say Aboriginal people own, there are Aboriginal organisations that own pastoral properties, but they are only under pastoral lease – they don’t own the land. So we*

*own nothing really. And because we own nothing we have no access to any traditional thing at all. We are denied that” (Interviewee 6).*

An additional problem according to Interviewee 6 is the creation of a distinction between traditional and non-traditional owners. Traditional owners are beginning to be recognised in legislation, which Interviewee 6 sees as appropriate, and even helped to instigate. However the cultural rights, as opposed to traditional ownership rights, of other Aboriginal people are not being recognised. *“They are creating a new precedent which is really dividing the Aboriginal people in two... Traditional Aboriginal owners of lands like here have to be recognized... governments have embraced the recognition of these people and organisations who represent them. So none of these people can be people like us, who are transient, stolen generation people. We are out of the picture all together. So that’s why we have organisations like this starting – Joorook Ngarni resource agency. We only represent nobodies like myself. All the traditional owners are represented by another organisation. Because they get royalties and things. We are denied that opportunity because we are non persons if you like. Legislation creates racism if you like in that sense” (Interviewee 6).*

The issue of cultural rights to land for all Aboriginal people needs to be addressed. A deeper understanding of Aboriginal history and culture by non-indigenous Australians will be necessary before a clearer understanding of the importance of the land is achieved. Perhaps if land can be viewed as an aspect of Aboriginal cultural heritage by non-indigenous Australians, they might then be able to liken its importance to places that the non-indigenous community view as being of cultural significance.



#### **7.4 Aboriginal History and Heritage of Wyndham**

What became clearly evident throughout the study was that the history of Aboriginal people in Wyndham has largely gone unrecognised. Interviewees continually recounted stories that have received little or no mention in local historical records. Written histories usually paid minimal attention to the Aboriginal population with the exception of the early days of ‘settlement’ and the conflict that occurred, or an event whose significance could not be ignored – the coming of equal pay legislation and the movement of Aboriginal people into the town. According to Interviewee 1 the ‘Aboriginal Pioneers’, who contributed to the construction of the town, often through hard physical labour were largely neglected. The Aboriginal experience of World War Two also lacks recognition.

Interviews conducted during the study revealed completely different perspectives on the official history of the town, both in terms of differing perspectives on events central to both the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal accounts of Wyndham’s history and in terms of different views on what was important to the history. Interpretation of the historical record was also aided by the oral history accounts. As Goodall (1990) noted, although records of the removal of Aboriginal children are evident throughout Australian history, it is only through oral history that the devastating affects of these policies become clear. Every interviewee was affected by policies of child removal in one way or another. The historical experience of Aboriginal people in the town also highlighted sites of historical significance that are largely known only for their

contemporary use. These buildings included Joorook Ngarni, which was part of the old native hospital, and the golf course which was home to Aboriginal camps during the war.

The different ways Aboriginal people looked at the world became apparent when examining historical sites such as the old gaol. Prison graffiti recorded the number of ‘moons’ inmates were incarcerated for, illustrating alternative methods of measuring time, in practise as late as the 70s. The use of the moon method does seem to have faded with time, and was not evident in any of the interviews. Further examination of the gaol site, along with other sites such as the native hospital should be considered. Unfortunately this was outside the scope of this thesis. The native hospital building is currently threatened with white ant damage so any action will need to be prompt. If resources were available archaeological digs could be considered as they may have the potential to reveal a wealth of information on the history of these buildings and the people who used them.

One of the most interesting revelations in the history of the town was the presence of what Interviewees 6 and 1 called the ‘bush’ Aboriginals, people still living a traditional lifestyle, as late as World War Two. Little however was known about these people. One possibility is that they were somehow associated with the Forrest River Mission. Wilma and Harry Venville in their book Dadaway, refer to three main groups of Aboriginal people at the mission – one group was seen as ‘traditional’ Aboriginal people who spoke little English and lived about a mile away from the mission (Venville, 2000:6). The Venville’s noted that *“The number of old people fluctuated, as some died and others went walkabout. There were probably never more than about twenty five at the most and their number was even then, rapidly diminishing as they died from*

*illness and old age.*” (Venville, 2000:6). The Venville’s were teachers at the Forrest River Mission school in 1958 and 1959. If this group of people were what Interviewees 1 and 6 referred to as the ‘bush’ Aboriginals, then the traditional lifestyle was present as late as the 1950s.

Arguably the most important lessons learnt from the recording of Interviewees’ histories were their personal struggles and triumphs. The stories of how families came to make their lives in the town, despite the harsh conditions, both natural and social. It was interesting to note as Interviewee 15 pointed out, that social problems such as racism seemed to increase in the town at times when the population peaked, such as when the meatworks was fully operational. Other interviewees concurred, Interviewee 2 commenting on the changes that occurred in the community club at the Three Mile. In the 1980s Aboriginal people largely used the pub at the Port, the Three Mile being a ‘white’ pub. In the early 90s however economic circumstances and a drop in population caused the club to welcome Aboriginal patrons. Now there are several Aboriginal members of the club.

Interviewee 6, at the time of this study, was involved in writing his own autobiographical account of the history of the town. Most interviewees felt that this was a significant step toward helping the Aboriginal history of the town to be heard. Most interviewees were also happy to share their stories for this study and believed in the notion of a ‘shared history’. Interviewee 15 displayed some initial concerns following accounts of a local history study in Broome which had abused the trust of the participants. Interviewee 15 also raised the valid point of a need for a study that considers the perspective of the youth, particularly dealing with social issues such as

suicide and alcoholism. *“You need to consider younger views. People my age have baggage. We grew up with prohibition. People wondering about youth suicide etc need to go to the youth – not the elders. They are like chalk and cheese now days. Older people are opinionated and have stern ideas about the youth. They have no idea where they are coming from”*(Interviewee 15). From its inception this study was not designed around the opinions of those under 18 and when conducting research in Wyndham the study was bound by ethical approval to those over the age of 18. Nevertheless there would certainly be merit in a second study utilising the perspectives of the younger age group.

### **7.5 Closing Statements**

In one respect, the study at Wyndham reinforced on a small, local level, many of the findings cited from previous research such as that of Thorley. There were nonetheless findings that were *sui generis* and specific to the local context.

The issues of space, access and freedom of movement were markedly more significant than the issue of possession. Land rights as such appeared to be viewed by the interviewees as a matter of access rather than possession.

Among the older generation interviewed, heritage could best be termed as conceptual and location based. In other words heritage was the memory, frequently embodied in an oral tradition. The physical manifestations of this conceptual, oral tradition were the sites. There was a marked contrast therefore between indigenous notions of heritage and the most obvious

manifestation of the non-indigenous view. By and large the interviewees were not given to the idea of monuments, plaques and other typically non-indigenous ways of displaying heritage. For them, the real heritage rested with the memory. Exceptions to this dichotomy became evident when the interviewees sought to communicate their heritage values to the non-indigenous community. There appeared to be a genuine willingness to utilise non-indigenous ideas to communicate indigenous values. The second exception arose from a generational distinction within the indigenous community itself. The interviewees of the older generation were willing to accept the idea of a written history, a museum or monuments, if those things could help to transmit and preserve traditional heritage values to the young.

The study reinforced previous research concerning the complexity of the concept of heritage. Distinctions were evident between the indigenous and the non-indigenous community in Wyndham and were equally evident within the indigenous community itself. Before effective preservation and celebration of heritage is undertaken studies such as this reinforce the need for a clearer understanding of exactly what is to be preserved.

In terms of a historical record the existing histories of Wyndham, the published local accounts and references to Wyndham in wider state and national histories, are distortions. They are not what they claim to be. They are overwhelmingly white histories, for white readership. They are no more valid as a history of Wyndham or the Kimberley Region than is a history of the Ford Motor Company for someone studying the history of the motor car. The research conducted in Wyndham repeatedly revealed aspects and perspectives completely ignored in current historical accounts. Ford may be an important aspect in the development and evolution of the motor

industry, as were the first cattlemen, the first goldminers and settlers in the development of the Kimberley. Nevertheless in each instance someone came before. Others lived, worked, hoped, dreamed and died in the same area, at the same time. A part of the story can never be 'the story'. That is the lesson of the Wyndham interviews.

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## Appendix A

### Warawara - Department of Indigenous Studies Macquarie University



**Project Name:** Understanding Aboriginal Perspectives  
of History and Heritage in Wyndham,  
Western Australia.

**Researcher:** Bronwyn Lawton, BA (hons) student  
Department of Indigenous Studies  
Macquarie University  
NSW 2109 ph: (02) 9850 6751

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You are invited to participate in a study of Aboriginal perspectives of the history and heritage of Wyndham. The study focuses on the period from European establishment of Wyndham, to the present day. The purpose of the study is to gain an understanding of how Aboriginal people perceive their role in the town's history, and to document sites of significance to Aboriginal people relating to that history. Examining history and heritage concerns of the Aboriginal population may help determine better ways to define Aboriginal history and heritage.

The study is being undertaken by Bronwyn Lawton, as a component of a Bachelor of Arts (Hons) degree in Aboriginal Studies under the supervision of Dr James Kohen, Department of Biological Sciences (02) 9850 8138.

If you participate, you will be asked about events in Wyndham's history that you, family or friends may have been involved in. You will also be asked your views on different events in the town's history. You may be asked about places you associate with these events, any importance they have, and whether they should be formally protected. You may also be asked general questions about the role or importance of history or heritage. If permission is given by you the resulting conversation from these questions may be recorded on audio tape. Interviews will not be recorded without permission. It is anticipated that interviews would not last more than an hour and breaks may be taken whenever you require them.

Data from the study, including audio tapes will be stored at Macquarie University for the duration of the study and for the minimum required period of 5 years after the studies completion. Access to the data will only be given with permission from the participants. The results of the study will also be made available to participants in the form of a report.

Any information or personal details gathered in the course of the study are confidential. Individuals will

only be identified in an account of the town's history if their permission is given.

If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw from further participation in the research at any time without having to give a reason and without consequence.

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I, \_\_\_\_\_ have read/have had read to me (*delete one*) and understand the information above and any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in this research, knowing that I can withdraw from further participation in the research at any time without consequence. I have been given a signed copy of this form to keep.

Participant's Name: \_\_\_\_\_ (block letters)

Participant's Signature/ Interpreters Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ (*delete one*)

Date:

Investigator's Name: \_\_\_\_\_ (block letters)

Investigator's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date:

The ethical aspects of this study have been approved by the Macquarie University Ethics Review Committee (Human Research). If you have any complaints or reservations about any ethical aspect of your participation in this research, you may contact the Ethics Review Committee through its Secretary (telephone 9850 7854). Any complaint you make will be treated in confidence and investigated, and you will be informed of the outcome.

**(PARTICIPANT'S COPY)**

## Appendix B

### QUESTIONS/ DISCUSSION OUTLINE USED IN INTERVIEWS

Interviewees were encouraged to discuss any issues they felt were relevant to the study. As a guide however, the following points/questions were used:

- Personal background – whether participant has lived in Wyndham all their life, family background, traditional owner or other – brief details to get an idea of participants life and where they fit into the community.
- Are there any **traditional concepts of history and heritage**? If so what are the main similarities/differences between the common view of heritage today. (*according to literature modern notions of heritage are obsessed with preservation – Aboriginal notions are likely to include a more active process of the giving of heritage rather than passive preserving, also maybe the Dreaming provides a kind of link of past and present*)
- The Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation has identified the idea of trying to create a ‘shared history’ as helping to promote reconciliation. **Do you think helping non-Aboriginal people see an Aboriginal view of our countries, or even your communities history will help reconciliation?**
- Legislation/laws protecting heritage don’t give much direct attention to sites from recent history that may be of significance to Aboriginal people. Traditionally heritage sites from this period have been thought of as valuable to white people only because they tell the story of settlement. Some Aboriginal people have been forced to use laws targeting ‘white’ heritage to bring attention to this. They want people to know for example buildings where resistance to the treatment they received took place. **Do you think the law can better acknowledge different types of Aboriginal heritage? Eg. other than rock art and sacred sites, maybe places of resistance or places people grew up or worked.**
- **What can you tell me about the history of Wyndham?**

Things to ask about if prompting is necessary :-

	Cattle Stations
Initial ‘settlement’ or ‘invasion’	Disease
The overland telegraph	Afghan Traders
Missions and the Church	
Massacres and ill treatment	Aviation

World War 2

The Meatworks/The Port/The Prison

Equal Pay legislation

Growth of Kununurra

Daily life

Music – Munumburra Festival

Education

- **How do you think Aboriginal people have contributed to the growth of Wyndham since it was established as a town?**
- **In what ways has the position of Aboriginal people in the town changed over time?** eg. most people lived outside the town at first – how did they relate to it then as opposed to now?
- **Have you heard of the Townscape Project that will be carried out in Wyndham this year?** Amongst other things this project aims to help promote the visible heritage of Wyndham (eg. historic buildings like those in the Port Area). **Do you think an account of the Aboriginal history of the town and their heritage interests should be incorporated into the project?** If so **How can this be done?** Perhaps by inclusion of the relevance of places to Aboriginal people on tourist signage (*this has been the approach in Darwin to establishing a 'shared history'*). How else?
- Heritage can take many forms. It can be an object like a building that is important to us, it can be an aspect of culture – maybe something traditional or something that has changed over time, like art or music. **What do you see as part of your heritage in Wyndham today?**
- **What do you think of Wairru Park?**
- **Are there any places in Wyndham or the surrounding area that you think should be preserved because they represent part of Aboriginal peoples role in the history of the town or the way Aboriginal people were treated at different times?** These can include areas that are already listed to give some form of protection and/or recognition eg. Wairru Park, Oombulgurri
- **What stories (if any) about living around the Wyndham area do you feel are important for you to pass on to future generations?** *Possibly links to the theory that the one universal thing in heritage is that we all want to pass on something (even if it is not a physical object).*
- **Do you think that the growing use of Aboriginal culture in the Kimberley for tourism will be a benefit or a problem for Aboriginal people?**
- **Is it important that we try to ensure tourists come away understanding a little about contemporary Aboriginal societies as well as traditional lifestyles?** *If so how can we help achieve this?*