

OOMBULGURRI REVISITED

*Deirdre Dowsett and Sue Chapman recently retraced their steps to Oombulgurri
And remembered fondly and with some tears. Deirdre writes....*



There are a lot of years between 1977 and 1999, so it was with a mixture of curiosity, hope, excitement and trepidation that I returned to visit the Aboriginal community I had left in 1977 after living there for five years.

The return to Oombulgurri was part of a ten-day holiday that Sue Chapman and I took together in the Kimberleys.

KUNUNURRA

For me, the whole trip was a combination of nostalgia and newness. We spent most of our time based in Kununurra at a backpackers hostel. Kununurra has grown – lots of tourist-type things, and lots of new employment areas, mostly outcomes of the Ord River Irrigation Scheme, Lake Argyle, and the diamond mines. It was a good base from which to play tourist, but not somewhere I would really like to live. (However, if you want a great few days sometime and are in that part of the country, book a cabin at Emma Gorge, which is part of El Questro Station. Sue and I stayed for three days and totally recommend it – great walks, great scenery, good food and not all that expensive. Don't go in the wet, though!)

WYNDHAM

Wyndham was something of a shock. Now that the meatworks are closed and the port is containerized and employs few workers, Wyndham has shrunk!

We went to the pub at the port, sure we could get a counter lunch and catch up with old friends. We couldn't even find the barman! We did go to the Crocodile Farm though, and met a huge old croc called "Oombi" that the staff there had removed from the Forrest River at

Oombulgurri at the community's request after it had eaten several dogs – (one of which was owned by a teacher and was on a lead at the time!) A bit of maths has me convinced that I surely swam with Oombi when he and I were both much younger.

OOMBULGURRI

Of course, one of the major reasons for going to the Kimberleys was to revisit Oombulgurri and the many friends and colleagues there, so we set off for Wyndham, certain we would run into some of the Oombulgurri community who would tell us how to get permission to visit. Sure enough, outside the post office, while we were waiting to phone Ord Air to book a flight, we saw coming toward us a group of Aboriginal women. "That woman in the centre has to be one of the Alberts girls", I said to Sue. "I guess after twenty-odd years that would be about right. She looks exactly the way Stella used to look." I was almost right – except that it really was Stella, looking not very different from the way she looked twenty years ago. A little greyer on closer inspection, but that was about all.

STELLA ALBERTS

Meeting Stella, amid much noise and many tears and hugs, began an afternoon of meeting everybody in town, or so it seemed, and involved a lot of memory searching to work out who was really related to whom. We met Josephine Moore and Reggie Meahan, both of whom had worked with me in the Education Guild in Oombulgurri. I was deeply appreciative of Reggie's decision to take me aside and spend time telling me quietly who had died and who was still around, thereby getting over one of the real difficulties. (When it's inappropriate to speak the name of someone who has died, it's more than a bit tricky trying to find out who is still alive).

MANY HAD DIED

Hearing the list of people who had died was a bit overwhelming. It included, of course, not only older people but many of the kids



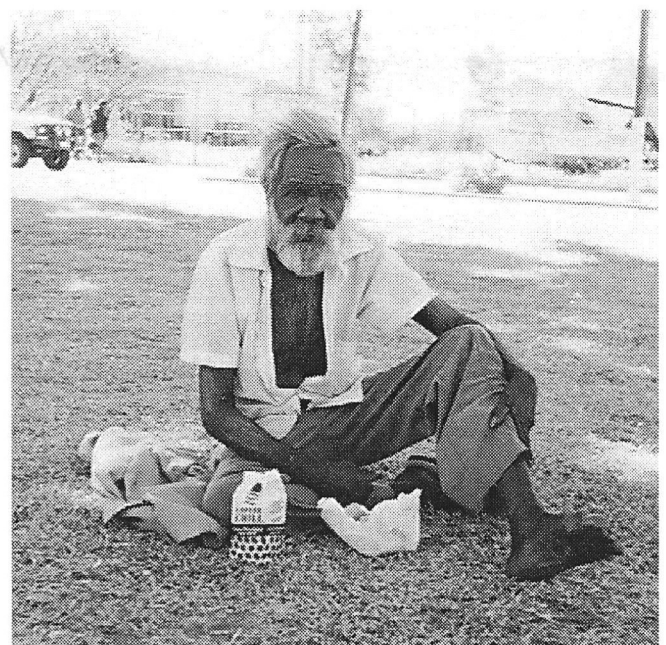
Deirdre Dowsett

I had taught. Some had died in their teens or early twenties. It was hard to hear that people I remembered as bright enthusiastic pre-schoolers have been dead for some time. I had gone up there expecting that this would be so, but my head knowledge of mortality rates didn't do much to cushion the shock when we got down to specific people.

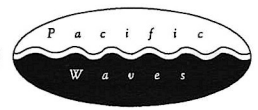
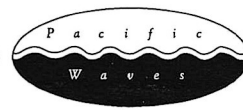
BUT MANY ARE STILL AROUND

However, the more we talked and met people, the more stunned I became at some of the people who were still around. Sue and I spent half a day in Wyndham and a day in Oombulgurri. After Sue left to go back to work I spent another day in Wyndham. To those who never visited Oombulgurri or met the community on their visits to ICA locations, the following names won't mean much, but here goes anyway.

We met Stella Alberts and all her children. We met Allan Meahan, who was the original Chairman of Oombulgurri and a man for whom I have huge respect and affection. Also John Selwyn Meahan whose wife Sheila is in hospital in Perth. We met Hilton & Molly Gore, Mary Taylor, Eric & Elaine Johnstone, Mark Mitchell, May Smith, LeRay Mitchell, Leila Mitchell. All of these were adults when I lived in Oombulgurri and many were elected members of the Oombulgurri Council.



Allan Meahan

**The Albert Family**

Amazingly, Karen Edwards told us that her grandfather, Charlie Djeela, was still alive in hospital in Wyndham. I remember him as a quite old man when I was in Oombulgurri. He was one of the boat and barge drivers.

Some of the people I knew as youth are doing well. We met quite a few, and some had to jog my memory as to who they were. Several asked after lots of the "gudia". Richard Evans and Trevor Morgan send regards, as do Rosie Taylor, the Alberts girls, Gabriel Evans, Michael Martin, Geraldine Smith, Connie Clark, Joanne Moore, James Johnstone, Leslie Smith and others. We met many of their children. Michael Martin, whom I taught as a twelve-year-old, took great delight in introducing me to his grandchild!

GREAT PRIDE IN IMPROVEMENTS

Flying into the Oombulgurri Community and spending a day there was quite an experience. Many of the community took great pride in pointing out physical improvements. The main roads are paved! There were phones in the office, the store and the school, as well as several public phones. The community is powered full time by a large generator some distance out of the community. (Trevor Morgan has been trained to run and maintain the power). The school has computers and a separate high school building! The houses have televisions and toilets – septic, not pit. There is a new store, with a store manager employed by the community, and a range of goods from yogurt to jeans. The new office complex has a Centrelink Office and a Council room as well as several offices. The community has expanded. No one seemed exactly sure how many live there, but about three hundred or more seemed to be the consensus. Not only are the houses bigger, but there are more of them, and they have expanded into new areas that have required new roads, streetlights included. (Gudia house, of which some of us have fond memories, has sunk back into the ground and cannot be seen through a

patch of dense bush that has risen around it. "Great for snakes," Richard told us.) We walked up the jump-up and along a bit of the road to Jandungi, which anyone who ever had to service the pump will remember with mixed feelings, I'm sure. My little Barina could have driven it no problem, at least in the dry!

THERE WERE LOTS OF PEOPLE WORKING HARD

Some of the people we knew have moved back to Wyndham, and some of the Wyndham people are now

living in Oombulgurri. I suspect this fluctuates according to who is in power in the Council at the time.

Among the usual family disputes, there seems to be a number of tensions. Depending on who we talked to in Oombulgurri we heard there were lots of people working hard, few people working hard, too much grog, no problem with grog, and so on.

Certainly when we were there, lots of people were working, though there was evidence

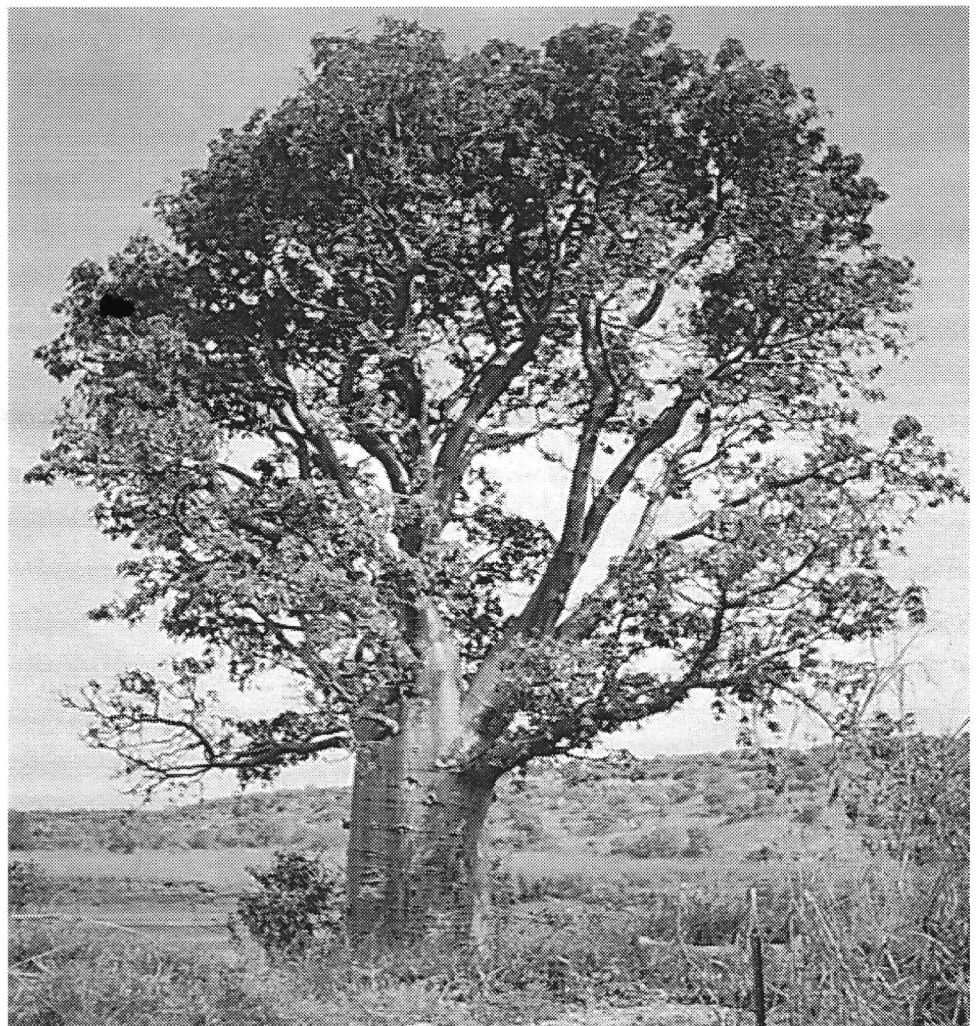
that the alcohol problem remains, and I gather some evenings are "lively".

UNANSWERED QUESTIONS

Our stay was too short to do much more than look around and renew old acquaintances. There are lots of questions I would have liked to ask, but couldn't in so short a time. Are the elders still handing down their wisdom to the young men and women? Does the elected Council still represent all the people? Are they still relating through the Wunan lines?.... One thing is very clear, though. Those people who moved back to their tribal land close to thirty years ago to create a new future for their children have done just that. The original community, with all its frailty and with all its strength of spirit, has continued. Whatever its continuing problems (and I'm sure there are lots), Oombulgurri is alive and growing and is in charge of its own future.

THE FUTURE IS OPEN

I am pleased to have visited and to have renewed my links with that part of my past. I turn fifty this year. More than to any other of my very varied life experiences, I look to Oombulgurri with love and gratitude for what five years there taught me about the profundity of Spirit, and about the risks and the joys of living.

**One of the fabulous Boab trees at Oombulgurri.**