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Indigenous Histories and the State Archives

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ABSTRACT

State Records NSW, has a significant collection of records relating to Aboriginal people. The records document the business of government in NSW and its interaction with Aboriginal people. One of the most significant sources of material are the records of the former Aborigines Welfare Board (formerly the Aborigines Protection Board) 1883 - 1969. These records document the administration of a Board which had significant control over the lives of Aboriginal people - from the management of reserves and subsequent movements of Aboriginal people - to the removal of Aboriginal children from their families.

State Records has custody of the surviving records of the Aborigines Welfare Board. Although the records are incomplete, due to destruction and loss, they are one of the most important resources for Aboriginal

personal, family and community histories.

Within the collection of AWB records there are approx 1000 photographs taken from around NSW. The pictures are an interesting mix of official and personal photographs. The photographs of people range from formal studio portraits (mainly female wards in the 1920s) to snapshots in the 1950s. The photographs were taken all over NSW at many reserves and stations. Unfortunately however, many of the photographs are undated and unidentified.

Over the past two years, State Records has embarked on a project to create a database for the photographs. An Indigenous Volunteer has been working with State Records to go back through the original photographs and record any additional information to add to the photographs context. For example,

names, dates, transcriptions, studio stamps and format. Importantly the database will allow for oral history information to be added to the photograph recording any identifying names and places made. The database will go on to increase accessibility for Indigenous clients who wish to view the significant collection of photographs. Some of which may be the only surviving photograph of a family member or of a group of children in a community.

STATE RECORDS NSW

The State Records Authority of New South Wales ('State Records' for short) is a statutory body established under the *State Records Act 1998*. On 1 January 1999, the Act replaced the *Archives Act 1960*. State Records replaces, and is legally a continuation, of the former Archives Authority of New South Wales.

State Records operates as one of the State's cultural institutions within the Arts portfolio. Our Minister is the Hon. Bob Carr, M.P., Premier, Minister for the Arts and Minister for Citizenship.

Our vision

That people and Government in NSW have ready access to records which illuminate history, enrich the life of the community and support good and accountable government.

Our purpose

As the NSW Government's archives and records management authority, State Records exists to ensure that:

- the business of the NSW public sector is properly documented and the resulting records are managed efficiently and effectively for as long as they are needed, and that
- the State archives collection is developed, preserved and used.

INDIGENOUS HISTORIES AND THE STATE ARCHIVES

Records relating to Aboriginal people held as State Archives

State Records holds a significant number of records relating to Aboriginal people.

The records document the business of government in NSW and its interaction with Aboriginal people. Many of the records were created as a result of Government legislation and policies that had a major impact on Aboriginal people in NSW.

The records document different periods of government administration from contact, protection and segregation to assimilation and more recently self-determination and reconciliation.

A note on the records

Many of the records documenting the administration of Aboriginal affairs were created in response to policies that had a major impact on Aboriginal people and communities in NSW.

Some of the information contained within the records may be viewed as being offensive to some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people because of the context in which they were created. Unfortunately the records of the various departments are frequently far from complete due to destruction or loss.

ABORIGINES WELFARE BOARD, 1883-1969

One of the most significant sources of information held as NSW State archives are the records of the former Aborigines Welfare Board (AWB).

A Board for the Protection of Aborigines was established on 2 June 1883, comprising six members appointed by the Governor. The Board held weekly meetings at which recommendations concerning the State's Aboriginal population were considered.

This Board functioned without any statutory power until the *Aborigines Protection Act 1909* was passed. Under the Protection Act the Board was reconstituted with the Inspector General of Police as ex officio chairman and not more than ten members appointed by the Governor. Their duty was

to exercise a general supervision and care over all matters affecting the interests and

welfare of Aborigines and to protect them against injustice, imposition and fraud.

The Board's principal expenditure was provided for the distribution of rations, clothing and huts for the accommodation of Aboriginal people.

Records of the Board

The records of the former AWB, document the administration of 'Aboriginal Affairs' and the Board's intervention in the lives of Aboriginal people coming under its control.

The records are incomplete due to destruction and loss. For example, in NSW the correspondence files of the AWB have only survived from 1949 – 1969. This major gap in the records is significant and much of the evidence of the policies of the AWB has been lost. The result of this is that Aboriginal people who wish to conduct personal, family and community histories are faced with many challenges.

PHOTOGRAPHS OF THE FORMER AWB, c.1924 – 1961

A significant resource that has survived are the photographs of the AWB. There are over 1,000 photographs in this record series dating from c.1924–61.

The series comprises a mixture of official and personal photographs. The photographs of an official nature show reserves, stations, homes and schools with interior and exterior views of accommodation and housing projects. Also included are photographs of pupils and teachers, station managers and matrons. They also record the visits of Government officials.

The photographs of people range from formal studio portraits (mainly female wards in the 1920s) to snapshots in the 1950s and 1960s. They show Aboriginal people participating in many activities, such as football, basketball, cricket, swimming, gardening and attending school. Photographs of christenings, first communions, weddings, birthdays, Christmas parties, excursions and a visit to Luna Park are also included. The female wards were often photographed in

their domestic service uniforms, sometimes with their employers or employers' children and some are photographed in studio apartments.

Identification of photographs

Many of the photographs are undated and unidentified. A list of photographs is available in both the State Records reading rooms for researchers to access. The descriptions include both the name of the person and their location, if they are known.

Community consultation

Community consultation will form a major part of reconstructing the identity of these photographs. State Records encourages clients to contact the reading room if they are able to identify the people and/or places in the collection of photographs.

The original photographs are included in the records of the former AWB at State Records. The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) was permitted to copy this collection in 1981 to assist with identification.

History of the photographs

The history of the photographs has, in many ways, been unrecorded. Although the photographs illustrate the wide functions of the Board and its contact with Aboriginal communities, information on their context has been largely undocumented. What was the purpose of the Board in taking these photos?

FACT OR FICTION: THE PHOTOGRAPHS AS PROPAGANDA

For some, the photographs are considered as a form of propaganda, the Board taking snap shots of what they perceived to be their 'good work' with Aboriginal communities throughout the State.

In 1985 Carol Cooper wrote an article on the photographs in *Australian Aboriginal Studies* titled 'The Aboriginal Welfare Board Photographs: Fact and Fiction: Cooper argued that 'While most could be termed 'factual' or 'realistic', they possibly tell us as much about the aims of the AWB

as about the people depicted.(Cooper, 1985)

Carol also writes of the juxtaposition of 'shanty towns' depicted in earlier photographs against those portraying Aboriginal families in 'sombre domesticity'; eating breakfast in a modern kitchen. Do the photographs accurately portray what life was like for Aboriginal people in NSW in the period from the 1920's to the 1960s?

CONNECTIONS & COLLABORATIONS

One of the only ways for us to find out more information on the context of the photographs is to take them back to the people who were involved. Inviting Indigenous histories into the archives is essential for identifying the names and places documented in the photographs.

PROJECT TO RECORD FURTHER CONTEXTUAL INFORMATION

To assist the identification of photographs, State Records has created a database to record known contextual information. The project's first phase includes going back through the original photographs to recheck inscriptions (dates, names, places) and to record further data such as format, size, studio stamps and possible relationships between photographs. Photographs needing conservation work are also identified at this stage.

The second phase of recording contextual information will come from recording oral history information from Aboriginal people who may be able to identify people and places in the photographs. The database provides a place for this information to be captured.

REFERENCES

Cooper, C (1985) *The Aboriginal Welfare Board Photographs: Fact and Fiction*, in Australian Aboriginal Studies, 1985, number 1 p 65

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would also like to acknowledge the Aboriginal men, women and children whose lives are documented within records held as NSW State archives.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Kirsten Thorpe began work at State Records NSW in 1999 through an Indigenous Cadetship program. Since completing the Cadetship Kirsten has worked in the position of Archivist - Aboriginal Liaison within Public Access to promote access to records for Indigenous people. In particular, records of the former Aborigines Protection and Welfare Boards held as NSW State archives. Kirsten holds a Post Graduate Diploma Science (Archives and Records), Bachelor of Social Science (Sociology) and a Diploma of Aboriginal Studies (Administration). Kirsten is a descendant of the Worimi people of NSW.

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