

I SHARED MY MOTHER WITH THE ABORIGINAL CHILDREN

Finale Part One



28 April 2019

More than fifty boys lived at St Francis' House from 1945 to 1959. Many of those children came from Alice Springs and St John's Hostel and other places in the Northern Territory. Some of their stories have been lost. Some of their stories are incomplete or records missing. We have tried to collect what we can and with help from people from Alice Springs and elsewhere we have been able to bring together this series, "Kids from the Alice."



L-R - Jim Foster, David Woodford, Peter Tilmouth, Malcolm Cooper at St Francis' House in the 1950s.

I have been fortunate to work with my father John P McD Smith on researching and writing this series. This article includes some of the other snippets that have been collected along the way.

John spent his childhood in Alice Springs and lived at the rectory in the early 1950s with his parents, Father Percy Smith and his wife Isabel. The couple met in Alice Springs in the early 1940s and were married at The Church of the Ascension in 1943.

John was an only child, but as his parents cared for many children at St John's Hostel, so there were always other kids around. John recalls,

"I had many Aboriginal brothers. Some in Alice Springs. More back in Adelaide at St Francis' House where I was born in 1946."

"I was younger than most of them. They used to play with me and with my toys. I remember crying when one of my favourite toy trucks was broken."

"Some of the children didn't have their mothers. I was happy to share my mother with them. I would have to get myself ready for school then line up with the other children for inspection by my mother."

John's mother was born Isabel Almond in 1914. A music and school teacher by training she loved caring for children.

David Woodford was one of those children from Alice Springs. David's mother Millie gave birth to him in 1934 at "The Bungalow." He was one of the first six boys from Alice Springs to go to Adelaide in 1945 along with Charles Perkins, Malcolm Cooper, Bill Espie, John Palmer and Peter Tilmouth. David and John Smith shared a lifelong friendship despite David's repeated offence of dipping baby John's dummy into the salt, rather than the sugar causing the infant to cry. David also recalls,

"Father Smith made arrangements with the manager of the Ozone Theatre at Semaphore for us to be admitted free of charge on

Saturday afternoons and with a small amount of spending money this would highlight the weekend. One penny of our pocket money was to be kept for church collection. The St Francis' House boys' queue at the pictures grew considerably as we would get our mates in free of charge in exchange for lollies or ice cream at interval. No-one complained!"

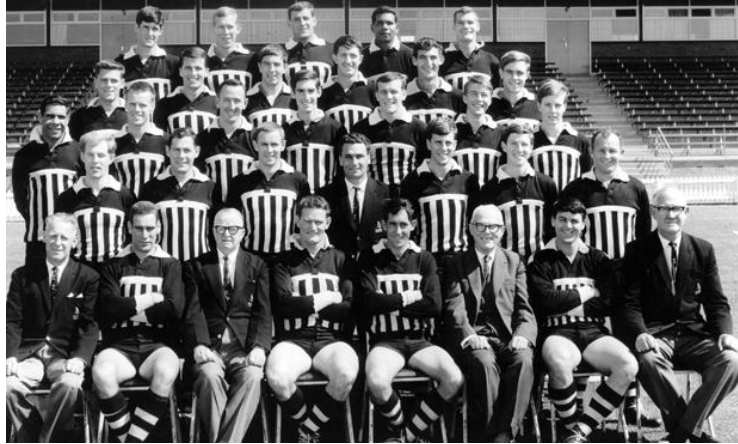
David trained as a fitter and turner and worked for the South Australian railways and the highways department. He was part of the Aboriginal Advancement League in the 1960s. He married Judy Almond in 1981 who was Mrs Smith's niece, so Isabel became his Auntie. They were happily married until Judy passed away in 2014. David died in 2018 aged 84. Both were keen fans of the Port Adelaide Football Club stretching back to the days when David's relative and fellow St Francis' House boy Richie Bray was playing for the club. Richie was a very talented footballer.



David Woodford's mother, Millie Woodford with Albert Namatjira in about 1949.

In 1962 **Richie Bray** played in his first Premiership for the Port Adelaide Football Club. A three-time premiership player Richie Bray was a member of the 1962, 1963 and 1965 premierships sides under coach Fos Williams. Richie played 77 games for the club over a

career spanning eight years. He spent most of his playing time on the half forward flank kicking 65 goals. He also coached locally at the Semaphore Football Club.



1965 - SANFL Port Adelaide Football Club premiership team photo. Richie Bray is standing on the far left in the third row.

Wilfred Huddleston known as “Boofa” also played for Port. He was one of three competing for a spot in the 1963 Port Adelaide grand final team as a news clipping from the time reports. He is pictured with Richie Bray who just pipped him for selection.



1963 newspaper clipping of report in The News about SANFL Grand Final selection possibilities for Wilfred Huddleston, Bruce Nyland and Richie Bray for the Port Adelaide Football Club.

James (Jamesie) Bray was an Eastern Arrente man born in Alice Springs in 1941 to Billy Bray and Mary Perkins, the eleventh of twelve children. His father worked as a fencer, mica miner, gold miner, and railway fettler to support his large family. At one stage he wrote to the Protector of Aborigines in 1941 protesting against the removal of his children from Central Australia. That letter is now memorialised in reconciliation place in Canberra. James grew up in the Gap cottages in Rainbow Town. He was sent to Adelaide around age eight to St Francis' House and completed school at Le Fevre Technical High School. His early working life included fruit picking in the (Murray) Riverland and labouring in timber mills and training as a welder. He took on bush jobs and railway work in the Northern Territory and became a skilled arc welder working with Dillingham Engineering in the construction of the minerals processing plant at Gove.

James also worked for the water resources division in the Territory undertaking early drilling in Yulara. He managed Aboriginal hostels in Darwin, Katherine and Alice Springs and after completing a diploma in community development worked at the Institute for Aboriginal Development leading their cross-cultural awareness program. In 1989 Jim was elected inaugural chairman of the Centre for Appropriate Technology (CAT) Inc board.

Writing in 2013 about Father Smith, James described him as "the great man." James was consistent in his conviction that the future opportunities for young Indigenous people were in science and engineering. A single man, when he returned to Alice Springs, he became everyone's brother, uncle and gramps. He died in 2016 aged 75.

John Palmer was another of the first six boys and was a talented artist. Father Smith arranged for him to go to art school. An older cousin to Gordon Briscoe he protected young Gordon from the older boys, and taught him how to box and play football. Briscoe recalled,

"John Palmer could reproduce Albert Namatjira style paintings. John's mother was a sister to my mother. He and Malcolm Cooper were good boxers and really good footballers."

Jim Foster was a cousin of John Moriarty and along with Wally McArthur was evacuated to Mulgoa with them. Growing up in NSW he became a talented rugby player. In 1956 Jim Foster sailed to England and played rugby league for Blackpool and Wigan over a six-year career following in the footsteps of Wally McArthur. An annual perpetual sports award is named in his honour at Le Fevre High School.



Jim Foster when playing professional rugby in England for Wigan in the 1950s.

Peter Tilmouth was born in Alice Springs to Tilly Tilmouth in 1934. He went to Adelaide with the first group of boys in 1945. He became known to the other boys as “Truck” after he got a Saturday morning job helping the local greengrocer with his deliveries. In 1953 aged 18 he was doing an apprenticeship with the Electricity Trust of SA and wrote an article in which he said,

“We all realise that if it had not been for this hostel (St Francis’ House) we would have found ourselves in dead jobs in the Northern Territory. It was believed that a part-Aboriginal could not be educated, but it is proved wrong here when one of our lads, who having a bad educational start, won a voucher for a general application of trade at the Engineering Trade School, another won a continuation scholarship at the Le Fevre Boys’ Technical High School and yet another won an Art Scholarship at the primary school in 1950.”

“There are scores of lads, not only in the Northern Territory, but all over Australia who have ability and intelligence of becoming great education persons ...”

Peter was absolutely correct. Sadly he died in a mining accident in 1973 and was buried in the opal mining town of Andamooka. He left a wife and two children. In 2009, members of his family travelled to Andamooka to have his remains exhumed and brought back to Alice Springs where he was re-buried.

To be continued

Part 2 will be published next week.

Mark J Smith

Mark J Smith is the grandson of Father Percy Smith (1903-82) who was the first resident Anglican priest based in Alice Springs from 1933 and with his wife Isabel founded St Francis' House, a home for Aboriginal children. Mark holds an honours degree in history and politics from the University of Adelaide.

Comments

Brian - Posted April 29, 2019 at 5:12 pm

Have followed this series of articles with interest over recent months.

The collection of stories about what these people achieved is quite outstanding as a group but also as individuals in their own fields who also supported each other along the way.

Would be good as TV documentary or photo book. Thank you.

Peter J - Posted April 29, 2019 at 4:14 pm

Some quiet achievers here. Good to see these important community contributors recognised. Great history to celebrate for the Alice and Central Australia. Cheers Erwin.

Marilyn Smith - Posted April 29, 2019 at 9:05 am

Peter Tilmouth was my brother and at the time of his death he left behind three children. Two lived in Andamooka with his wife and the eldest lived in Adelaide with her mum.

Peter went to the Technical High School in Adelaide, and once he graduated he got a job in Woomera before moving on to Andamooka to take up mining.

Simon - Posted April 28, 2019 at 3:50 pm

Have enjoyed this series. Richie Bray was a good footballer. Part of those great Port teams of the 1960s. Thanks Erwin.

Stephen - Posted April 28, 2019 at 2:36 pm

Love the picture of Millie Woodford with Albert Namatjira.

What amazing guys the St Francis House boys turned out to be!