

CHAPTER 3

When I arrived in Adelaide with all the other Aboriginal boys from the Northern Territory, South Australia and New South Wales, we thought the sea and the boats were a bit of a disappointment. Then we had to get used to the people in this strange environment. We overheard remarks like, 'Look at the darkies—look at the niggers.' Of course, we were looking, wondering where they were too. But we were it! We found this a strange thing. We knew then that we were a separate group.

This feeling of separateness came out more in the school situation at Marryatville School. We went to live at the bottom of the Adelaide Hills in a home in an ordinary street and went to an ordinary school for one year. But we were different. We knew it. They knew it.

We could feel ourselves being different in every possible way. Not only were we called names by the kids around the streets but we were treated differently by everybody. The people who had most to do with us were all church people. They invited us in because they thought it was the right thing to do, to have the Aboriginal boys down for a picnic or an afternoon at the church. However, there were no natural relationships. We were not asked to any homes in the normal sort of way, as ordinary human beings. I remember one particular church person who we thought liked us; he refused to let us in his front gate whenever white friends visited him. We never spoke to him again.

Things were made worse because we were regimented. We were all together in a boys' home. We had the same sort of clothes. None of us had any money of our own to use freely. We were never

invited to any of the people's places socially. It was always a peculiar, unnatural relationship. We were uncomfortable and I am sure the white people were uncomfortable.

Father Smith was a good man and he had the imagination to realize that we should leave the environment in Alice Springs and get some education. But the mechanics of getting us down to Adelaide had all sorts of unexpected dangers and difficulties. These were not necessarily Father Smith's creation but were a result of the attitude of people at that time. He probably was not able to analyse these things and he certainly was not able to understand us. He had enough on his plate in establishing the hostel in the first place.

The hierarchy of the Church of England thought there was no future for Aboriginal hostels; but in fact that was the right time to bring in such hostels. Father Smith's idea was right then. Hostels will outlive their purpose in the next generation. For the future it is better for Aboriginal children to be brought up in their own homes with an educational programme guiding parents in child care, health and other matters.

The hostel was expanded and was moved to Semaphore in a huge old mansion type building. Father Smith eventually went back up to his parish in Alice Springs and we were left to the mercy, literally, of all kinds of people. They were mostly very bad people as far as I am concerned.

At school we were 'the abos' and they (the other pupils and teachers) were 'the whites'. Many things reinforced this—our clothes, no pocket money, no bikes like the other kids, and horrible lunches.

Later, at Le Fevre Boys' Technical School, I was always below average. I was not interested in school. It meant nothing to me. Nobody encouraged me in any way. Nobody ever gave me a reason why I should study hard. I failed miserably and was booted out. The only thing I passed was woodwork, which I hated. I even failed in sheetmetal. My drawing was atrocious, my mathematics, my English (I still don't know the difference between a noun and a verb) were below standard. I did not care for learning.

The only thing they told us was that we were troublemakers and that we were eating too much at the home. The authorities kept

telling us that we were costing the church a lot of money. The sooner they could get us away from school, the better. We were a burden to the Church of England and it seems, on reflection, to everyone else.

There was no person to sit down with us and say, 'Now listen, this is how you do this,' or 'Why don't you try this?' I failed so miserably that they said I had no future. I never had a real friend at school amongst the white children or teachers. Within myself I felt an outcast. I was a kind of loner. My only friends were fellow Aborigines. What united us as well was the common struggle to exist and find some happiness. The only happiness I found came through sports. This was generally the case with all of us.

The boys in the home were brothers to each other. We grew up together and are still together. Some have died tragically. Some of the boys were John Moriarty, now a senior official in the Department of Aboriginal Affairs, Vincent Copley, Ken Hampton and the late Malcolm Cooper. We were father, mother, sisters and brothers to each other. We were family.

My school days were devoid of any warmth or feeling of satisfaction. I hated every minute of it and felt the whole exercise a waste of time.

However, we went back to Alice Springs every Christmas. That used to be an event in itself. All the things that would happen on the train going and coming remain in my memory still. Seeing all the Aboriginal people along the line, that was the real thrill. We would look out for friends and relatives.

The fact was, I was hopeless at school, even at sport. I never went to one person's home in all my school years and with most of the other Aboriginal boys it was the same. One or two went out occasionally but most of us were never invited socially into anybody's home.

Our white girlfriends at school would not meet us openly after school. They would not be seen walking down the street with us. That would have been the worst thing in the world. They were ashamed of us. Parents would not hear of male Aborigines talking to their daughters. Sometimes there would be arguments when one of us would get sick of being called an 'abo'. Girls would meet us

inside the local picture theatres when the lights went out but not before. We were great inside the darkness of the theatre but not outside.

It was all sort of smouldering inside me at that stage. I just could not put the pieces into place and see it all in its correct perspective. There was a lot of confusion in my mind. I was quite defenceless. I built up a feeling of rejection until it seemed that the whole of society was against me. I would think, 'There must be something wrong with me that enables that bloke to call me a "nigger", with so much feeling of hatred in his voice.' I felt I was not good enough, an outsider, that I was not part of that school, I was not part of those people and I belonged to nothing. White society told me I was white but rejected me. They took our Aboriginal heritage away and made us all drifters in society. They took everything from us and condemned us for existing. It was hard times in the minds of such young people. The government helped us to try and understand and the church confused us even more. I needed, and we all needed, a father, but we didn't have one.

Where did I belong? I was floating. This can do all sorts of things to your mental attitude, how you relate to people and events. It was a very upsetting time and a young person in this position can develop hang-ups that stay on in later years.

Then the same whites who caused the problem say, 'Aboriginals have a chip on their shoulder.' Such racist people never pause to ask, 'Why is that bloke so aggressive when he could be a little more passive?' 'Why is he not able to communicate with other people? Maybe it is because he has been faced with a situation that he does not understand?' Such questions never occur to the racist person—in this case and at that time, the average Australian. The same situation exists today where whites do not understand Aborigines. All they can say is something that suggests that the Aborigine has a character defect: 'He has an inferiority complex.' They can walk away then because they think they have put that bloke in the correct category. They walk away with a clear conscience. Or do they?

All my life people have said, 'Charlie, you've got a chip on your shoulder.' I have looked for that chip for a long time and have

never been able to find it. By now it must have grown into a log, specifically because these people—(who I think have a chip on their shoulder through lack of understanding of human nature) have carried on in this manner towards me. There are thousands of Aborigines like me, right throughout Australia. According to racist people these Aborigines have a chip on their shoulder. That is the white man's conscience finding an excuse for the Aboriginal 'problem'.

I hated all my school life. I never enjoyed one minute of it. I never enjoyed the companionship of any of my 'school mates' right throughout school. In fact, I have forgotten most of their names. I hold no grudges towards them. They never invited me home and I could not invite them to mine because I was too ashamed of it. They would not have wanted to come down anyhow. As soon as school hours came to an end, that was that as far as we were concerned. That is how it is now for lots of Aborigines and whites. Today it is the same with the public service and its impersonal approach to people—all people. The system de-characterizes the individual and some public servants act like machines to each other. It does not suit Aborigines who are 'living' people. Also in sport. When football games are over the blacks go their way and the whites go theirs. Yvonne Goolagong is a heroine now, but what about later? She will be just another darkie like us. People protect her now but what about when she no longer can make money from playing tennis?

It is the same in Alice Springs and Darwin today. The whites say 'We are an integrated society,' which is a lot of bull—they are a segregated society. If they cannot see that then they must be blind to facts. Alice Springs is ultra-conservative and as racist in practice as the more notorious areas in Australia.

After Father Smith left the Aboriginal boys' home or institution that I was in, the atmosphere changed. We had various other people in charge, but I didn't ever feel happy there. I didn't get on with the people and neither did I do well at school. Discipline at the home was pretty severe, and we were punished quite harshly for what seemed to us to be fairly minor offences.



The old Alice Springs telegraph station where I was born. Then an Aboriginal reserve, it is now maintained as a historic site on the Overland Telegraph Line



My mother with my younger brother Ernest and myself



Father Smith with some of the first boys at St Francis House in Adelaide. I am second from the left in the back row



A school group on the reserve near Alice Springs. I am directly in front of the Sister, facing the wrong way



There was one bloke there, Mal Ball, who I liked better than the others. But he and I did not understand each other too well. We never seemed to hit it off. I felt he always regarded me as a smart-alec type. Regardless of this, however, he was generally one of the rare good blokes.

Finally I was forced to leave the home. I left gratefully at fifteen. I went into a boarding house full of drunks. Nobody helped me find a place. I was told, 'Go and find a place to stay, you're getting out of here next week!' The Church could not care less about us. It was the same with the other boys.

I did not know anybody. I had just started my apprenticeship as a fitter and turner and I had to pedal a bike eight miles to work and eight miles back. I was earning three pounds ten a week when I had to move out. You can just imagine where a bloke can go on that much money.

The boarding house I found was really rough, but there were a couple of good blokes in it. I paid three pounds a week for it: ten bob left over to pay my fares to and from work, buy my books, my lunch, clothes, tools and equipment—ten bob! There was nobody to fall back on and no one to advise me. Nobody said, 'Look, you are doing the wrong thing.' Everything had to be learned by hard experience—and it was hard all right.

I never had anything that I could call my own. Even when I was starting school in Marryatville I would be denied lunch as punishment for a small misdemeanour. This practice carried on when we moved to Semaphore. I would follow other boys and when they had thrown away their scraps, I would pick them up and eat them. I was very very hungry. We all did the same thing on occasion.

The hostel meals were usually inadequate and when we were too hungry we used to go out after dinner and pick up half-eaten apples, pies and pasties out of the gutter. We would gather the scraps together and divide them up amongst ourselves. I did not think that was bad at all. It was a necessity. Reflecting back on it now, it turns my stomach over.

Even when I left the hostel and I was older, I was always hungry, always aware that I had not had enough to eat. I learned, through

my hunger, to make a glutton of myself. Every Sunday we would go to mass and afterwards church people would provide a luncheon for us. Egg and bacon pies were our favourites. We would steal food for later on, for when we were hungry.

That attitude persists with me today. I often eat as if it is my last meal. I eat until it just about comes out of my ears. I cannot get out of that habit. Subconsciously, I seem to be trying to make up for all the food I missed earlier on in life. My wife just cannot get over it. Until the age of twenty-two I rarely had a full belly. I envied young white kids who had good meals and reasonable clothing.

I stayed in the boarding house for three or four years. That stage of life is a very important time for a young bloke. I was paying out heavy money for board and yet the fridge was always locked in that place. You had your dinner and that was that. We were fed quite well but if you felt like something afterwards you could not get it. If you were late for a meal that was too bad. I had no money to buy a meal if this happened.

Having only ten bob left, I could not go out very often. I would walk three miles to the local picture show and three miles back. If everyone else has money and you have none, that is when you feel it worst. If everyone is poor, like in the depression years, it is not so bad. What was worse was the fact that there was no one to turn to who was in a comparable position, with whom I could laugh it off. My big luxury was a bottle of Coke and a packet of sultana biscuits every Friday night. I shared a room with another Aboriginal lad from the Alice but not once did he offer or give me any help. He often earned big money.

I was quite suited for a fitter and turner apprenticeship as far as my vocational guidance tests were concerned. But I really hated the work I was doing. It wasn't my thing. All the same I stuck at it because I thought it was my responsibility to do that. I hated that as much as I hated going to school. There was nothing satisfying in my life whatsoever. Everything I did was done because I felt an obligation to somebody else or I thought I should carry out something to the finish that I started. My motives were mixed up.

The people at my job were good to me and very kind. I made quite a few mates there. Here again, as in the hostel, I never went to

their homes. They never invited me home for tea or anything like that. One of the few blokes that I would say I ever had a relationship with that was very good and healthy, someone who felt something for me, really understood me and really came across to me in a big way, was Bob Orr, a Scot. What I liked about the old Scotsman was that he was very kind-hearted. He had suffered a lot. He came from a poor family with humble beginnings. Scotsmen are like Aborigines in that sense. They have a big circle and they bring you into the circle. Scots people know what it is to be without.

I met this bloke, Bob Orr, and he impressed me straight away as soon as he started talking. He said, 'You're not white Australian, are you?' 'No,' I said, 'I am an Aborigine.' He said, 'Yes, I thought you were. You have some pretty big problems in this country?' I said, 'Oh, yes, there are some pretty big ones here and there.'

So we struck up a friendship and he would advise me on a lot of matters. He would make me think about values that I should base my life upon. For the first time I felt as if I had a relationship with a white person, that was genuine. He would talk to me the way I wanted to be talked to. If he thought I should be abused, then he would abuse me. It was such a natural relationship. He had a tremendous influence on me. His advice to me was just like pouring water on a dry sponge. I absorbed it all. He went back to Scotland and he died not long afterwards. I felt I'd lost the father I never had.