

ETHEL RICHARD'S FRASER ISLAND

This FIDO backgrounder No 81 publishes (April 2017) some volunteered recollections of the late Miss Ethel Richards describing her life on Fraser Island. She was a member of FIDO's first Veteran's Tour of Fraser Island in September, 1976. She related these memories of her upbringing and early life on K'Gari for John Sinclair soon after FIDO's 1976 Veterans Tour: —

Ethel Richards lived to an old age retiring to a retirement village at Redlands near Brisbane. She was privileged to have met as a child and to be strongly influenced by two legendary Butchulla elders Nugget and Teddy Brown.



John Sinclair (far left) and Ethel Richards (far right) were part of a group of Fraser Island veterans with memories of Fraser Island going back to 1905 who joined a Veterans Safari organized by FIDO in 1976 to allow them to revive and recount memories of Fraser Island as they had first encountered it. The group included Aboriginal elders, former bullockies and foresters, women with long family connections to the island and journalists.

My Tribal name was Bidaven. It means "Strip the Bark". It relates to the bark of the Tea Tree and it has an action name."

PARENTS *I was not born on the Island but my mother and father had their honeymoon on the Island, and just before I was born they spent a lot of time on the Island amongst the tribes, and fished on the Island and then they came back on to the mainland. They stayed there for a while and they went up past Bundaberg to a place called Rosedale and stayed for a time. That's where I was born."*

FAMILY LIFE AS A CHILD: *We came back again to the Island. We didn't stay there for any length of time - just to visit. My father went just to visit his aunt and his relatives up there. Most of the time we were there we lived in the timber camp which was near the Forestry camp in the middle of the Island in the rain forest. They visited the aunt during the timber years. They were with them in different parts of the Island amongst all that time. I was about 12 years when I was at the timber*

camp and before that as I was growing up as a child — we went to various places. We were going backwards and forwards to Fraser Island."

"My father was a Butchalla. He was born at a camp near Saltwater Creek. I doubt whether they would have camped there because there wouldn't have been much fresh water or they may have camped further up the river, say near Aldershot, or something like that. My relations were born at Saltwater Creek. My grandmother died fairly young, at Baddow, near the railway siding, so my father was brought up by one of his uncles - brought up by his relatives. Father's uncle was Paddy Brown. He was the 'King' of Fraser Island as I was told by my mother and she heard it from the old people who lived on the Island. She knew them very well. Another uncle, was Teddy Brown whom I remember very well. He worked in the timber on Fraser Island.

My mother came from the Keppel Islands and lived at the Church of England Mission at Bogimbah. She wasn't raised there. She just stayed for a time. Her mother was there for a short period. I think they moved from Woodford down there for a time and then possibly it was a visit, and she went back. She finally died in Woodford, my grandmother. She was buried at Woodford at the Island Mission site.

TRIBAL NAMES: *I am the eldest in a family of ten. Four of us, including me, have tribal nine. My tribal name was Bidaven. My brother, Cyril was called Abutri, which means, "the broken day" just when the sky is ripening in the East — dawn — which is a beautiful name I think, and my other brother, Charles is called Nagunya. That means 'a white cockatoo'. There are many of them on the Island. My sister, Jessie lives at Brisbane, and she was named Dooling. That's a lovely name too. They're all interesting names.*

After we first four were born, the elders, the old people, had gone and there were no more tribal names. No people to give Aboriginal names, then. The rest of the family missed out. We separated. I was going to different parts of the coastline. I went up to the Burnett area to live - the country places, and in the meantime the old people passed on.



Right up to the World War II Aborigines were engaged in K’Gari’s timber industry which was labour intensive in its early years. As the industry became increasingly more automated the workforce shrank and the traditional owners of K’Gari were amongst the first to be made redundant.

RELIGION AND CUSTOMS: *The Aborigines were very religious people. God was Bidol. There were very strong morals taught amongst the tribe - Have faith in God. Have faith in people. Be honest. They taught above all, humility. They were wonderful teachers and excellent storytellers who told stories to reinforce what they were teaching.*

The Butchallas were not immoral at all and certainly not polygamous as was claimed in some newspaper article. They practised the separation of boys from girls at a very early age. From what my mother told me, passed on. They didn’t have large families. They Just had a few children. They could cope a bit better and in times of danger they could take flight more easily if they had only two or three than if they had great tribes. And of course it meant that they were healthier and better able to cope with circumstances if they didn’t have lots of children.

Some of the ‘Golden Rules’ for the children were – ‘early to bed’. They’d wake up very early in the mornings. The story came to us from our people, how, in the olden days they’d even get the babies and take them out and roll them in the dewy grass and you get them accustomed to the cold, and they were right after that. They wouldn’t feel the cold so much. We children got out into the open, the cold, dewy grass, and I remember as a child, I did it myself, walked in the cold, dewy pass, even though it stung our feet we kept on going. We just loved it. Just loved getting out early in the mornings and you get so accustomed to it you don’t worry about it. It stings a bit, the cold. It hurts, but you keep moving all the time and gradually it wears off, and when the sun gets high in the heavens, it gets warmer.

In the evening children were taught to keep quiet. They were corrected, told to keep quiet in the evenings in case an animal might creep on them at night, after dark. So, they had to keep it quiet so the older people could listen in case of any danger coming to anybody. There’d be no loud noises. Maybe some wild animal might come creeping on them such as a dingo or a snake coming near. They had to keep their ears open and listen carefully for any sound at all, even the smallest sound. They’d virtually go to bed with the sun, almost as soon as it was dark. They’d settle down for the night and get the children off to bed. After a good night’s rest, going to bed early, they would be ready to wake up early.

They were very healthy people and a very happy people. They were taught the beauties of nature around them and particularly the beauties of the bush. From an early age we became more aware, more attuned to nature. The old people told us legends and in these legends, nature was brought into it. They told stories about birds, other creatures and we listened very carefully and they told stories in such an interesting way. We took it all in.

Because of what we heard from the elders we became very observant. We took notice of everything that was around us and we loved the things of nature. We loved getting up early in the mornings. Even in my own childhood I can remember how we'd get up and first thing in the morning before the sun rose, go searching for the Banksia flowers and they'd be filled with honey and we'd love to suck the Banksias and get all the goodness from them.

HONEY: *I was very fond of honey. The hives of native bees were plentiful. We'd find them almost anywhere and in just very small trees sometimes, and they were easy to cut down. There were two types of bees, small bees, there is one they call the 'Muppee' and the other, the 'Goondoor'. The 'Goondoor' has more honey in them than the 'Muppee' because the 'Muppee' has a lot of pollen. A lot of pollen was used as a medicine. The 'Goondoor' was a smaller bee than the 'Muppee'.*



Ethel Richards knew a much more pristine K'Gari. It has changed as a result of the timber industry as evidenced by this photograph from the early logging days. Note the open understorey in the area at the rear of these fallen giants.

THE BEACH: *I didn't have a lot of contact with the Ocean Beach of Fraser Island as a very small child. Much of it I can't remember — just a few things — a few places and they stood out in my memory, over the years. I remember the beautiful things of nature around — the beautiful flowering trees we had and the beautiful skies, beautiful beaches and happy groups of people sitting around camp fires, talking, laughing. These things remain with me over the years and I will never forget those happy times we had. And later on, as I grew older, about 12 years, when I was about 12 years of age, I was in a place about the centre of the Island. It was a timber camp, and I can remember more of this place.*

I can well remember times when we went out to what we called the Back Beach. I think its still called the same today. When we went out on these camping trips after a busy week, we'd have a wonderfully relaxing time and we'd go down the beaches and pick up these eugaries just with our feet, just a can full, we used to use in those days. We'd have campfires and we'd build the camp fires and boil up these eugaries and have these

and of course that's why you see a lot of the heaps of shells along the beach today. It's places where our people were and where they camped and where they ate these - we call them 'Wongs'.

Sometimes we'd go on these camping trips when the men went fishing. The older men, even though they wouldn't be old at that time when I was a girl about 12 - they were grey-haired men and yet they were very active and very healthy and well and they'd go into the surf fishing, right up to their waists or even a bit deeper and I can well remember how the big waves did come over their heads and they'd just dive under and over they'd go and come up again and they'd fish near the rocks where they'd catch the fish that we'd eat and we were never without fish. We always had plenty of fish."