Mr. D. Foster

13 April 2004

Please find enclosed two case studies of children institutionalised in Western Australia. The papers may be of use to the committee in its deliberations.

Yours sincerely,

Darren Foster

NEGLECTED CHILDREN IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA

A CASE STUDY: 1897 - 1908

John George Foster

by

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1997

INTRODUCTION

George Foster's life really began in his 16th year -- on 2 February 1908, the day he was sent to Dardanup, near Bunbury in the South West of Western Australia to work as a farm labourer. On that day, fragmented memories of a childhood steeped in poverty and dislocation were sealed in the past as a private torment, never to be shared with family and friends. For his was the memory of a five year old migrant boy living in squalor in Fremantle and seeing his mother and infant brother, probably for the last time, as he was despatched to a home for neglected children by well intentioned authorities. It was the memory of more than a decade in State institutions where routine and stern authority replaced any semblance of a family life.

George Foster was not unique. His experience as a 'neglected child' was typical of many children whose families were swept up in the heady expectations of the late 1890's gold rush and the crushing disappointment and impoverishment which often followed. Between 1894 and 1897, the peak years of immigration, Western Australia's population doubled from 81,579 to 160,495[1] as migrants from other colonies sought to realise dreams of affluence in an economy fuelled by its gold output. Many of the migrants to Western Australia who disembarked from their sailing ships at the bustling port of Fremantle never made the final leg of their journey to the goldfields.

This essay examines the social conditions in Fremantle in the late 1890's and the consequences for children who were declared 'neglected' and sent to church or State run institutions. It particularly examines the period 1897 to 1908, the years in which George Foster was institutionalised, and a time in which Government welfare services were rudimentary and church run institutions played a prominent role. It is a period which immediately pre-dates the formation of the Children's Protection Society and the establishment of a State Children's Department and Children's Court in 1907.[2]

"NO SETTLED PLACE OF ABODE..."

George Foster (Plate 1) could never say with certainty when or where he was born. When he joined the Australian Imperial Force in 1914 he said he was born in Fremantle; when he was discharged more than five years later he gave his birthplace as Bunbury. By the time he married for the second time in 1929 he had reverted to Fremantle. In fact, neither was the case and is a sad illustration of the confusion and uncertainty -- and perhaps embarrassment -- he faced throughout his life about his precise age, birth date, place of birth and the identity of his parents, all of which vary from document to document as he responded to official requests for information.

What is certain is that just prior to 1896 George Foster, aged about four, arrived in Western Australia from the eastern colonies with his mother Louisa and older sister May (Appendix 1). The Foster's were among the tens of thousands of migrants who contributed to dramatic population growth of Western Australia, and in particular Fremantle. In 1891 the population of Fremantle was 5,607 but by 1896 it had jumped to 13,000.[3]

Many of the migrants were escaping harsh conditions elsewhere as Appleyard notes in his essay *Western Australia: Economic and Demographic Growth, 1850-1914*:

> ...a large proportion of Western Australia's immigrants during the 1890's were Victorians pushed out by a severe depression in that colony as a result of imprudent economic policies during the boom years 1860-90[4]

For Fremantle this influx generated a demand for accommodation which far exceeded supply and imposed considerable pressure on the rudimentary social infrastructure. The Local Board of Health, chaired by Mayor Elias Solomon, grappled with the need to provide efficient sanitary, wastewater and rubbish disposal. Its efforts were complicated by the establishment of tent communities around the town, nightmen who neglected their duties, the introduction of diseases to the local population by migrants and the proximity of noxious industries to living areas.

One of the few surviving local newspapers from that period, The *Umpire,* kept the populace informed about sporting events and had advertisements inviting newcomers to stay at one of dozens of hotels and boarding houses around the port. The 'Premier' Cafe in Market Street offered meals for 9 pence and beds for a shilling[5], but for George Foster and his mother and sister 'home' became a cottage in Russell Street where there were boarding houses, widows and working people with rooms to let. It was here in Russell Street on March 12, 1896 that Louisa Foster, alone and unmarried, gave birth to an illegitimate son, William Frederick Foster, assisted by local midwife Mrs Annie Ross[6].

With an infant son, two other dependent children aged seven and five, the social opprobrium of being an unmarried mother and considerable competition for jobs, Louisa Foster's prospects of eking out a living were bleak. With the extra expense and responsibility of a new baby, and rents remaining high, Louisa was forced to join hundreds of other families living in squalid conditions in a tent community on the eastern fringe of Fremantle, beyond Monument Hill (Appendix 2)

Known as Canvas Town, the tent community lacked running water and any sanitation. On 19 March 1896 residents of the tents petitioned the board of health to "assist in carrying out sanitary arrangements" which the board declined, recording in the minutes its opinion that "if the tent holders were uncleanly, they should be removed".[7]

Among the other residents of Canvas Town were Frederick and Florence Bamkin and their children, who migrated from Victoria and found themselves in a similar predicament to Louisa with accommodation in Fremantle scarce and too expensive. Florence Bamkin gave birth to her son George in a tent on a searing Summer's day in February 1898. Ninety years later George Bamkin recalled his family's experiences:

> ..my father used to cart water by yoke with two kerosene tins of water from Stotter's (well), the place in High Street....As I grew up I used to go out with my father, I used to carry a little billy can of water home...he used to have to pay sixpence for those two kerosene tins full of water...8 gallons of water[8]

A photograph (Plate 2) of the Bamkin's and some of their tent 'neighbours' in the late 1890's gives an insight into their existence -- a large, weather worn canvas tent surrounded by necessities, such as firewood and a kerosene tin to cart water, as well as a horse and a pet dog. The Bamkin's and their neighbours were all dressed in their Sunday best as if self conscious about their reduced circumstances.

George Foster was about five years old during his time at Canvas Town. His experiences may have more closely paralleled those of eight year old Graham Vivian and his six year old brother Tom whose family migrated from Victoria seeking their fortune. High accommodation costs and a father who turned to drink meant the family of eight had no choice but to live in a tent on the beach side of the railway line at North Fremantle for 10 years from 1896. When asked by an interviewer in 1988 what he remembered about life in the tent, there is bitterness in the 100 year old's voice:

> Well I remember nothing about it. I just lived in it. The old man pitched a tent amongst the bushes like everybody else, but other men would sink down a pump. But we had to carry, for half a mile, water every morning, Tom and I...poor old Mum...those four kerosene's (tins of water) had to do Mum for the day. We had a big tub and a wooden stove...and we'd have one bath a week and all take turns in the bath in front of the fire. Mum had a bad old life...[9]

Conditions in the tent community beyond Monument Hill were atrocious. The Fremantle Municipal Council, irritated by the frequent reports of unsanitary conditions and outbreaks of disease at Canvas Town, moved to dismantle the community.

On 18 March 1897 the Board of Health considered a petition from 14 people and their families asking that eviction notices served on them be rescinded. The matter was referred to the Mayor and Health Inspector, and it appears they were reprieved for no immediate action was taken.

For George Foster, his mother, sister and infant brother, life in such an environment was hazardous. The well used by Canvas Town residents was frequently contaminated (Plate 3), prompting the Government Analyst to "condemn the water absolutely for drinking purposes".[10] Not surprisingly, Canvas Town residents featured prominently in the Health Officer, Dr Hope's, regular reports on the diseases and ailments sweeping Fremantle: typhoid, scarlet fever, diphtheria, measles, low fever, chicken pox, influenza and colic as well as conjunctivitis which was common in children.[11]

To compound the poor living conditions, an investigation undertaken by the Government analyst found that many of the local milk suppliers were guilty of watering down their milk[12], reducing its nutritional value to children and infants such as George, his sister and baby brother William. This prompted the local Health Officer to note that "inferior milk has been largely responsible for the mortality among infants".[13]

For a single parent such as Louisa, survival would have meant doing laundry or any other general work to bring in an income and leaving the children with friends, neighbours, or in the care of George's older sister May, who was by then about eight years old. For many, including Louisa Foster, alcohol became an escape from their desperation. This is evidenced by the Government Statistical Register which shows that in the period 1894 to 1898, the number of cases of drunkeness dealt with by the Magistrate's Courts peaked at 3,720 in 1897 and was more than double the number in 1894.

Long time Fremantle resident Stephen Jones recalled stories about the scene:

> ...some residents of the Town, ascending Ellen Street or High Street hill, were overcome by alcoholic languor and lay them down to rest by the wayside. They were 'rolled' as they slumbered.[14]

With his mother absent as a result of work or drunkenness, George and his sister and other tent children probably wandered off to find their own entertainment, and indeed food. They may have watched construction of the new Fremantle harbour or the hospital; or perhaps looked for food around the restaurants, cafes and hotels which were aplenty in the west end of Fremantle.

Given their living conditions and family circumstances, there was a certain inevitability about the fact that in November 1897, George and his sister were brought before the Fremantle Police Court presided over by Resident Magistrate Robert Fairbairn and GC Knight, Justice of the Peace. George was declared a "neglected child for that he was found wandering about having no settled place of abode"[15]. His sister was described in a similar fashion and, as if to lend further justification to the court's decision, it was noted that their mother Louisa was "not of sober habits".[16]

On 3 November 1897, under order of the court, George and May were admitted to the newly built Government Receiving Depot for neglected children in Barker Road, Subiaco, probably never seeing their mother or infant brother again.

THE GOVERNMENT RECEIVING DEPOT

The Government Receiving Depot operated under the Industrial Schools Act of 1874 for the "purpose of providing for and educating orphan and necessitous children".[17] By the time five year old George Foster arrived, he was certainly necessitous. The depot register described his health as good but for "sore eyes", which was probably conjunctivitis or similar ailments common among children affected by glare, flies, dust and unsanitary living conditions.[18] As for his education, he "knew nothing" (Appendix 3).

A wider examination of the Government receiving depot register shows George's background was typical (Appendix 4). There were 32 children sent from the Fremantle district between 1896 and 1900, ranging in age from four to 14. With few exceptions, they had only one parent living. In most of the remaining cases, both parents were dead or one parent was infirm, habitually drunk, or had deserted the family. As for the reasons they were admitted, 75% were recorded as neglected, found wandering and homeless, or destitute. Their health condition was generally good, although many wore evidence of hardship and poor living conditions, such as "sore eyes", measles, "bad cold", "bruise on his cheek" or, as in the case of one five year old boy, "covered in boils".

The Depot, also known as the Subiaco Industrial School, was to be George's home for nearly two years. Early photographs of the building (Plate 4), which now adjoins King Edward Memorial Hospital, shows a long, single storey, stone building with an overly ornate entrance with a grand arch flanked by twin cupola towers, all of which belied the more utilitarian purpose of the building. The white picket fence extending along the front boundary gives an almost homely appearance but for the more sober jarrah side fences topped with barbed wire.

A photograph in the 1900 Annual Report of the Superintendent of Relief and Inspector of Charitable Institutions, James Longmore, (Plate 5) shows the school as a picture of order and propriety with the Union Jack flying from the tower and the children posed in the forecourt. The young boys, all wearing hats, are roughly assembled to the left of the front yard while the girls in their hats and white pinafores were gathered on the right hand side, all under the supervision of at least three adults.

The grand building and images of order and respectability may have been an effort to ease the discomfort of the locals about such a school in their midst. According to Spillman in *Identity Prized: A History of Subiaco*, the school's relocation from Claisebrook to Subiaco in 1897 was the result of

> ...the Government's desire to remove the delinquency problem from sight and mind, choosing an outermost part of what was then one of Perth's outermost suburbs.[19]

When George Foster arrived in November 1897, the depot had just opened a month earlier in the new building in Barker Road, Subiaco after operating from its premises in Claisebrook since 1894. At the end of 1897 there were 27 children at the school made up of 17 boys and 10 girls.[20] At this time the only staff were the school's superintendent, Mr Featherstone J Fowler and his English wife Edith as the matron, both of whom would remain for the duration of George's time at the institution. A teacher and assistant matron were engaged in early 1898 but lasted barely six months, and that remained the pattern over the next two years, perhaps giving an indication that it was a difficult post.[21]

James Longmore was fairly frank in identifying the school's strengths and weaknesses in his reports. In his 1897 report he said:

> The buildings have a handsome exterior, but the interior arrangements are not so suitable as they might have been. There was no school room arranged for, but by turning one of the kitchens, which is a goodly sized apartment, into one, the difficulty has so far been got over; this room is also used for the purposes of a dining room.[22]

He went on to express satisfaction about the education of the 'inmates' and their religious instruction, but lamented the lack of facilities for the boys to receive industrial training. Longmore indicated his intention to seek funds to establish workshops for carpentry and shoemaking, which would have capitalised on Mr Fowler's skills as a carpenter and cabinet maker.[23]

Visiting days for the school were Sunday, Tuesday and Thursday for a few hours, but whether Louisa Foster ever made the trip from Fremantle to Subiaco to see her children is not known. Just before Christmas in 1898 the Fremantle City Council gave notice that it would disband Canvas Town[24], which, according to some reports, had been home to 2,000 people.[25] Effectively destitute, Louisa is unlikely to have made the journey.

For George, it is difficult to gauge the experience of the industrial school. In contrast to his time in Canvas Town, he would have eaten regularly, and had more wholesome food. He received some education, clean clothes and a bed to sleep and while he was separated from his mother, he at least had his sister May close by in the girls' wing. A letter to the matron, Mrs Fowler, from one of her former charges a few weeks before the Fowler's resigned testifies to their kindness:

> you have been my very best friend...dear Mrs Fowler it seems as though you have had a lot of trouble with the children been sick if you do leave they will never get any body as kin(d) as you and Mr Fowler.[26]

The records also show, however, that several inmates repeatedly absconded from the school so it may not have been a universally positive experience.[27]

For George, as for most of the other inmates, the stability the industrial school offered to their lives was temporary as most were ultimately transferred to denominational orphanages. Of the 32 children originating from Fremantle between 1896 and 1900, 12 were later sent to Roman Catholic industrial schools at Subiaco or Glendalough; three were sent to the Swan Boys' Home; five were sent to a home at Collie and six were returned to a parent. In the winter of 1899, aged nearly seven years, George was transferred from Subiaco to the Protestant Swan Boys' Home near Guildford and for the first time, separated from his sister May.

SWAN BOYS' HOME

Situated on the banks of the upper reaches of the Swan River and surrounded by paddocks and river flats flanked with tall gum trees, George must have found the agricultural setting of the Swan Boys' Home alien to his urban experience. As he was brought up the dirt road to the orphanage, George would have first seen Brown House, an impressive two storey Gothic influenced brick building with a sharply pitched roof in the English style and quoins of Donnybrook stone (Plates 6, 7 & 8). In the background and surrounded by trees he would have seen St Mary's church, by then 30 years old.

With five other boys, George was officially admitted on July 5, 1899 (Appendix 5) to what would be his home for more than eight years. His health was good, but it was noted in the register that he had "bad eyes on admission". It was also recorded that George was not confirmed into the Anglican faith but the steps to rectify this situation were started the following year -- on April 30, 1900 -- when he and other boys were baptised by the Reverend Alfred Burton at St Mary's.[28] (Plate 9)

There were 67 boys on the roll by the end of 1899, making it about twice the size of the Subiaco industrial school, and the following year the number increased to 75. As was the case with the industrial school, George's circumstances were similar to most others. James Longmore records in his annual report that of the 75 boys at the school at the end of 1900, 54 had one or both parents dead.

Longmore is fulsome in his praise of the institution. In his 1900 annual report he says:

> The boys in the Institution have every appearance of being well cared for. They look bright and happy. The clothing of the inmates is, on the whole, clean and tidy.

Further, he says:

> ...the Superintendent and Matron show the utmost solicitude for the care of the inmates, and with the larger staff they now have to assist them should be the means of turning out well trained, useful lads, a credit to the Institution and the State.

The report also notes a library had been started, that a new water supply had been added, and that the farm now had a piggery, a fowlhouse and a proper yard for butchering purposes. He commended the agricultural training of the boys, who had land under cultivation and were tending cows, sheep, goats and horses as well as learning boot repairing, carpentry and blacksmithing.

The Chief Inspector of the Education Department, Mr Walton, was generally positive but noted the there "were only sufficient inkwells to supply one class at a time" and that the "weakest classes in the school were the infants, who cannot be said to receive suitable instruction" owing to a lack of staff .[29]

An indication of the daily routine at the orphanage can be gained from the rules laid down at its foundation. Rule 9 states:

> The elder children shall rise at 6am, winter and summer; the younger at 6.30. Breakfast at 7.30, summer and winter. School hours, 9 to 11.30am and 2 to 3.30pm. Dinner at 1 o'clock, tea at 6 o'clock, and in winter to bed by 8, summer by 9.[30]

The boy's diet was equally regimented with specific rations of bread, meat, potatoes, vegetables, rice, salt, sugar, tea, milk and soup to be served on particular days. It was further specified that:

> on the days when soup is issued, puddings which are to be made of sago, rice, suet (with treacle), raisins, currants or summer fruit, are to be given to the children. The soup to be made with rice and vegetables. Potatoes are not to be used when other vegetables are supplied.

In this way the administrators of the orphanage ensured the boys were well nourished so they could manage their school work and their other chores and agricultural tasks. But the boys' perspective may have been quite different. An insight is given by a former inmate from the 1930's, LN Collins, who described an almost identical menu and said

> if I live to be 105 I'll never forget the meals. It was not so much the quality of them but the sheer monotony...you knew that in two months, three weeks and four days time, if it fell on a Tuesday, it would be toad-in-the-hole.[31]

For George and his fellow inmates, life at the orphanage did not exclude recreation. In his 1902 Report Longmore said the boys played cricket and football, had a daily swim in the river during summer and regular outings to Perth and Midland Junction. A 1901 photograph (Plate 10) shows the boys in lace up boots, long socks, shorts and tunics with starched white collars and straw boaters -- the picture of respectability -- in Perth for a Royal Visit. There were annual visits to the Zoo, and summer holiday camps were held on the banks of the river at Cottesloe in 1903, and in the following years at Point Walter, Rottnest Island and in 1908 the boys walked from Middle Swan to a camping site at North Beach.[32]

Canon Alfred Burton, Manager of the orphanage, saw great value in the excursions, commenting in his 1907 report that a month spent at Rottnest "worked wonders with the boys, and they were able to face the Winter with an even greater reserve of energy than usual".[33] LN Collins observed about an annual camping holiday at Rockingham in the 1930's

> I wasn't particularly excited at this so-called 'holiday', and neither were any of the boys. No doubt the powers that be meant well...there was plenty of swimming, but most of us preferred the fresh water of the Swan River. We had no money, so there was no ice cream, no cool drinks. We had no fishing lines. We spent a great deal of time in our tents, and tents can be very hot when out in the low scrub and sand. I don't think any of us were sorry when the 'holiday' was over...[34]

Burton also regularly reported on the conduct of the boys. For instance in 1904 he said "the boys' behaviour has been uniformly good" and that "no trouble whatever has been experienced in maintaining order and discipline"[35]. A surviving orphanage punishment book, which starts in 1904, reveals why. George Foster, then about 11 years old, was one of many boys who received 4 or 6 cuts for various misdemeanours, in his case for "neglect of work", "gross laziness", "at river at non-swimming time", "misbehaviour after repeated warnings", "going in kitchen", "out of bounds", "using a kitchen knife (for) cutting up clothes pegs", and "unpunctuality".

In his sixth year at the Swan Boys Home (Plate 11), on April 4, 1904, George's mother Louisa died, ending any prospect of the family being reunited. With no permanent place to live and no means of support -- and perhaps anguished over the loss of her children -- it is not surprising that in August 1902 Louisa was charged, convicted and sentenced to a week in Fremantle Gaol for being disorderly. A second conviction in May 1903 for being "idle and disorderly" saw her in prison for a month, and in July 1903 she was convicted of vagrancy and sentenced to six months imprisonment.[36] Ironically, her final conviction was by Fremantle Magistrate Fairbairn who had ordered George and May into State custody six year earlier. By this time, Louisa was described by police as a "park dosser"[37], so she is unlikely to have been encouraged to see her children, even if she had the will, presence of mind or means to do so. Her death of "phthisis exhaustion"[38] at the age of 39 was not likely to have been reported to George, by then about 11 years old, because the authorities marked 'unknown' on her death certificate against the question of whether she had children.

The orphanage's aim was to turn out boys well skilled for agricultural work and in effect, life beyond the institution. In his 1907 report, Burton cites the example of one boy who had successfully completed a five year apprenticeship with an employer:

> This furnishes an instance of what any ordinary boy can accomplish, by five years steady work under a kind and capable master. I am glad to say that I have already arranged with this employer, to send shortly the best boy available, for another five years.[39]

George Foster's opportunity came in the summer of 1908 when he was old enough, at 15, to be sent to a farm to apply his agricultural skills and make his way in the world. He was discharged on February 2, and sent to the service of the Hon. Harry Whitall Venn, a former Minister in the Forrest Government who had an estate at Dardanup, near Bunbury.

DARDANUP PARK

If the Swan Boys Home was a world away from Canvas Town in Fremantle, then the Venn estate, Dardanup Park, was another world again. Harry Venn was a former pastoralist and long serving politician who eventually became Commissioner for Railways until he was sacked after a confrontation with the Premier, John Forrest. Venn married Charlotte Shenton, the daughter of one of Western Australia's most respectable families and became brother in law to Sir George Shenton, President of the Legislative Council, and Sir Edward Stone, the Lieutenant Governor.

When George Foster arrived at the estate to replace another Swan Boy, Henry Simpson, who'd left after just four months, he must have been struck by its grandeur. The 12 room, two storey house had a sharply pitched roof in the English style, with dormer windows and a gabled porch, all of which reflected the status of the owners (Plate 12). An early photograph of the substantial dairy (Plate 13) shows two young men milking while another young man and a rotund Harry Venn in a country squire's outfit, look on. According to Gleeson[40] in her manuscript *The Life of HW Venn*, Venn:

> engaged in mixed farming, cropping oats and hay; he had flocks of merino-cross sheep, a herd of cattle, Berkshire pigs, and bred horses from noted sires. In addition, he kept a herd of Ayrshire-Shorthorn cattle for dairy purposes.

With his experience from the Swan Boys Home farm, George had little difficulty teaming up with the other farm hands to undertake his duties at Dardanup Park. For George, his arrival in Dardanup meant the beginning of his life away from the orphanages and the deprivations of his early childhood. But for Charlotte Venn, the event was so insignificant as to not rate a mention in her diary[41]. Instead she recorded:

> Eric out riding all day. We played cribbage after dinner on verandah.

A few days later, George may have been the 'boy' she referred to in her diary as accompanying Harry "as I don't like him driving alone since his illness".[42] Within three weeks of George's arrival, Harry Venn died from a combination of heart failure, dropsy and pneumonia.

CONCLUSION

The sad event of his employer's death did not see George leave Dardanup. He remained, worked for Venn's successors, and gradually built himself into a well regarded member of the small farming community who went to the First World War with other local men as a member of the 10th Light Horse Brigade and, ultimately, married a local woman and settled on his own farm on the aptly named Paradise Road. While George's new start in Dardanup was a dramatic break from his troubled past and he was ultimately reunited with his sister May, he could never completely escape the tragedy of being separated from his mother and younger half brother. Given George's young age at the time of the separation from his mother and brother and the undoubted trauma of the events, it may be that George and his sister never pieced together the fragments of memory or perhaps found them too painful to revisit.

George Foster would probably be held up as an example of the success of the State's child welfare policies at the turn of the century, as rudimentary as they were. It could well be argued that the intervention of the Fremantle resident magistrate, and the separation from his mother whom the authorities deemed unfit for the task, spared George a cycle of homelessness, poor health, poor education and a possible drift into petty crime to subsist. It is certainly the case that the Subiaco Industrial School and the Swan Boys' Home -- and to some extent his service at Dardanup Park -- offered him stability, a formal education, industrial training, regular meals, clothing and a roof over his head. But it is debatable whether they adequately replaced the hope of a family life and some knowledge and understanding of his origins. There are simply too many gaps in the historical record to properly judge whether George's fate was sealed when his family landed on Western Australia's shores in the heady days of the gold rush, or whether there was any real prospect of the family remaining intact and recovering its circumstances as the social climate changed and welfare services and living conditions improved.

Perhaps the best approach is that of former Swan boy Collins who said in 1987

> Looking back on those years there's no doubt it was a pretty hard life, but in the long run it did us, or myself anyway, more good than harm. I don't, and never did, look back with any bitterness. My home life was not what it should have been, so I was reasonably happy in the Orphanage. One's life is too short to bother dwelling on the bad points.[43]

She Called Her Coral Because It Was 'a perfect pink day': The Neglecting of Coral Suzanne Dickerson

Darren J Foster

Summer arrived early in the Western Australian coastal town of Geraldton in 1959. By Thursday, 5 November, the mercury reached 93 degrees, the highest since the previous summer — a perfect start to the Geraldton Yacht Club's new season, which officially opened a few days earlier.[1] For children in Geraldton, the warm weather marked the countdown to the Christmas holidays and days spent at the beach, snorkelling, fishing or exploring around the wharf like Rob in Randolph Stow's *Merry Go Round In The Sea* who spent 'hours staring down in the green water watching the useless fish ...'.[2] The pleasures of summer were only surpassed by the wonders of the new, post war technology that local people were beginning to experience. A crowd of more than 100 huddled around the window of radio dealer Charles Boyes' Marine Terrace shop as he picked up the signal for Geraldton's first television broadcasts on two TV sets; and the *Geraldton Guardian* gave front page prominence to news of the latest unmanned American rocket under the headline 'Man in Space Is Step Closer'. Meanwhile at the Geraldton Radio Theatre Frank Sinatra, Rita Hayworth and Kim Novak were starring in 'Pal Joey' which was being screened in 'technicolor'. This was a time of optimism and wonderment as Geraldton, like many other Australian towns and cities, moved into a new and, materially at least, more sophisticated age.

As the citizens of Geraldton looked forward to summer and a future of hope and opportunity, on the inland side of the town, beyond a steep sandhill known as Mount Misery, a tragedy was unfolding. On 4 November 1959, Joan Dickerson, aged 26 and a resident of the 'coloured people's camping ground', faced a personal armageddon as welfare authorities declared her six children under the age of 8 years — 4 girls and 2 boys — wards of the state for reasons of neglect. Two days later, on Friday, 6 November, and under the escort of a Mrs Ford and a police constable, five of the children were put on the 7.15am bus for the 400 kilometre trip from Geraldton to the department of child welfare's receiving depot in Mount Lawley, Perth. Unbeknown to the children, trembling and crying, it was the last occasion in their childhood that they would be together as a family.

Thirty seven years after this incident, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) released the report of its inquiry into the separation of indigenous children from their families. Most of these forced removals took place under state and territory native welfare laws or, as was the case with the Dickerson's, general child welfare laws which operated alongside the native welfare regime. From 1937, the occasion of the first commonwealth-state native welfare conference, these practices occurred according to agreed national policies of 'absorption', followed in the 1950s by 'assimilation', as a means of controlling the lives of the indigenous population.

Following the release of the HREOC report, Prime Minister John Howard told parliament that his government would make no formal apology on behalf of the nation for the 'errors, wrongs and misdeeds of earlier generations ... particularly when the acts involved were sanctioned by law and believed at the time to be for the benefit of the people affected'.[3] There are obvious contradictions in this statement. In describing the removal practices as 'error', the implication is that the events were the random acts of individuals rather than the systematic application of federal and state government policy; but in stating that they were sanctioned by law points to wider societal validation of the actions.

This article, through the case study of Coral Suzanne, the eldest of the Dickerson children, argues that the experiences of children declared state wards were neither the result of random errors, wrongs or misdeeds, nor the perfunctory application of legislation or departmental policy, but owed much to the prevailing social attitudes towards Aboriginal people, women and the indigent. Legislation and government policies, themselves born of public sentiment, empowered those whose judgements about the best interests of the children and the worthiness of the parents and family setting, were more often a product of the social climate than any insightful analysis of the potential costs and benefits to be derived from removing children from their families and placing them in alternative care. Finally, this article intends to challenge the assumption in the prime minister's remarks that the practice of child separation was simply a policy wrong turn of earlier generations and a matter of and for the past. The HREOC report concluded that 'most families have been affected, in one or more generations, by the forcible removal of one or more children'.[4] Hence, the experiences of the Dickerson children are nationally representative and show how a combination of federal and state government policies and practices, reinforced by prejudicial attitudes, had devastating and lasting consequences for indigenous families throughout Australia.

It is a story which could not have been adequately told without the generous co-operation and assistance of Coral Suzanne Dickerson, now Suzanne Armstrong, in providing access to personal welfare department records and other family records to illustrate in graphic detail the experiences of stolen children. It was the beginning of a journey to understand her own origins and to deal with the grief, anger, hurt and sense of bewilderment which has shadowed her entire adult life.

Perth born Joan Mace, a non-indigenous woman and the mother of the Dickerson children, first arrived in Geraldton in early 1952 as a pregnant teenager, alone and homeless. On 1 May 1952 in the Geraldton District Hospital she gave birth to a daughter whom she called Coral because it was a 'a perfect pink day'. It was a moment of whimsy for the eighteen year old single mother facing parenthood with no family members around to provide comfort and support. There is little documentary evidence detailing the circumstances which led Joan Mace to Geraldton but according to family stories she fell pregnant and was thrown out of her home in the inner Perth suburb of Claremont where she was raised by her English born grandmother Emily Mace, and where she attended local schools.[5]

Emily Mace's reaction to her granddaughter's predicament was not surprising, for it was a case of history repeating itself. After a bitter marriage breakdown in the 1920s, Emily struggled on a portion of her husband's war pension to raise her only child Olive. That meagre income was constantly under threat from her husband who laid complaints with the authorities: 'in reference to Mrs Mace, I wish to state

that I am not maintaining her any longer, owing to her drinking and consorting with men'.[6] Whether the claims were true or false, the shame of the marriage breakdown and the family's abject poverty turned Emily into a virtual recluse. Adding to her misery was the discovery in 1933 that her nineteen year old daughter Olive, had fallen pregnant. Olive gave birth to her daughter Margaret Joan Mace in Hillcrest Hospital, North Fremantle on 21 July. Soon after, Olive left Perth to start a new life in the south west free of the social opprobrium directed to unmarried mothers, and Emily took on the responsibility of raising her granddaughter Margaret Joan, known as Joan.

Around the beginning of 1952, after her ejection from the Claremont family home, Joan Mace met up with Dixie Dickerson, a young woman of indigenous descent who worked as a maid at a well known Guildford hotel. Dixie invited the heavily pregnant Joan to share her room, but her act of charity was discovered late one night by the hotel manager who threw the pair out into the rain. With nowhere to stay, they hitchhiked to Geraldton, Dixie Dickerson's home town.

An outcast from her own community for being a pregnant, unmarried teenager, it was not surprising that Joan soon found a soul mate in Dixie's twenty-one year old brother Fred Dickerson, a troubled young man who had spent much of his adolescence as a ward of the state and by eighteen had a criminal conviction to his name.

To the authorities, Fred Dickerson was officially labelled a 'quadroon', a person of one quarter Aboriginal heritage, and therefore possessed of the right to vote, buy alcohol and move freely from place to place — rights which were denied to his relatives who were branded 'half castes', such as his mother, or 'full blood' Aboriginal people.

Fred was one of ten children of Hilda Harris, a woman of Aboriginal descent, and Herbert Dickerson, a non-indigenous returned serviceman. From the moment Fred's parents were married in Geraldton in 1927, they were under close official scrutiny. After performing the marriage ceremony and discovering that the bride was a 'coloured person', the Reverend H Vine wrote to the Chief Inspector of Aborigines querying the legality of the marriage.[7]

The couple initially went to Morawa but by 1930 were at Carrarang Station near Carnarvon, where their third child, Fred, was born. The family's mobility did not deter the authorities for in October 1937, while living at Rothsay, near Morawa, they were once again the subject of official observation. In a Native Welfare department file note compiled after a visit to the area by the Commissioner for Native Affairs, A O Neville, it was recorded that Dickerson was a 'low down drunken waster and a man of dirty and filthy habits'. It went on:

> it will be necessary to bring some pressure to bear on Dickerson and his wife to live as white people ... perhaps it will be possible to force these people to correct their mode of living by taking away their children until they establish themselves as white citizens. White men should not be permitted to marry native women unless the white men and their wives live as white people.[8]

It was in this climate of overbearing official scrutiny and damning judgements of his family that Fred Dickerson was raised. In 1944, following a report by Health Inspector Sutton, the Native Welfare department carried out their threat and removed seven of the ten Dickerson children from their home in Mount Magnet.

> a condition of squalor prevailed ... although a broom was noted, no attempt had been made to keep the house even reasonably clean. The yard was in a very dirty state. This is a very sore spot in an otherwise generally clean town.[9]

Seizing Fred and his siblings posed a dilemma for native welfare authorities because of their status as 'quadroons' and therefore not strictly subject to the Native Welfare Act:

> Mrs Dickerson is a half caste and a native in law, but her children are quarter caste and unless they live substantially after the manner of the original full blood inhabitants they are not natives in law. Their father is a white man ... and I am afraid difficulties would arise if we attempted to deal with them as natives, as doubtless Dickerson would challenge the legality of such action.[10]

Accordingly, the Native Welfare department invited the Child Welfare department to intercede because the latter had jurisdiction over 'non-native' children, that is, those who were quarter indigenous or less. The Child Welfare department removed the children to the Mount Lawley Receiving Home from where six were sent to Sister Kate's Cottage Home and Fred, the eldest of the group, was sent to Swan Boys' Home. After seventeen years of pressure on the Dickersons to conform to 'white standards', the family was forcibly disintegrated by authorities. Herbert and Hilda Dickerson's marriage crumbled soon after. This incident illustrates the legislative armoury of the state in controlling indigenous families, regardless of the rights which were bestowed upon those of predominantly non-indigenous descent. For Fred Dickerson, with the awareness of a fourteen year old, the resentment must have been intense, for separation from his parents was coupled with isolation from all of his siblings. It would be fifteen years before this pattern was repeated with his own children.

In 1952 when Fred Dickerson met Joan Mace he was accepting of her colour and her pregnancy and later treated the infant Coral Suzanne as his own; indeed Coral Suzanne grew up believing that Fred Dickerson was her natural father. Joan and Fred had a daughter, Elizabeth, born in 1953 and in November that year they married in Carnarvon.[11] Within a month, both Coral and Elizabeth were officially registered as the children of Frederick Arthur Dickerson.[12]

The family led an itinerant lifestyle, with Fred getting work throughout the mid-west on shearing teams or as a station hand. Around 1958, the Dickersons moved to Perth and stayed in Lord Street, East Perth. The reason for the move is not clear, but it may have been related to the death in February 1958 of Fred's father, Herbert Dickerson, who lived in East Perth. The family was still in Perth in March 1959 when their sixth child was born. It was while in Lord Street that the family, desperately poor, was befriended by a young woman who worked in a nearby drycleaning factory. Jean McMurchie was newly married and had no children of her own. Having experienced hardship as a child in the depression, she felt for Joan Dickerson struggling to feed and clothe six children on meagre child endowment benefits and with an unemployed husband. Mrs McMurchie used scraps of material to make dresses for the girls and coats for the boys and also gave them their first conventional toys. Coral Suzanne remembers those acts of kindness. She recalls at around six years of age being startled by a gift of a doll from Mrs McMurchie, because she thought

it was a baby. She had never seen a real doll before; throughout her childhood Coral Suzanne and her sister had nursed beer bottles wrapped in rags scavenged from the Geraldton tip as their closest equivalent.

Around this time, to meet the demands of a growing family, Joan Dickerson bought a second hand washing machine on hire purchase from a shop in Beaufort Street. Given the financial pressure on the family, it demonstrates the importance Joan Dickerson placed on her family's hygiene and cleanliness. But this effort to live up to middle class domestic standards was soon frustrated as the family was evicted from their home. According to Mrs McMurchie, a woman in one of the row of three houses owned by the landlord started a brothel with young girls of indigenous descent. The house was raided by police, and the landlord responded by evicting the tenants in all three houses.

The family was on the move again; this time they returned to the familiar territory of Geraldton with furniture and washing machine following by train. From living on the fringe of Perth in a run down semi industrial suburb out of sight of most of the citizenry, the Dickersons settled back into the 'coloured people's camping ground' separated from the rest of Geraldton by Mount Misery. Known locally as the Snake Pit, it comprised a collection of tin and hessian shacks with dirt floors and no running water or electricity. Frank Gare, native welfare officer for the Geraldton district in 1959, has said for most Geraldton residents the Snake Pit was just somewhere they passed on the way to the outdoor pictures.[13]

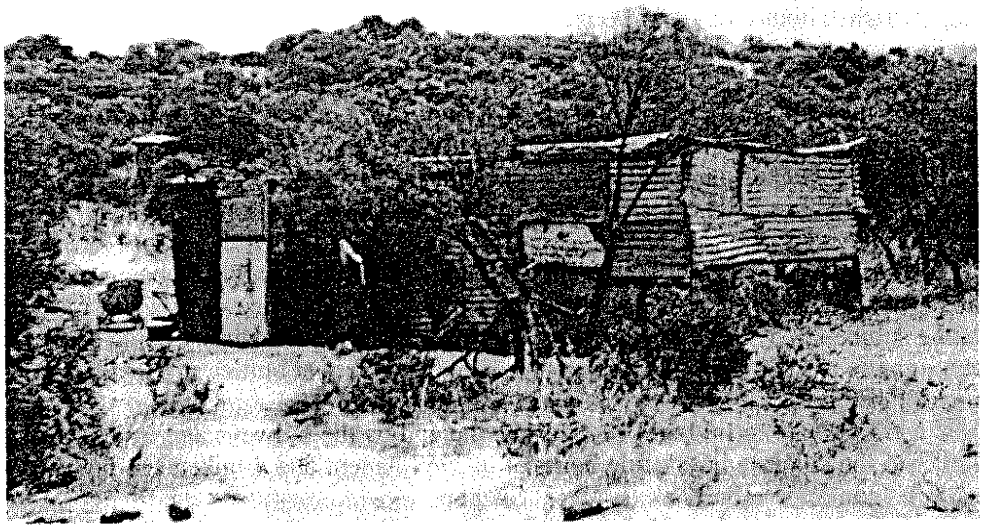
To Mr Gare's wife, Nene, it provided source material for her popular book *The Fringe Dwellers* published in 1961. In the book, Trilby's view of the camp illustrates the living conditions:

> The humpy was just as she had imagined it ... a ramshackle arrangement of tarpaulins and scrap iron nailed to bush timber. A bough shelter projected from one end and beneath it stood another rough table and two cane chairs very much the worse for having been sat on. Suspended by a string from a nearby wattle swung a wire safe, its door hanging open, its shelves bare.[14]

The Dickerson's tin shack is recalled by Coral Suzanne as being lined with hessian, with a leaking roof and dirt floor. The washing machine was probably redundant by the time it arrived, but Joan, through Mrs McMurchie, kept up the payments regardless.

At this time, Coral Suzanne was of school age and started attending Geraldton Primary School in Fitzgerald Street. For a six year old, the few kilometre walk each day was a major trek often not accomplished. Coral Suzanne remembers her mother throwing pebbles at her to encourage her towards school, but for a child with no shoes, little opportunity for a bath and having had almost no contact with non-Aboriginal people for the entirety of her short life, the experience was daunting. Coral Suzanne clearly recalls she and her sister being ridiculed by other children on the way to school. Trilby, in *The Fringe Dwellers*, experienced a similar indignity when she overheard a policeman telling her parents:

> some of the white mothers and fathers did not want their children to sit alongside coloured children because they had too many colds and they scratched their heads too much.[15]



Dickerson's tin shack, Geraldton

Dickerson Children, Geraldton, late 1950s

In the only surviving photograph of the Dickerson children in Geraldton, the blurred image does not conceal the sores all over their legs. In spite of her truanting and impoverished home life, Coral Suzanne's Grade one report indicates an enthusiastic student with good results. The class teacher, Mrs Boys noted 'Susan is keen on her work. She needs extra help in reading'.[16] It was also around this time that she dropped the name Coral, perhaps the first sign of schoolyard peer pressure. The name appears on her school report folder on which Suzanne neatly misspelled her name 'Susan Dickenson' and pasted two magazine pictures of fashionably groomed young non-Aboriginal women. Child welfare authorities later noted that Suzanne and her sister were 'probably the poorest dressed little girls at the school'.[17]

In the Snake Pit, conditions were difficult, a feature of daily life being alcohol abuse which often generated violent confrontations. Suzanne recalls her mother being subjected to abuse from other camp dwellers: 'I remember her being dragged through the mud, and hit, water being thrown over her, beer bottles smashed and put under her chin'.[18]

Fred worked intermittently as a farm hand and on the railways and was a caring father to the children but during bouts of unemployment and drunkenness he would assault Joan and verbally abuse Coral Suzanne.

The family was always short of food, surviving on damper, bardi grubs, the occasional emu, kangaroo or stolen chickens. Potatoes were good for two meals — one of peeled potato and one of potato peels. Coral Suzanne recalls being introduced to the concept of Christmas while living there; Christmas meant the big pit in the yard from which tinned food, including plum puddings, were dug up — the origins of the trove were not questioned by the delighted children!

But despite these hardships, Suzanne recalls that for the most part it was a loving family where the parents composed an individual song for each of the children and where the residents of the camp would sing around the fire at night.

The policy prescription for Aboriginal people in the 1950s was assimilation, defined by the then WA Commissioner for Native Welfare, Stanley Middleton, as a process towards 'assimilation into the general community on the basis of reasonable equality in all facets of community life'.[19] It was a significant advance on the approach of previous decades, which presumed the eventual extinction of the Aboriginal people and advocated their absorption into the white population. The latter policy imposed the expectation that non-Aboriginal men marrying Aboriginal women would 'raise' the indigenous people to white standards, hence the damning judgement of Herbert Dickerson for failing to adopt a mode of living deemed appropriate by native welfare officials.

Under Middleton's regime, those with more progressive attitudes towards Aboriginal people found a willing accomplice but change was incremental and met with resistance. For their part, people of Aboriginal descent were segregated by law on the basis of their degree of indigenous heritage. Fred Dickerson as a 'quadroon' and his children as 'octoroons' were not subject to the controls over their daily lives which were laid out in the Native Welfare Act; as a so called 'half caste' Hilda Dickerson, Fred's mother, was subject to the act and therefore denied citizenship and voting rights, and access to some welfare entitlements, despite being married to a non-indigenous Australian. These arbitrary distinctions inevitably caused resentment and tensions, not only between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities but between 'quadroons' and other Aboriginal people. Its effect, in

Geraldton, was to create two settlements — one for 'full bloods' and 'half castes' at the official Aboriginal reserve, and the Snake Pit opposite which was populated by their paler relatives of predominantly non-Aboriginal descent.

The distinctions also led to a confused identity, as one elderly woman of mixed descent described in an oral history: 'we Aboriginals all had a rotten time in the old days ... especially us who were in between. We didn't belong properly to either lot'.[20]

Clearly, the legislation with its built in caste system identified a course for social advancement and attainment of basic rights for people of Aboriginal descent that was contingent on the denial or diminution of their indigenous heritage. A proposal in 1952 by a Labor opposition member of the Legislative Council, H C Strickland, to address this anomaly by amending the Native Welfare Act to extend citizenship rights to 'half castes' was greeted with derision by government members. One of them, South West MLC Leslie Craig, told parliament: 'many of them are just pale niggers and have no more idea of living as white people than have the full bloods'.[21] This statement exemplifies the conservative attitudes of the 1950s and demonstrates that regardless of any rights which may have been conferred on Fred Dickerson and other people of predominantly non-indigenous descent, they rarely achieved the full measure of respect and recognition as equal citizens. In practice, what rights they did have were more notional than real.

Child welfare policy of the 1950s echoed the paternalistic native welfare practices as would be expected, because they shared many of the same clients. In the case of Fred and Joan Dickerson's children, primary responsibility for investigation and assessment of their condition rested with the local child welfare district officer, as the family fell outside the scope of the Native Welfare Act. For those children who were subject to the act, once they were assessed by the native welfare officer they were handed over to child welfare authorities for processing through the Children's Court. These two parallel welfare systems later merged.

Thus Aboriginal people, regardless of their degree of indigenous heritage, felt encircled by the twin welfare arms of government, as one woman described:

> Aboriginals have two omens sitting on them. They've got Community Welfare — they might step in if you don't go to school or things like that, play truant — and you've got the native welfare on the other side watching. And 'course you've got the ... policeman. A three pronged attack on you all the time.[22]

Underpinning child welfare legislation and indeed native welfare policy was the notion that the best interests of the child were paramount. Those interests, however, were determined on the basis of the family setting and, consciously or unconsciously, the degree to which it contrasted with a 1950s model of the ideal family. For poor, or Aboriginal families, the standards were difficult to meet and ill defined. Jill Julius Matthews argues:

> Child welfare departments and philanthropic bodies did proclaim positive ideals of family life such as honesty, industriousness, respectability, sobriety and independence. But these were middle class moral abstractions, difficult for poor families at risk of state interference to interpret.[23]

Measured against a white, middle class family, it becomes relatively easy to justify removal and placement in alternative care as serving the best interests of the child. An illustration of public sentiment about the supremacy of the white family setting, and the disregard for the preservation of the natural family, is evident in Mary Ferber's Family Forum column in the *Daily News*, 6 June 1959, which deals with the adoption of babies of indigenous descent: 'If the great baby shortage has done anything, it has started a small movement to adopt native and part native children into white homes. It is the most intelligent piece of assimilation ...'. Jan Mason and Carolyn Noble-Spruell go further in their view that 'the assumption of benevolence in child welfare decision making clouds the extent to which children's vulnerability is intertwined with age, gender, class and race power relationships'.[24]

The power of the model family ideology can be more fully appreciated in the context of public debates about juvenile delinquency which have recurred in Western Australia since the second world war. A 1945 commission into child delinquency identified a lack of parental control as the most frequent cause of delinquency and set high value on 'preventative rather than correctional methods'.[25] In 1959/60, the year the Dickerson children were removed from their family, an interim report of a ministerial committee into juvenile delinquency delivered its findings stating that 'the basic causes of delinquency lie in long term faulty relationships between parents and their children'.[26] The strong linkage made between the quality of family life and the phenomenon of delinquency was clearly a significant influence on child welfare practice and an impetus in the observation and control of disadvantaged families as a method of 'prevention' of delinquency.

In 1952, the minister for child welfare in the McLarty government, Arthur Watts, introduced amendments to the Child Welfare Act to widen the definition of neglect to include children 'living under such conditions as to indicate that the mental, physical or moral welfare of the child is likely to be in jeopardy'. In justifying the amendment Minister Watts said: 'experience has shown that the existing definition in some cases does not give the court sufficient grounds for the committal of the child to the care of the State ... the desire is to give the court unquestioned authority to deal with cases of that nature'.[27] The bill also empowered officers of the department to enter premises where they had reason to suspect a destitute or neglected child was living. In effect the amendments gave the Child Welfare department greater latitude to make value judgements about the families which fell into its gaze and greater authority to act upon those judgements.

Not surprisingly, the successful passage of the amendments was followed by a sharp increase in destitute and neglect applications to the Children's Court which peaked in the late 1950s and early 1960s, around the time the Dickerson children were committed to state care.[28]

On 2 November 1959, Fred Dickerson was convicted of assaulting his wife Joan and sentenced to fourteen days imprisonment in Geraldton gaol.[29] Two days later, the child welfare district officer successfully applied to the Children's Court for Coral Suzanne (7) and her five siblings aged 6, 5, 4, 2 and 7 months to be declared wards of the state under section 4, definition 10 of the Child Welfare Act. The court concurred that the children were neglected in that they were 'living in such conditions as to indicate that the mental, physical or moral welfare of the child is likely to be in jeopardy'.[30] The older five children were committed to the care of the Child Welfare department while the youngest was returned to her mother.

In his formal report, the welfare officer noted that the committal came after eight months of welfare action, including efforts to secure employment for Fred, but 'the ultimate result was inevitable'. The severest judgement was reserved for Fred and resonates with remarks made decades earlier about his father: 'living conditions were very poor, and the father ... who is a quadroon, is a weak character, both mentally and physically, who bears all the trace marks of a complete and utter no hoper'.[31] Given the conclusions of the district officer and the court, the report is curiously contradictory in its observations about the family's home and the children's health and schooling. It states, for instance, that the corrugated iron shanty was in an unfavourable locality, being adjacent to the native reserve and had only two bedrooms and broken furniture; however it was 'quite clean considering type of structure and position'.

It further stated that the children's sleeping arrangements were inadequate because they were required to share beds, but their health was generally good considering the environment. It notes that the children regularly attended school, were keen about their school work and had made average progress.[32] To support his argument, the district officer tendered to the court a photograph of the Dickerson dwelling — an image which would have confronted middle class sensibilities with its ramshackle appearance. The shanty was unshaded, and surrounded by scrub, sand and debris including empty beer bottles. The ultimate conclusion of the district officer was that the family, as a unit, was beyond rehabilitation. His final remarks were:

> it is Mrs Dickerson's intention of securing domestic work on a station and deserting him (Fred). She appears to me to have some prospects of rehabilitation if she gets away from him. It is felt that the release of Freda will give her some incentive....[33]

Following their committal into state custody, the children, fearful and bewildered, were temporarily placed at Nazareth House, a catholic hostel in Geraldton run by nuns, until arrangements were made for their transportation to Perth. On Friday, 6 November 1959, the five children were readied for the 7.15am bus trip to Perth. Coral Suzanne and Elizabeth wore their best dresses — those made by Mrs McMurchie. Joan Dickerson was there as they left, although Fred Dickerson, in prison, had no opportunity to say goodbye. Nearly forty years later Coral Suzanne recalls:

> my Mum knelt down on one knee and put her arm around me ... saying that we were going away for a while, but she would come back and get me ... she kissed us all goodbye and said to me to take care of them all ... I just remember screaming.[34]

The district officer 'phoned ahead to the Mount Lawley Receiving Home in Perth to warn of the impending arrival of the children under the escort of Mrs Ford. Coral Suzanne recalls the children all felt sick on the long bus journey and were given barley sugars by a friendly passenger. On arriving at the home she remembers their escort informing the matron that the children had lice: 'a big deal was made ... our hair was chopped off and we had green caps put on our heads as well as kerosene or vinegar'.[35]

The receiving home register noted Coral Suzanne arrived wearing shabby clothes, weighed three stone two pounds and had a neglected appearance. She was examined by the medical officer who diagnosed gastroenteritis and recommended isolation. But for seven year old Coral Suzanne, who carried the responsibility of keeping the children together, any effort to separate them was met with a fit of screaming.

Inevitably, the children were divided, reigniting the trauma of the separation from their parents. In the ensuing weeks, the children were individually taken out on weekend trials by foster parents. On the occasions she was taken out by prospective foster parents, Coral Suzanne recalls screaming until she was returned to the home to be with her sister Elizabeth. Jean McMurchie recalls visiting the children at the receiving home at the request of their mother: 'they asked me if they would ever see their mother again. I lied and said yes they would ... they were so frightened they were shaking'.[36]

In February 1960, just before the start of the school year, both Coral Suzanne and her sister Elizabeth were fostered to a family in Gosnells in suburban Perth. The couple were devout seventh day adventists who already had four boys of their own. A week later, the child welfare officer reported that Coral Suzanne and Elizabeth had 'settled in very well' but were asking after their brothers and younger sister.[37]

In March 1960, the Geraldton district child welfare officer reported that Joan Dickerson and Fred were reunited and living at Mount Magnet while Fred was working at Depot Springs station near Sandstone. He ruled out any of the children returning to the family at that point because of their cramped living conditions and because 'it is too early to anticipate what the chances of rehabilitation are'.[38] Within a year, in March 1961, the prospects of the family successfully rehabilitating in the eyes of the Child Welfare department ebbed away as Fred Dickerson was sentenced to fifty days gaol for being sixty-three pounds in arrears on maintenance payments for the children in state custody. Amazingly, the same department monitoring the family to assess its prospects of rehabilitation was bringing about further financial hardship for the mother and children by prosecuting the breadwinner for substantial maintenance arrears, despite the well documented history of poverty and intermittent income.

After only a few months with the foster family Coral Suzanne was diagnosed with a heart murmur indicating mild congenital heart disease. For an eight year old child from the bush undergoing the necessary medical examinations in a large hospital, the experience must have been frightening, particularly in the absence of her mother. At this time Coral Suzanne was enrolled at Gosnells Primary School where she made good progress, but by early 1961 was beginning to show signs of being deeply troubled. The welfare officer noted:

> Sue seems resentful of the fact that her natural mother is no longer interested in her. Her school work has suffered and on many occasions during lessons she has burst into tears and screamed for her mother.[39]

It wasn't until March 1962, more than two years after her removal that Coral Suzanne received a letter from her mother, by then in East Carnarvon, who said 'I haven't written before as I did not know how to get in touch with you and Elizabeth'.[40]

It is quite likely that Joan Dickerson was not informed about the whereabouts of Coral Suzanne. A 1981 report commissioned by the Western Australian government on the experiences of children in long term care noted that natural parents 'were often actively discouraged from having contact with their children and 'fresh start' policies were implemented'.[41]

Whatever the reason for the delay in initial contact, several letters, Christmas and birthday cards followed, postmarked Carnarvon, Gascoyne Junction, Geraldton, Yuna and Bootenal, which gives some indication of the family's itinerant existence in pursuit of mustering and other station work. The Dickerson family had also enlarged, with the arrival of two more children — but the letters spared Coral Suzanne any reference to the continuing poverty and hardships, Fred's further convictions for assault and a series of drunk driving offences, and the regular Child Welfare department investigations of their remaining children. In March 1962, only days after writing her first letter to Coral Suzanne, Joan Dickerson lost her youngest child to state custody. The Carnarvon clerk of courts recorded:

> the ... children referred to live with their mother in the open back of an old utility vehicle parked alongside a shack, occupied by a family of natives, on the Gascoyne River bank ... drinking water has to be carted half a mile from a mill and the river is used for washing purposes.[42]

The effect on Coral Suzanne of receiving a letter from her mother was immediate. A welfare report in September 1962 recorded 'since natural mother has written Sue has been a different child'.[43] Coral Suzanne wrote letters to her mother regularly for the first few years after the initial contact, describing her own circumstances. Joan Dickerson, probably painfully aware of her inability to provide materially for her children, replied 'it's nice to know that you have all those nice things and also TV. It must be great'.[44] In another letter she wrote 'we would love to have you home for Xmas but we have no place as yet. Please don't be disappointed. I know it's hard'.[45]

The foster parents were devoted and dedicated to Coral Suzanne and her sister, but despite child endowment and a small subsidy from the Child Welfare department for the care of the children, it was a financial struggle. The department was not always prompt in providing assistance; on one occasion the foster mother wrote pursuing an outstanding remittance of $20 for the cost of Coral Suzanne's high school uniform.

But for Coral Suzanne there was an underlying sense of insecurity about life with the foster family; she sensed the financial cost, the arrival of the foster mother's long awaited baby daughter, the foster mother's ill health and the foster father's frequent absences in the country for work, would mean that two foster children would become a burden. This insecurity manifested in behavioural problems and competitive tension between the two foster sisters. The fears were not altogether unfounded, for as early as May 1963 the department noted 'it seems that (the foster mother) may not be able to keep the children much longer'.[46]

At the beginning of June 1963 Coral Suzanne, then aged eleven, ran away from home in her pyjamas and was found by police walking up Albany Highway. The welfare officer expressed alarm about her state of mind:

> tears well out of her eyes whenever her mother is mentioned. It seems that the first intense happiness at regaining contact with her mother through letters has now worn off, and she cannot bear the thought of the years of separation that lie ahead ... Sue gets thinner every day and has dark circles under her eyes. She does not play happily with any of the children at home or at school.[47]

The foster mother proposed to the welfare officers that the reassuring effect of a meeting between Coral Suzanne and her mother might reconcile her to living in the foster home. The officers agreed. The file notes 'she (Coral Suzanne) is quite aware of the poor conditions under which her family lives and does not want to return to them. She talks of lice, and having no bathroom and not enough food ...'.[48]

But rather than arranging a meeting, the department held a case conference on 27 June 1963 and decided that the best course of action would be to place the two girls in the Salvation Army Girls Home; find a new foster home; investigate the placement of the children in Geraldton on the condition that Fred and Joan Dickerson would not 'interfere' if they were placed there; and investigate the whereabouts of Joan Dickerson's family.[49]

The Geraldton district officer reported that the Dickersons were back in the 'coloured people's camping ground' and that Joan Dickerson was very ill in hospital and unable to be interviewed. He met with Fred who said the couple were proposing to move to Perth to find work and suitable accommodation. The officer ruled out any placement of the children back with their family, noting 'confidentially Mr Dickerson smelt of wine when seen at 11.30am' and 'he certainly does not impress as a responsible type'.[50]

In view of the officers' report, and the foster mother's reservations about the department's plan, Coral Suzanne and her sister remained in the foster home. The file notes: 'Sue settled down immediately alternative placement was suggested' although tension between the sisters continued. In a fairly drastic proposal, the welfare officer considered that ultimately, placement in an institution might be the answer, thereby forcing the girls 'to rely on each other for security and comfort'.[51]

In early January 1965, five years after her removal and as she was entering adolescence, an intensely emotional reunion was held between Coral Suzanne and her parents in the Child Welfare department's city offices in Wellington Street, Perth. Also present were welfare officers, three other fostered siblings, and three foster mothers. Not surprisingly, the atmosphere was tense. The welfare officer recorded 'Sue started to weep' and her young brother, now three but only a few months old when his parents last saw him 'was most upset'. The Dickerson's, probably humiliated in the presence of the foster mothers, 'were very quiet and in no way tried to upset the children'.[52]

Days after the family reunion, the decision was made to separate Coral Suzanne and her sister. Elizabeth was placed in a foster home in Victoria Park but this placement was not permanent and she returned to the original foster home about a year later. The girls' reunion was shortlived, for in April 1966, just before Coral Suzanne's fourteenth birthday, the foster mother put them on a train and told them to get off at Lathlain station where they would be met by a Mrs Cavilla, an elderly church acquaintance of the foster mother. After a weekend stay with Mrs Cavilla, Coral Suzanne was told that she had been selected to remain with Mrs Cavilla as a companion and would not be returning to the original foster home. This abrupt

separation from her sister and placement with a new foster mother, was another scarifying experience in Coral Suzanne's short life.

The transition proved to be difficult; the welfare officer reported 'Susan tends to be defiant, demanding and unappreciative, but Mrs Cavilla counteracts by threatening to send her to the Reception Home'.[53] At this time, Coral Suzanne, who was still exchanging letters with her natural mother, told the department she intended to return to her family as soon as she was eighteen, after which she would become a missionary.

There was little prospect of Coral Suzanne returning to her natural family any sooner. For Fred and Joan Dickerson, the pattern of poverty and hardship continued throughout their married life despite Fred securing regular employment. By 1967 Fred was working as a labourer at the Bootenal Brick Works near Geraldton, but this income was interrupted by a conviction for drunk driving which attracted a sentence of three months imprisonment. Destitute as a result, Joan Dickerson applied for financial relief from the Child Welfare department. Her application illustrates the family's precarious existence; they had $3.00 in the bank, owned an old FJ Holden, paid $3 a week in rent to their landlord, and had hire purchase payments of $4.00 per month for books.

In 1967 when Coral Suzanne turned fifteen, she left Kent Street High School at her foster mother's insistence and started work, not as a missionary as she had earlier dreamed but producing peanut paste at Sanitarium Health Foods for the princely sum of $9.39 a week, $8 of which went to Mrs Cavilla in board. Other jobs followed — in a clothing factory, tea rooms, a department store kitchen and an office. Each job, and a flourishing romance with a twenty year old worker in a local timber yard, developed Coral Suzanne's sense of independence to the extent that the Child Welfare department found it increasingly difficult to assert their control. She repeatedly missed appointments with the welfare officer and in August 1969 secretly became engaged.

In April 1970, a few weeks before her eighteenth birthday, Coral Suzanne received a three paragraph standard letter from the Child Welfare department, addressing her as 'Carol', which advised her term as a ward was due to expire:

> but this does not mean we are not interested in your future. Should you at any time feel you need advice or assistance, do not hesitate to approach this Department ... best of luck ... from your friends of the Child Welfare Department.[54]

The effects of child separation are well documented in the report of the Human Rights Commission Inquiry into the separation of indigenous children from their families. While Coral Suzanne was in fact not of indigenous descent she identified as such and was brought up in a family with predominantly Aboriginal members. Jamrozik and Sweeney note that, while there are differences in the treatment of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children: 'in both cases children have been removed from their families because authorities believed that the children's parents and families were "inadequate" or in some ways "inappropriate..."'.[55]

It is therefore fair to extrapolate from the experiences outlined in the Human Rights Commission inquiry and the submissions to it. The WA Aboriginal Legal Service's submission summarised the effects of separation as alienation, bewilderment and confusion, feelings of grief, deprivation of childhood, lack of self esteem, and a

sense of hopelessness and disappointment.[56] The multi generational effects can be seen in ill formed parenting skills, difficulty in maintaining relationships, substance abuse, depression, domestic violence and welfare dependency — characteristics which were evident in Fred Dickerson who was himself the product of a forced removal.

The potential risks of removal were not unknown to the WA Child Welfare department. In July 1965, in response to a growing number of unsuccessful foster placements, the Child Welfare department issued a two page directive exhorting district officers to engage in self reflection before making 'applications of neglect'. Among the twenty-four questions posed by the directive were:

> Am I destroying the 'natural roots' of the child? Am I imposing my personal standards in assessing? Am I being pressurised into action by some local opinion? Have I added to the parents' anxiety in this crisis? Is it one of parental desperation? Should we deprive the child of his natural parents? Have I a plan for the future?[57]

For the Coral Suzanne and her siblings, this directive was five years too late, and in answer to the final question posed, there was clearly no plan for the future.

It was not simply the act of removal which traumatised those affected, but the placement in alternative care for indefinite periods with little concerted effort to bring about reunions, let alone family reconstruction. It was not until 1979 that the Western Australian government started investigating the phenomenon of welfare 'drift', the resultant research project finally reporting in 1981:

> Children were being fostered for many years during which contact with the natural family was minimal or non-existent, yet little was being done to improve the natural family situation, or legally secure the child's position by a transfer of guardianship or adoption.[58]

For Coral Suzanne, the effects of her separation recurred long after her departure from state custody. In 1970, shortly after her marriage, she went to visit her parents who were living in the crumbling, historic Bootenal Light Tavern with its dirt floor and panless windows, but found it difficult to rekindle a close relationship.

Coral Suzanne saw her mother again in 1974, when Joan Dickerson, gravely ill with cancer, came to Perth for medical treatment. Lying in her hospital bed, she expressed her grief and deep sense of shame over the removal of her children. She also admitted that Fred Dickerson was not Coral Suzanne's natural father.

On 16 August 1974, Joan Dickerson died in Royal Perth Hospital aged forty, leaving her husband Fred and ten children aged from five to twenty-two years. In her Geraldton home, grieving relatives burned every floor in the house to release her spirit. For Coral Suzanne, a new mother herself, the experience was shattering. After re-establishing sometimes awkward contact with her mother, she had lost her again. She had also lost the man she believed was her father, and with him went her Aboriginal identity.

For the other dependent Dickerson siblings, the loss of their mother was compounded by the fear that it would prompt the welfare authorities to intervene and remove the remaining children from their father.

Fred Dickerson died in Port Hedland on 1 December 1986 aged 56 years. It is a reflection of the degree of the family's disintegration that his funeral was the first and only occasion that the ten children of Joan Dickerson have been together. Sadly, they never had the opportunity of being together as a complete family.

Coral Suzanne Dickerson's parents shared a heritage of institutional poverty and social dislocation. Indeed, there is documentary evidence to show that the Dickerson and Mace families, in their respective communities, had been under varying degrees of official observation from as far back as the 1920s. Herbert and Hilda Dickerson were under constant and intrusive scrutiny from the Native Welfare department, while Emily Mace was monitored by the Repatriation department as a result of vexatious complaints by her former husband. Both families, in their own time and place, found themselves outside of the social norm and were effectively outcasts. Given this inheritance, it is not surprising that their descendants, Fred and Joan Dickerson, suffered the same fate in their time and place, Geraldton in the 1950s.

While the newspapers of the 1950s show signs of a softening public opinion towards the rights of Aboriginal people and a renewed effort by the Native Welfare department to improve their living conditions, the pace of change was too slow to spare the Dickerson family from their fate. As a union between an indigenous man and a non-indigenous woman, as dwellers in a shanty, and as abusers of alcohol, the couple attracted considerable attention in a community which preferred indigenous and non-indigenous people to live separately and which preferred alcoholism and domestic violence to be hidden behind the closed doors of neat suburban houses. In an era where prevention of juvenile delinquency was a powerful subtext in child welfare policies, notions of the best interests of children were inextricably bound with the enforcement of social conformity.

The application of middle class standards to the Dickerson family's circumstances manifested in punitive action against the family for its perceived shortcomings, failing to take account of the underlying causes, principally poverty. Jamrozik and Sweeney note: 'however noble the intentions of welfare workers might have been ... it is undeniable that "child welfare" in Australia means services to the poor, which may be rendered with care but also with coercion'.[59] There is a temptation to judge the conduct of individuals in their interpretation and application of the policies of the day, but this would have the effect of absolving the governments and ultimately the wider community of responsibility. In issuing its 1965 directive posing critical questions for field officers to consider before removing children, the Child Welfare department was effectively devolving responsibility by asking its field officers to act contrary to social and political expectations and display uncommon sensitivity, foresight, compassion, and strength of conviction in their dealings with families such as the Dickersons.

For Coral Suzanne Dickerson, the action taken by the state remains the most scarifying experience of her life. For a seven year old child, it was a trauma which can barely be comprehended. The emotional trauma was compounded by the mirage of a reunion with her natural parents who were in an inescapable cycle of poverty, shame and despair, and the long period in alternative care which, although she was materially better off and with caring and affectionate foster parents, never satisfied her longing to be with her natural parents. It was an experience that was shared by thousands of other children regardless of their individual circumstances. As Peter

Read points out:

> whether the children were institutionalised in white or Aboriginal homes, fostered or adopted, loved, hated or ignored, they shared in common the mental torment of not belonging in a society which the Europeans innocently, ignorantly or arrogantly assumed they would belong.[60]

As an adult Coral Suzanne, like many others, has been left to piece together fragments of her past and nearly forty years later she is learning for the first time about her origins from a 250 page welfare department file. It is the start of a long process of coming to terms with her past, dealing with the grief over the premature deaths of her parents, and re-establishing relationships with her siblings. For most of those who have experienced removal, the emotional scars left by the experience remain a destructive and powerful influence on their lives, and those of their family members. For governments at state and federal level, it is clearly a problem not of the past, but of the present, as the Governor General Sir William Deane recognises:

> the present plight, in terms of health, employment, education living conditions and self esteem ... must be acknowledged as largely flowing from what happened in the past ... true acknowledgment cannot stop short of recognition of the extent to which present disadvantage flows from past injustice or oppression.[61]

The case study of Coral Suzanne Dickerson provides personal evidence of the consequences of child separation for just one family. It demonstrates the organised and systematic way in which the policies were implemented to exercise control over indigenous families; it demonstrates the dubious bases upon which judgements of neglect were made; and most importantly, it shows the devastating, lasting and contemporary effects of child removal policies.

In arguing that these are matters of and for the past, Prime Minister John Howard has failed to recognise the magnitude of the contemporary social problems which stem from these past experiences. While the 'errors, wrongs and misdeeds' may have been committed by earlier generations and administrations, many of the subjects of these policy prescriptions, like the Dickersons, are still living and are likely to remain so for at least fifty years. For them the events of 1959 continue to shape the present with a potency intensified by four decades of anger, grief, confusion, and dislocation. To ignore the plight of these people today is to prematurely consign them to history — perhaps the ultimate act of assimilation.

Endnotes

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