

WINE VVS

Aboriginal family trees: Setting the record straight and rebuilding lost connections

ABC Central West By Melanie Pearce

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PHOTO: Barkindji woman Elizabeth Bennett, who now lives in Orange NSW, wants help in researching and clarifying her family history. (ABC Central West: Melanie Pearce)

Barkindji woman Elizabeth Bennett's birth certificate is battered and broken but she keeps it in a plastic sleeve to try to prevent further damage.

She says the document has a mistake and some of the official records of her family don't match the oral history handed down over generations.

Ms Bennett is one of the Indigenous people of central-west New South Wales trying to correctly piece together their family tree.

Their research is being helped by an anthropologist and research historian from NTSCorp, the Native Title Service Provider for Aboriginal Traditional Owners in NSW and the ACT.

Recording family histories

As part of NAIDOC Week activities in Orange and the surrounding shires of Blayney and Cabonne, NTSCorp is offering a family tree service to Aboriginal people.

In establishing a family tree, a NTSCorp officer will interview and gather information from an individual before putting names into a database of Indigenous families it has been compiling for more than a decade.

"Usually we have some of those names and we can match them up to their ancestry," NTSCorp research historian Natalie Rugiano explained.

"A lot of the time, there are people who have never been as far back as the early 1800s and they're quite shocked and amazed that we have that information," she said.

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The end result is a family tree that can be very intricate and extensive, and which is sometimes printed and framed by the family.

However, Ms Rugiano said the whole picture of an Indigenous family often could not be confined to a piece of paper.

We've got people who are 70 or 80 [who have] got nothing and they come to us and ... it's really nice to know we're making a difference.

Natalie Rugiano, research historian at NTSCorp

Personal discoveries

She said it could be emotional and difficult work. Recently, a woman she helped cried when she saw some of her family history being uncovered.

"We've got people who are 70 or 80 [who have] got nothing and they come to us and ... it's really nice to know we're making a difference."

Some family histories have been lost as a result of the Stolen Generations.

"A lot of Stolen Generation children and their descendants come to us and they have hardly any knowledge because when they were taken away ... they were pretty much disconnected from Aboriginal life," Ms Rugiano said.



PHOTO: Peter Moore (centre) and his son Keith are keen to find out more about their family history and have approached Natalie Rugiano and the NTSCorp for help. (ABC Local: Melanie Pearce)

Correcting the records

Ms Bennett approached NTSCorp during their central-west visit as she searched for details about her mother, Isobel Bennett.

Her own birth certificate records her mother's place of birth, in contrast to Ms Bennett's memory of her mother's story.

"My mother was born at Pooncarie on the Darling River, [but] my birth certificate shows she was born at Menindee," she said.

"I know that because she told me."

Ms Bennett said her mother was one of the first generation of stolen children and was removed from her family and taken thousands of kilometres away to Bathurst and Melville Islands.

She said this lost connection made it hard to get clear and correct information about her family.

"A lot has been wrongly written in the archives because there was no written record of people's births, deaths or marriages in the days before the Second World War," she said.

Family history for future generations

Another agency keen to use the NTSCorp family tree service was the Barnardos crisis care program that looked after children, including Indigenous young people, in out-of-home care.

Case manager, Debbie Lytton, said their organisation tried to place children with extended family.

"So it's important that we find the correct family, and all the family if we can, to try and get those children back connected with their families and their communities," she said.

Ms Lytton said it was difficult to do because often a child's parents would have no connection to any family, Aboriginal or not.

However, she said she was interested to look at a service like the family trees provided by NTSCorp.

"My clients are all little people so when they get older they will have that information there," she said.

"We will already have that research for them, and it will be there for them to be able to look back on."

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