



The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

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' MAKE THE MOST OF YOURSELF . . .

for that is all there is of you.'

*V. Chapman

This profile of Mr Vic Chapman is adapted from the December 1979 edition of "Aboriginal Quarterly" with permission of the Editor and of Mr Chapman.

In submitting his story to "Aboriginal Quarterly" in response to that journal's request to hear from some of the 15 fully qualified Aboriginal teachers in NSW, Mr Chapman observed:

"I didn't set out to be the first Aboriginal teacher or the first Aboriginal principal or the first Aboriginal anything - these issues are not really important to me personally...I reckon I could write a book and fill in the sadder and more negative bits - but to what avail? I subscribe to Yunupingu's comment on Australia Day - 'we must leave history behind and look forward'."

...It was quite strange that education was to become my field when my mother and father couldn't read or write at all. But despite the absence of a formal education, they handed on to us sound values and attitudes. And a goodly supply was needed, not only because of the thinking that then abounded, but more especially because fifteen were born into the family.

My father was born at Currawillimghi Station, near Hebel in Queensland, to a market gardener and local midwife in 1875. He settled into working with sheep for the greater part of his life for G.M. Richmond of Haddon Rig. The expertise and contribution he made to the industry was acknowledged in a history of the Balonne Shire - *In Mitchell's Footsteps*, by G.O. Armstrong.

Mother grew up in nearby Angledool and worked for the Langlo Parkers as a servant girl from the age of eight. To help support

*Mr Victor Chapman, formerly Principal, Gwynneville Public School, now Principal, Berkeley School, Wollongong, N.S.W.

her large family later, she took in washing and ironing and cleaned houses for the sheep station owners.

Being the youngest I was also the luckiest in terms of educational opportunity. The conditions prevalent when I presented myself were absent when more capable members of the family could have used them. Looking back, it is interesting to ponder how different things would have been for my four surviving sisters and seven surviving brothers if Aboriginal secondary and tertiary grants had been available, together with the guidance currently given.

Towards the end of my primary school years we moved from Hebel to Goodooga, 26 miles away in NSW. There an unforgettable man called McKinnon was in charge of the one-teacher school. He was an excellent classroom practitioner, bulging at the sides with concern for his charges, of whom 90 per cent were of Aboriginal descent. He convinced my family that I should sit for a State Bursary Examination and there was much talk and many questions. Never having moved more than 80 miles in any direction from home, the concept of a 'high school' was surely a school on stilts.

The dreaded day, Wednesday, 1 November 1944, finally arrived and the test was administered. I was unhappy because all the other kids got a holiday while I had to wade through a series of papers, watched by McKinnon and the supervisor, Mrs Betty Marks.

At the end of that year, McKinnon sent a telegram from Sydney congratulating me on my success. A frantic rush ensued to buy a presentable port, presentable clothes, and my first pair of new shoes, ready to leave for high school in Dubbo in 1945. The holidays seemed to rush past as I tried to grapple with the idea of being away from home for the first time in my life.

The fateful day came when the Brewarrina mail was boarded - with me sitting up on top of the load like the veritable Jacky, guarding the new port and very conscious of the large sum of money in my pocket - £10. The only advice that could be given (because nobody had dealt with such things) was 'pin the money in your pocket'.

At Brewarrina mother had told me to seek out a beautiful old dark lady, Mrs Frost, who owned a boarding house. She made me feel very welcome overnight, and I was calm enough to view a train for the first time next morning. That train took me on that memorable trip to Dubbo and my digs at 134 Bourke Street.

With my limited experience, the new surroundings and new people were difficult to accept, but I was determined not to let the side down, because my family were top of the priority list. Enough courage was plucked up to enrol myself at the high school, where people soon appeared generous in outlook and treated me as an individual in my own right.

I gained in confidence, compared favourably with others in the 'A' classes, and was eventually elected Prefect in Fourth Year and Captain in Fifth Year. It was a good school that gave me unforgettable friends among staff and students.

The early days there were full of loneliness. I remember travelling home at every opportunity. This meant boarding the 9.30 a.m. train at Dubbo which arrived at Brewarrina at about 7.30 p.m. that day. Mostly the remaining 76 miles to Goodooga were done under the tarpaulin on the back of the mail truck. Usually my brother Ted had a feed ready for me at 2.00 a.m. and we spent until daylight talking about what I was doing at high school, funny incidents with my new mates, about general school routine and peculiar subjects like French and Latin (which sounded quite different from our 'lingo').

The rest of the time was taken up with the rest of the family until I caught the mail again at 2.00 p.m. the same day. The turnaround covered 12 hours, but being home was worth every minute of it.

After completing secondary school I worked for a very short time in shearing sheds and driving a truck until my Dad intervened and steered me eventually to Wagga Wagga Teachers College for 1950-51. Students were then picking up £9.5.6 a month, which dictated a spartan existence. The cream on the cake was provided by my father forsaking some of his hard earned wage as a sheepman and my mother her hard earned money from the washtubs.

To further ease the financial burden I went into the boxing ring every Saturday night at Forest Hill RAAF Camp or at the Wagga Showground. The stakes were high - £3 for a win, £1 for losing. Whichever way the decision went the chemist seemed to be the only real winner. I then realised I was not as accomplished at boxing as my brother Paddy, who went the distance with Dave Sands, or my other brother Tommy who was featherweight champion of Australia in the '40s.

Finally graduation came and my first appointment to Mudgee Relief Staff for three months, which took me to Mendooran, where I was permanently appointed for three years.

At the end of that time I married Ruth, a contemporary at Wagga Wagga Teachers College, and we settled in the Wollongong area. She was, and is, an exceptional person. We married at a time when mixed marriages were not fashionable, particularly in Cowra, NSW. She must be credited with unlimited patience in hanging on to me for almost 25 years, knowing how I felt about certain events in my life, placating me at the right moment, and being in a hostile situation herself because she had married a dark horse.

Nevertheless we produced two fantastic sons, imbued with a pride in their ancestry and of both parents. Murray is at present studying Arts/Law II at the University of NSW, while John is rounding off secondary school to go into surveying or engineering.

Except for Mendooran, the whole of my work experience has been on the South Coast. A variety of activities have kept me occupied - Masonic Lodge, lay preaching, Aboriginal welfare, and ceramics - as we jumped through the hoops of promotion, I started an Arts degree in the early '60s by correspondence, but after four courses in English, History and Psychology I quit due to a health problem, pressure of work, and the fact that the boys needed the guidance and attention of both parents.

Our own area has provided opportunities for progression without moving, as well as education and job prospects for the family. Remembering our own battles to become qualified, we didn't wish to chase promotion and inflict the punishment of moving around on our kids.

Looking back over the years I become nostalgic. In my terms we were not deprived though we had few material possessions. The tremendous fun of fishing along the Bokhara River, trapping rabbits, hunting, robbing beehives, searching for 'gooies', bumbils, naypans, quondongs, etc. are experiences not available to children today. The love and security of the immediate extended family are beyond price and a protection from the 'slings and arrows of outrageous fortune'.

I have been very fortunate in the people I have come in contact with throughout my 47 years. Perhaps as my skin got browner and more wrinkled it also became thicker and successfully warded off the missiles aimed at our people. At the risk of sounding pompous, I've refused to walk with lame people because in doing so there was a danger of developing a limp myself.

There is much I could say about Aboriginal education - a necessary tool in the survival kit for an Aboriginal in the legal

liberal society. It is encouraging to see so many - boys, girls, and mature age students - learning the tricks of the majority culture and still retaining as much Aboriginality as possible. No matter how I am baited I still say the Aboriginal secondary and tertiary grants are well deserved and purposeful, and the opportunities they open up should be readily grasped. I only regret they were not available in the early '40s and '50s to make the road much easier for my family.

To the other fourteen Aboriginal teachers in NSW - I wish you well. It is a challenging job where you can be a positive influence in all sorts of ways at pupil, staff and community levels. You can do it, and it's important that you do. As R.W. Emerson says: "Make the most of yourself for that is all there is of you."

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NOTICE

AUSTRALIAN READING ASSOCIATION

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Canberra

25-28 August 1980

Theme:

MULTICULTURAL LITERACY

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Notice of intending speakers, papers
and workshops to

Max Kemp

School of Education

Canberra College of Advanced Education

Belconnen,

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