

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Person

Entry ID: AWE4067

Carmichael, Beryl

(1935 - 2024)

Born 1 January, 1935, Menindee New South Wales Australia

Died 22 May, 2024, Mildura Victoria Australia

Occupation Aboriginal storyteller, Heritage consultant

Summary

Beryl Carmichael was an elder of the Ngijaempaa people and served on the National Parks and Wildlife Advisory Council, the Western Lands Advisory Council, and the New South Wales Reconciliation Council. She lived in Menindee in far western New South Wales.

Details

Daughter of Jack Kelly and Louisa Kelly (nee Briggs), Beryl was born at the old Menindee Mission in New South Wales. She was educated with Western lesson plans at the mission school but from an early age sought an education in the traditions of her people, the Ngijaempaa. Beryl's father was 'one of the main men who went through the [traditional] law in 1913 and 1914' and there was old Ellen Burke, a singer of songs, who still had the knowledge of her people. Thirsty for knowledge, Beryl would be taken out over the desert sand dunes with the other children to hunt for goannas and echidnas, or to collect grubs from the trees to use on their fishing lines back at the river. Her mother was often called upon in the mission community as a midwife and an interpreter between mission managers and older Aboriginal folk and Beryl learnt from her the various healing ointments and songs. From her parents she also learnt tracking skills, and would habitually be sent out with her brother to fetch a rabbit for breakfast before school. When Beryl asked an uncle, a singer of songs, 'Who are we? Where do we come from?', he replied, 'We come from emu country, the butt end of the emu, this is our country'. Beryl explains: 'That stuck with me, all the time I'm growing up. [Later I was given] a map of the emu country. The butt end goes around Mungo and the backbone is along the Barrier Ranges, his rib along the border to Queensland and cross over near Brewarrina where the fish traps are. This old lady gave me this book and said "Beryl, I'd like you to have this because it's about your people", and I found that map. I've been carrying it with me ever since because it just confirmed what that old singer of songs told me'.

The Menindee Mission was closed in 1949 when Beryl was about 14 years old, and she went to work on a series of properties around Menindee. She was married in 1953 and had ten children. All were born at the Broken Hill hospital, but the family continued to move from property to property in the Menindee area. Beryl was careful to pass on her knowledge of bush food and bush medicine to all of her children. She began teaching her eldest four by correspondence, but when the load became too much and drought was effecting surrounding properties, the family bought a brick house in town and the children were educated at the Menindee public school.

In 1967, Beryl became involved in the public school system herself: 'Our kids were experiencing racism in the schools, coming from the mission', she says, 'and they needed someone in there, a role model. So I went and asked the principal if I could go in and talk to these kids about racism and being different and all this type of thing. He said "Beryl, if you've got anything to pass onto the kids, you go and do it".' Beryl's lessons in Aboriginal culture and respect were extremely effective and she continued her work in schools for forty years. In 1975, in the wake of increased government funding for Aboriginal committees, she travelled to Sydney with \$15 in her pocket to register the Ngijaempaa Housing Company on behalf of her community. From 1983, Beryl was running Aboriginal Culture Camps for teachers and students to continue her program of education and consciousness-raising. She remembers, 'I was very shy in the beginning, but I knew that Dad's spirit was behind me, and Mum's'. Having erected a borrowed tent at the old Menindee Mission and taken donations of onions and potatoes to help feed camp attendees, Beryl was surprised to welcome 200 people from surrounding communities. Recreational games, Aboriginal dance and traditional cooking bonded the group: 'I thought, gee this is good, they're hungry for their culture'. The camps continue to this day with school groups, university classes and, more recently, public servants from the Department of Education and Training.

Beryl's first husband passed away in the early 1980s and she remarried in 1984. At nearly seventy years of age she was asked to join the National Parks and Wildlife Advisory Council and the Western Lands Advisory Council, and she had a strong involvement with the New South Wales Reconciliation Council. For decades of service, Beryl received a swathe of awards including the New South Wales Heritage Award, a meritorious award from the Minister of Education, and a Centenary of Federation award for community service. She recited two traditional stories – about the wagtail and the echidna (Thikapilla) – for Aboriginal Nations' animated production, *The Dreaming*.

Published resources

Resource

Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Videorecording

The Dreaming, Aboriginal Nations Australia, 2004

Book

Bush Foods of New South Wales, Stewart, Kathy and Bob Percival, 1997,
http://www.rbg Syd.nsw.gov.au/education/Resources/bush_foods

Site Exhibition

Unbroken Spirit: Women in Broken Hill, Australian Women's Archives Project, 2009,
<http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/bh/bh-home.html>

Archival resources

Private Hands (these records may not be readily available)

[Interview with Beryl Carmichael](#)

Author Details

Barbara Lemon

Created 17 February 2009

Last modified 16 August 2024