

Don't go to Gilgandra or you will get converted: a story of the Aboriginal Naden Family

by Robyn Walton, Coo-ee Calls Number 103, January 2008, pp1-10

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TRADITIONAL DANCE.

Ralph Naden with his troupe of Aboriginal Ceremonial Dancers.

Ralph Naden is definitely one of Gilgandra's quiet achievers. Many Gilgandra folk would know little of him apart from possibly his name, and that he is the man who creates those wonderful brush turkeys and emus we see at the Coo-ee Heritage Centre. We see him in town on various occasions entertaining the crowd as he leads his group of Aboriginal youths in Dance, their faces and body painted with the white ceremonial markings of their people. They, like Ralph, arrive without fanfare, and depart just as quietly.

To be quiet and reserved seems to be the hallmark of this man, though he's justly proud of his Aboriginality, his heritage and his family. What draws Ralph Naden out from the crowd and stands him alone, is his years of selfless work with Aboriginal youth.

From the time his son Philip, now a grown man, was bringing his schoolmates home, Ralph has made it his business to tell the stories of and teach the young the ways of the Aborigine as he knows it, in the same way stories and customs were handed down through the generations from Father to Son, Mother to Daughter in the years before the white man. Unable to practice their own Tribal Laws which taught respect, and having no written language, he firmly believes their culture was becoming lost. For so many of his people life was lived away from the traditional. For various reasons his people gravitated to towns where slowly the practice of their heritage slipped away until there were not enough elders who truly remember who could hold their culture together, elders who could pass their language and stories on.

So strong is his passion for the path he has chosen that Ralph and his wife Audrey sold their home in Bobs Street, and bought land at Balladoran next door to the gift of land from Gilgandra Shire Council to the "Balladoran Youth and Culture Committee". For more than a decade, he's been developing on his own land and at his own expense a friendly place of learning where Aboriginal Youth groups arrive for a day, or camp for a week absorbing the traces of their own culture, as well as the variety of personal skills needed by every person black and white, which enable them to move forward in their lives with confidence.

In keeping with the tradition of story telling, to relate the story of Ralph Naden who began his working life at fifteen, we must travel back to what he remembers and what has been documented of his family, especially his Grandfather Pastor William Bee Naden and Grandmother Stella, two people well known throughout the region and especially the Gilgandra Community for their work with the Aboriginal Inland Mission Church during the late 1940's and 1950's, two people Ralph remembers fondly.

His family story begins in Condoblin where his Grandfather William helped in the building of the Aboriginal Inland Mission Church there. He was not yet a convert to the faith and afraid of being preached to about his soul, often slipped away from the job when he saw the missionary in charge, Miss Barker, heading his way.

As William and Stella's interest in the teachings of the Aboriginal Inland Mission Church started to take hold the family moved to Bulgandramine a small reserve close to Peak Hill. 1938 saw their son Ralph Senior become the first New South Wales student enrolled at the Aborigines Inland Mission Training College at Pindimar, and it was in this year William Bee Naden became one of the first eight Native Workers sent forth to administer the Gospel to their own people. Such was the success of this programme that the following year Native Missionaries numbers rose to one hundred.

It was in that year, 1938, that Pastor Naden took his wife and family of ten children off to the Pilliga Scrub Mission where he found it difficult at first, because of the Mission Manager's views regarding the preaching of a Sunday Service. The Manager's position changed after the tragic death of a young girl one Sunday morning at the very time all children could have been at Sunday School, had they been allowed a service.

After this his Pastoral work on the Pilliga Mission began to grow with many converts to the faith, but life for William Bee Naden and wife Stella wasn't at all easy. Sadness came when their baby daughter Gloria fell ill suddenly. They were about to bring her home from hospital after a week's convalescence when the police rang to say she had passed away. There was a large family to provide for, and his work as a Shearing Contractor meant he could be away at sheds for more than a week at a time on many occasions leaving his wife and family alone. Although Stella was a wonderful asset in his mission work, the fact of time constraints meant he couldn't carry out many of his Pastoral duties, and that began to weigh heavy on his mind.

After much worry and soul searching he made a firm commitment to his mission work as is evidenced in this letter he wrote in May 1942 :

"It is some time since I last wrote, but I have had a very trying time, But, praise God, He gave me the strength to pull through. There is a hymn which says:

‘Once I thought I walked with Jesus, yet such changeful moods I had,
Sometimes trusting, sometimes doubting, sometimes joyful, sometimes
said.’

This seemed to fit me, then our Good Friday and Easter Sunday Services were wonderful. As I gave out the message I saw the hungry looks on their faces. Now that I have given up all for Jesus I come to the second verse of that hymn:

‘For he called me closer to Him, bade my doubting tremor cease.
And when I had fully trusted, filled my soul with perfect peace.’

Yours in His glad service, WB. Naden."

This decision was to prove correct in every sense. It appears William Bee Naden was a born gatherer of people, an excellent speaker and story teller, and a true and humble servant of his God.

In 1948 the family were one of the first Aboriginal families to move to Gilgandra. They came by horse and cart Mum, Dad and a family of seven boys and three girls. At first they lived in lower Miller Street. Although a Shearing Contractor, his first employer in Gilgandra was Billy Morris who owned a Butcher Shop in Miller Street. By 1950 they moved to settle amongst other folk in the area behind the Racecourse then known as the Pines, a small settlement beside the Castlereagh River, across from the main town area.

It was here that his Ministry took wing. His Services became legendary, and so large that he purchased a Generator and Public Address System so that his congregation, both black and white who'd travelled from all over the region could hear him speak. His services were held in the open air under the Gum trees, sometimes seven nights a week and again in the mornings. He ceremoniously Baptised his converts in the Castlereagh River.

It was said at the time that Pastor Naden had a "true revival taking place in Gilgandra." Also that his sermons were so uplifting, the congregation's singing so beautiful, and the lilting sounds of gumleaves played to beat of the clap sticks so haunting, that it created an atmosphere which stopped horse trainers like George Furnell, who worked each morning on the nearby racetrack from working. He stopped to listen, as did many others

in town and along the river as the hauntingly beautiful music and voices floated on the air.

Pastor Naden had a growing interest in photography and owned a variety of cameras. This interest formed the basis of his life-long friendship with Vic Brain. Vic, at the time, was a young businessman in town who owned Brains Motor Garage selling vehicles, tractors, refrigerators, the usual fuel and oil and of course mechanical repairs. He and his wife Margaret also owned Taxis in Gilgandra during the early 1950s. William Naden was first a valued customer, but as the mutual interest in photography became apparent their friendship grew to the point where Vic helped Pastor Naden build a Dark-room at his home in the Pines, and shared with him his knowledge of developing film.

Margaret remembers the Naden family with great fondness as she does many of those who lived in the Pines by the Racecourse in those days. She'd ferry them back and forth from town in the Taxi as the need arose, and remembers them saying always on the return journey take me home to "Riverview" their name for the settlement by the river.

Wanting to spread God's word further Pastor Naden began an outreach programme travelling to areas such as Gulargambone, Dubbo, Wellington, and as far afield as Condoblin for rallies. On the back of his old red truck which doubled as transport for his Shearers, he built a type of cabin complete with fridge, bed and table etc. His Ministry in and around Gilgandra became so strong that the town became known as The Holy Land with folks saying "Don't go to Gilgandra, or you'll get converted."

The 1955 flood devastated Gilgandra and washed away the homes and possessions of many especially those in the Pines area. Gilgandra resident, Evelyn Furnell remembers in the flood's aftermath, coming across two Aboriginal women standing in The Pines area crying. She asked, "Have you lost everything?" "Oh, we're not crying for ourselves," they replied. "Pastor Naden has lost everything, even his electric motor has been washed away." Such was the love and respect the people had for this Minister of Religion. Later his refrigerator was found caught up in the fork of a tree.

After the flood Pastor Naden, his family and many others from the Pines area moved to Balladoran from where, with the gift of equipment from the Aboriginal Inland Mission Bible School in Singleton that year, he was able to carry on his outreach work with renewed enthusiasm. He felt there was a great need in Balladoran for a Church, so set aside land at the back of his home for that purpose. His wife Stella who was a great aid and companion in all areas of their lives together, later Officially opened the Balladoran AIM Church.

William Bee Naden had not been a man of education and learning, but a man of fervent belief and dedication to something he believed in. Throughout the years of his Ministry he guided many away from drinking and gambling to excess, others he helped to find the right path for their lives. He died on the 19th January, 1959 leaving not just his family to mourn, but many in Western New South Wales. Tributes flowed in from all over, and still to-day the Australian Aboriginal Inland Mission pays tribute to him on their Website.

Young Ralph was only 3 or 4 years old when his Grandfather brought the family to Gilgandra. A family whose linchpin seems to have been that of support, love and care, not only for family but for all people. Growing up in an atmosphere such as this must

have formed the basis for Ralph Naden's own caring attitude. It's obvious too, that his life holds many parallels with that of his Grandfather, although not a Minister of religion, Ralph is a teacher of good, a gatherer of people and a story-teller who can relate to those he sees as most in need: young people, predominately aboriginal, who need focus in their lives.

He was born in Peak Hill 8th November, 1945, his father Ralph Naden Senior who'd been born at Condoblin, was a Shearer. His mother Renie (Irene) Dargin was born on the Bogan River Mission or "Boganya Mine Mission" at Peak Hill. Her Great Uncle had been a Black Tracker around Forbes, and it was from his mother's family, especially his Grandmother that Ralph heard the stories and learned much about his aboriginality. Her family the Dargins lived mostly within tradition. While working they had to work the white man's way, but at home they followed their traditional life, hunting goanna and porcupine their natural foods, cooking on the coals of an open fire, and performing the dance in thanks for the food that had been made available to them. Some of the family at Peak Hill still hold with these ways today.

Young Ralph's formal schooling began at the small one teacher School at Balladoran, the Teacher he remembers was a Mr. Malcolm Hards. Then, as a teenager he travelled by train to Gilgandra for High School, which turned out to be only four days each week because the train didn't run on Wednesdays. Back then there were no school buses, and he had nowhere in town to stay overnight.

Ralph didn't mind; he didn't like school anyway, and says today that his mind was like that of the old Aborigines: not one created for academia, but a mind built for hunting and gathering, and that's exactly what he liked doing, gathering native fruits and hunting Goanna, Rabbit, and Porcupine or Possum with a boondy or stick. He didn't have traps or rifles; he'd learned the old way, and never came home empty handed.

At 15 he got his first job with Angus McLennan on "Miala" Balladoran working for Ten dollars per week, he remembers having to pay fifty cents of that to the Taxation Dept. Riding eight miles each day for work, he'd been taught that no-one owed you a living, you had to get out there and do things for yourself and at that stage didn't know what racism was. Those were the days when his family taught "you worked for the white man, you respected the Police, and most of all you listened to and respected the Elders." To-day any man or woman could be your boss, but along with the skill of hunting with a boondy, and becoming familiar with the Wiradjurie language, those are the very values Ralph tries to impart to his young charges, black and white, male and female, today.

Shearing took over the greater part of his working life. He shored everywhere from Cooma to Charleville, and was part of a gang who shored for the late Media Mogul Kerry Packer, on his property "Elliston" at Scone. He was a good Shearer and is proud to say that at Walcha one year, whilst working for Contractor Brian Cleaver, Ralph along with his shearing mates Harry Marchant and John Towney, shored 1900 sheep in 2 days with three runs a day (a run consists of a two hour period) good numbers and hard work in anyone's language. He says he met many good blokes in the sheds, became a Shearing Contractor himself and although he hurt his back on the job and had to give it away, says the Shearing life still runs through his veins.

He worked hard and saved for his first home in Wamboin Street. He was just 27 years old when he bought the house from Jim Carson. As with his home now at Balladoran, it was bought with his and Audrey's savings, he says there was no Aboriginal Grant or loan involved; they'd worked for it, a fact he is proud of.

Ralph's path to working with Aboriginal youth began back in 1992-93 when Ralph had an old 4WD in which he went rabbiting almost every night. His son Philip often brought his mates along and Ralph taught the youngsters to kill a rabbit the old way, with a boondy, often rolling an old pram wheel along the ground for the kids to use as target practice. It was pure pleasure for him to see the happy glow of confidence on their faces as they got better at hitting the moving target with a stick.

The crime rate amongst Juveniles in Gilgandra at the time, was third only to that of Bourke and Wilcannia. Ralph's wife Audrey was working as an Aboriginal Education Adviser at the High School herein Gilgandra and Anthony Towney now a Police Liaison Officer, was an Aboriginal Youth worker in Gilgandra who knew Ralph and Audrey. He began taking the troubled youth he worked with to Ralph in order that he could 'take them under his wing,' fill some of their spare time with various activities and give them leadership.

Ralph rose to the challenge and says he'd put all the kids on the back of a ute and drive out to the back of the Golf Course where he'd teach them rabbiting as he'd done his own son and the kids before. He says the speed with which many of the fellas learned was impressive; in no time they became as good as Ralph with the boondy, hardly missing a target or rabbit. They had something to look forward to and they were achieving something. The kids looked up to Ralph, respected him and were so proud of their group they began calling themselves "The Boondy Arms". Juvenile Crime rates in Gilgandra started to fall.

Through Gilgandra Adolescent Support Project (GASP), it soon became apparent to the Gilgandra Shire Councillors and Gilgandra Police, the excellent outcomes Anthony and Ralph as a volunteer were achieving with these young people. Marty Gordon of the Juvenile Justice System then offered Ralph a position to work with these young offenders filling their time with work, guiding them to a better way in life. Ralph did just that, he had them scrubbing graffiti from walls around town, mowing lawns, doing community service work; and involved them in mentoring work courses.

It was during this time that the Gift of land from Gilgandra Shire Council was made to the "Balladoran Youth and Culture Committee" which is made up of both youth and Elders of the Aboriginal Community. Ralph eventually sold the home they now owned in Bobs Street and bought land at Balladoran adjacent to the gifted blocks. He bought a house from Forbes, erecting it on the land as the family's new home and at his own expense began building sheds, shower and toilet blocks and areas of learning where he could bring these young people to absorb more of their Aboriginal Heritage.

He called this new place of learning **YALMAMBIRRA BOOGIJOON DOOLAN**. Translated it means **TO TEACH THE LITTLE SAND GOANNA**. And Teach he does.

Ralph's achievements have now been noticed by many organisations who deal with the young. At various times he has groups from Barnados and Uniting Care Burnside, children usually from troubled homes who need direction: youth from the Juvenile Justice System, some of whom are on Probation or Parole as well as children who are simply on School Excursions.

They come from as far away as Cobar, Dubbo, Wellington, Coonamble, Nyngan; some come for a day others camp for a week. Ralph structures the programmes to suit each individual group. Sometimes it's as simple as a culture walk or it could mean camping in a tent for week. If it's a child in crisis Audrey and Ralph take them into their home for the duration of their stay. Whatever the reason and timeframe, Ralph hopes that each goes away having learned something of respect, something of the bush and land around them, and something of the old aboriginal way of life.

Ralph's Aboriginal Culture Camp has become a true family affair, for when he and Audrey moved to Balladoran, two of their five children, his daughter Deirdre and son Philip followed building homes there. Philip, who works with the Western Aboriginal Legal Service has learned the Wiradjurie language which has proved a great help to Ralph whose scant memory of it was not really enough in his teachings with the young. Now the words are familiar again and have become part of the their various programmes which Audrey organises as well as being chief Cook and surrogate Mother to the young for the duration of their stay.

Although he and Audrey have created their Culture Camp at their own expense, Ralph is ever aware that none of it would have been possible without the help and support of various people in the Gilgandra community both aboriginal and white. Reg Humphries of Dubbo's Burnside is another who Ralph thanks. He has become a firm friend and ally of the Nadens and the Balladoran Aboriginal Culture Camp from his first visit around twelve years ago.

Ralph says he goes out of his way to assist in whatever way possible because he believes in what they are achieving at Balladoran.

Based in Dubbo, Reg Humphries is the Orana Far West Regional Manager of Uniting Care Burnside, and when one speaks to him of Ralph and his work with Aboriginal Youth, the admiration, sincere affection and respect he has for the Nadens becomes obvious. He says he'd known of the Nadens as excellent Foster Parents through his previous work with DOCS, then began working with them through Burnside. After visiting the Culture Camp at Balladoran he was so impressed that he suggested he could possibly get funding for any future constructions. He was surprised when Ralph refused but as he got to know Ralph better he realised the type of man he was, proud but self-effacing. This project was something that was in his heart to do. Government funding came with Government rules and regulations. Ralph knew he and Audrey were achieving good things with their programmes, and wanted no interference from outside.

Reg says it's been his experience that when Ralph wants to further build improvements for the Camp but doesn't have enough funds he'll ring to see Reg has any work for him, the proceeds of which, along with other monies he earns are ploughed back into the Camp. He says the Nadens have helped hundreds of young people, predominately

Aboriginal who've come from the North West and Western regions of NSW to find some form of direction in their lives, and that the achievements of the combined work of two small branches of large organizations, i.e. Gilgandra's Barnados, for whom Audrey works and Dubbo's Uniting Care Burnside, who refer the young to Ralph's Culture Camp is far greater than anything one huge organisation or Government Department could or would accomplish.

Although working with Aboriginal Youth has become Ralph's main focus in life he also works for the Parks and Wildlife Service showing others how to recognise and document with the aid of GPS readings, aboriginal sites and artefacts. He also works as a Supervisor with Gilgandra's CDEP, and has become well known as an Aboriginal Dancer and player of the Didgeridoo here in Gilgandra. Along with Curtis Carr, Tyson Carr and Eric Priddis he was one of those who danced at the opening of the United Emirates one hundred million dollar 6 Star Resort at Bathurst last year, and has been invited to dance at the opening of the "Blackfellas Caves" at Katoomba on Australia Day this year.

All over Australia there are Aboriginal people like Ralph tracing and remembering the culture of their forebears, gathering the young around them to relate the proud heritage that is theirs. He says his own children have had a good education, he's proud of the vocation each has chosen, but more than that he is proud of the fact that they have become good citizens, goals he wants other Aboriginal Youth to aspire to. We in Gilgandra are fortunate indeed to have Ralph Naden to guide and help them find direction, nurturing in them a sense of pride in their Aboriginality, their culture, and their future.

Like his Grandfather before him Ralph has chosen a path of service and giving to others. His Grandfather funded his ministry from his own earnings and built a church, Ralph is doing the same in building his Culture Camp, this time the ministry, is mentoring the young. Starting small each built his dream from a determination to help others find a better way of life. To this day it's probable that no church in Gilgandra, or within Pastor Naden's own Ministry has seen or will see his like again; his Grandson Ralph is also well on his way to leaving a Legacy that will be remembered for many years to come.

My thanks to each of the following who gave information for this story:

Ralph Naden,

The book "A Man from the Pines" by G.M. Higgins 1976. Courtesy of Neville Naden.

Evelyn Furnell.

Vic and Margaret Brain.

Reg Humphries.

**The Majority of these photos were taken by
Pastor William Bee Naden during his
Gilgandra ministry 1948-1959**



William Naden's team of Shearers.

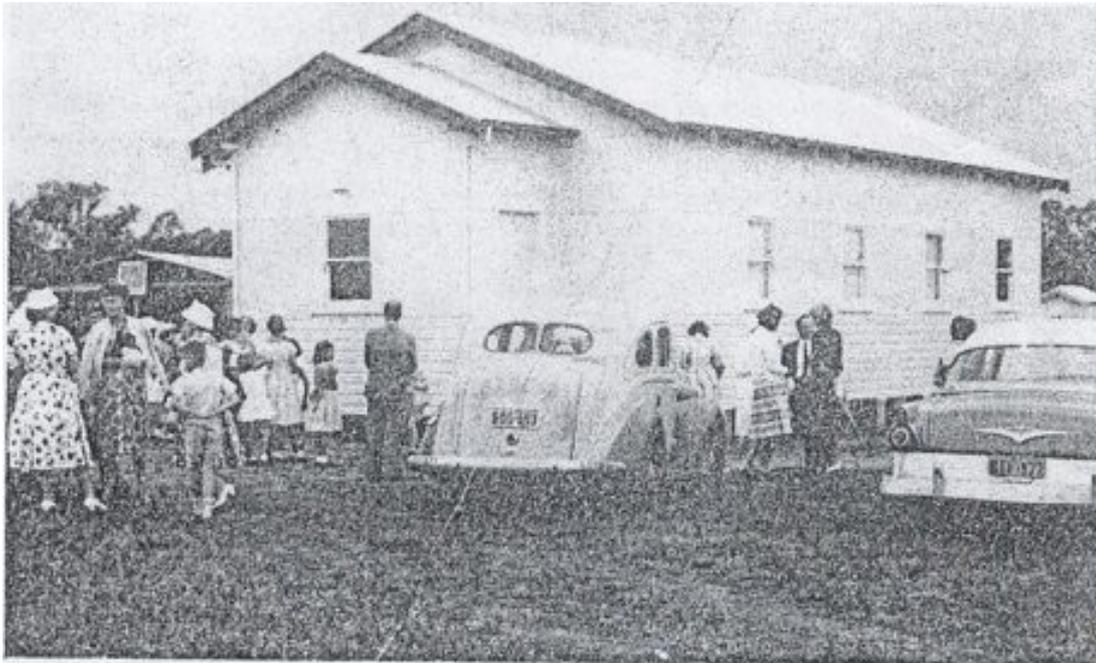
L/R: David Naden, Billy Gray, Ralph Naden, Jim Lane,
Lionel Naden, Hector Smith, Hugh (Pompy) Naden,
Harold Powell, Neville Naden and Neville Towney.



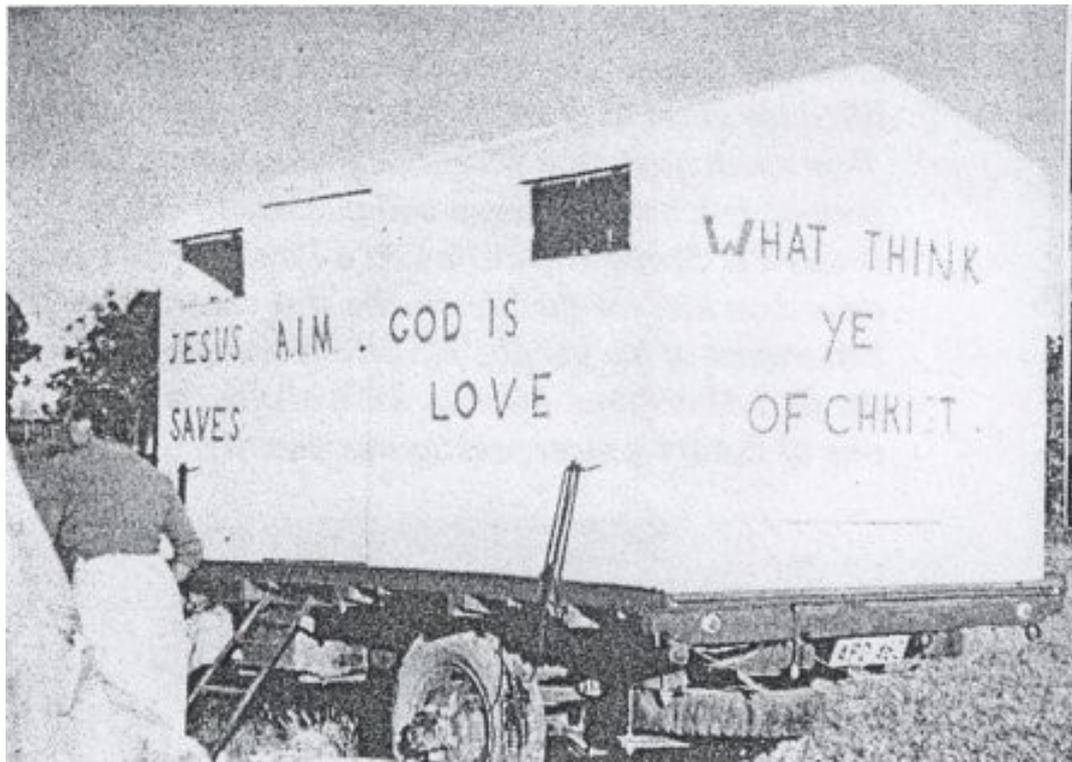
Sunday School at the Pines.



Mrs. Stella Naden officially opening the Balladoran church.



Opening day of the Balladoran church.

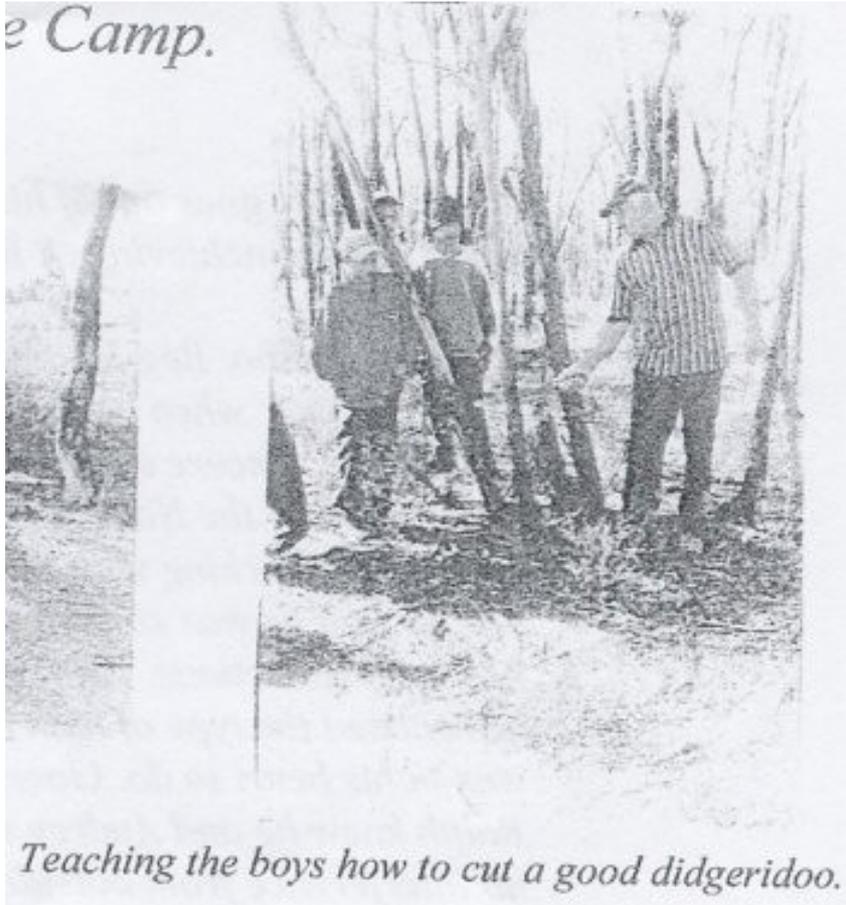


The old Red International Truck which was used for transporting his Shearers, and seen here transporting people to his Outreach Ministry Services, and later with the covered and sign written back he built on it for travelling to Services.

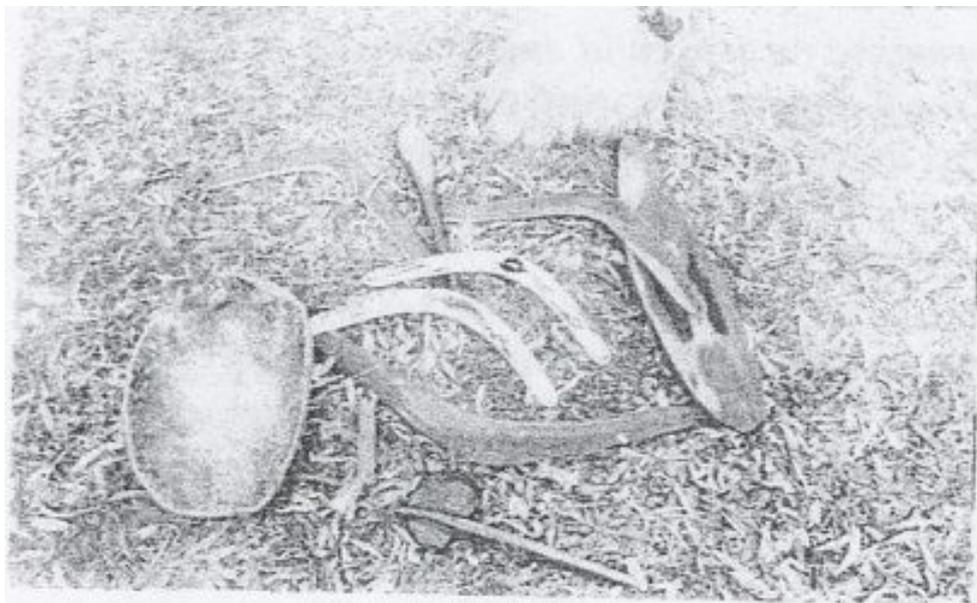
At Balladoran Aboriginal Culture Camp



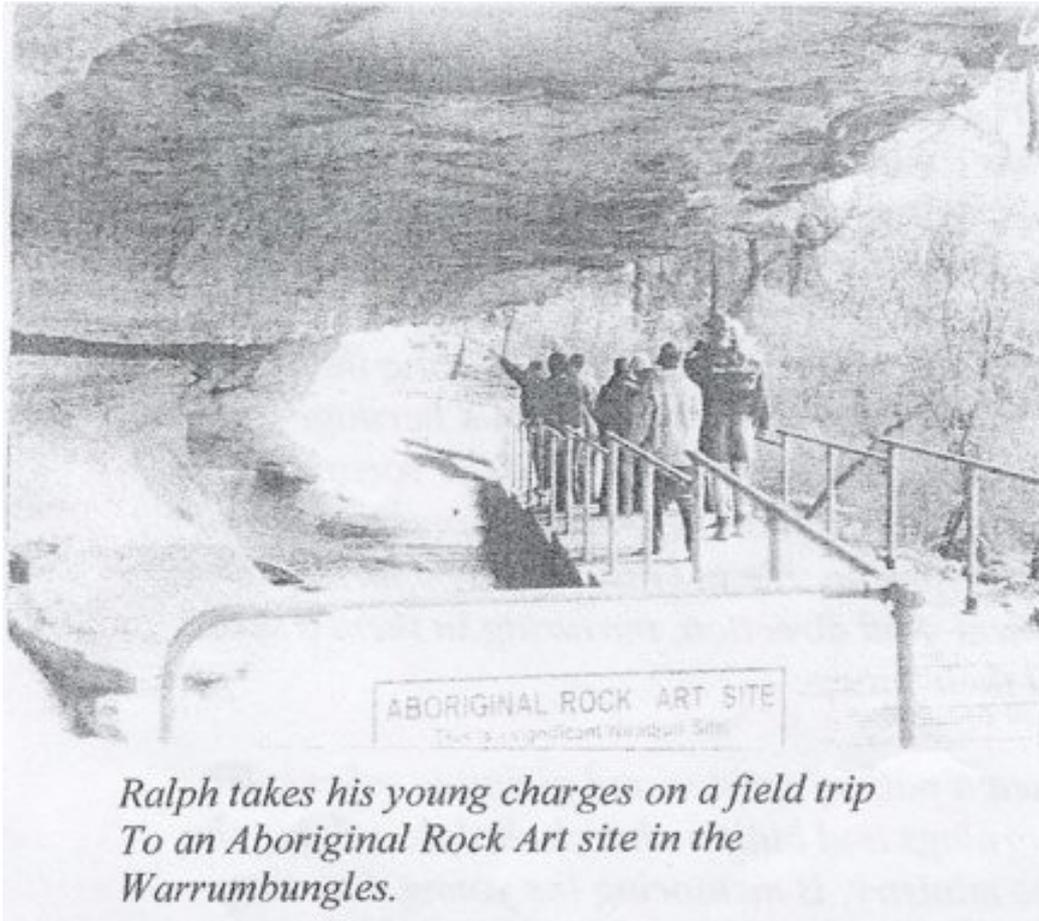
e Camp.



Teaching the boys how to cut a good didgeridoo.



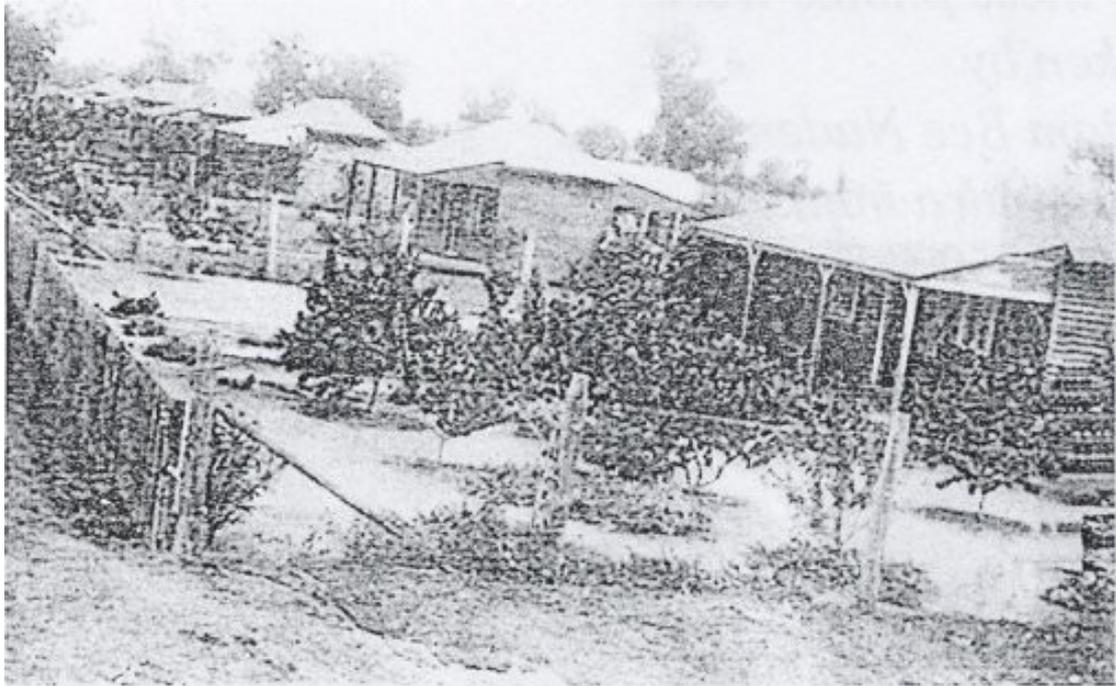
Aboriginal Artifacts.



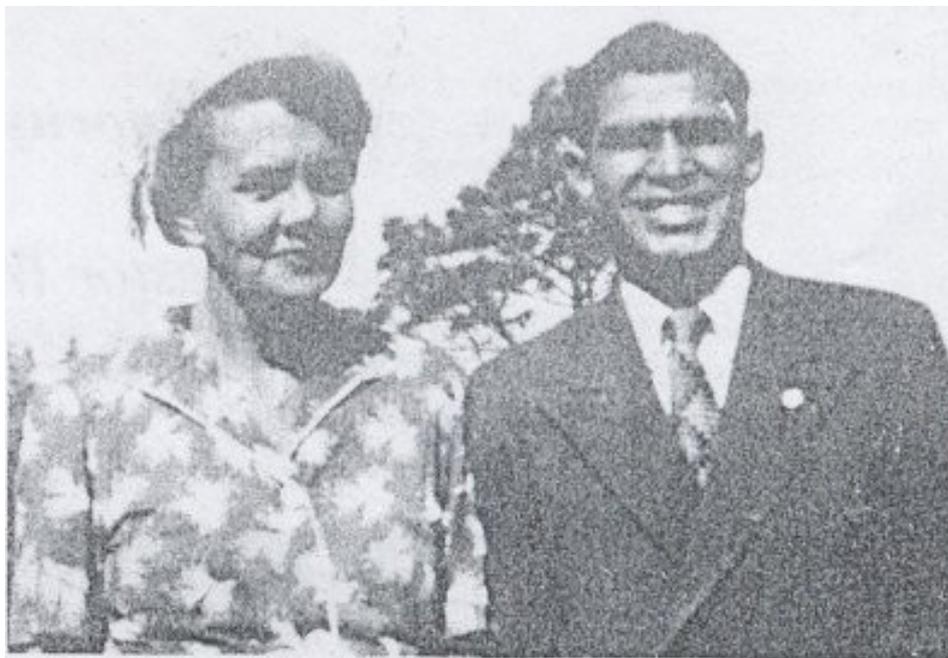


15 Don't go to Gilgandra or you will get converted: a story of the Aboriginal Naden Family

Early Days



Pilliga Mission where Pastor William Bee Naden's Ministry began. Circa 1938.



Bill Naden and his wife Olga 1957 the year they were at Singleton Bible College together .

It was a couple of strange happenings that brought Bill Naden Jnr to the Lord as, like his father before him he knew of the teachings of the A.I.M. Church but shunned away from them, until one day he was playing cards with a group of mates. One of the men was losing badly and cried out to the Lord, saying if there is a God let him strike there and then. His blasphemy frightened one of the blokes who said, "Don't talk like this." All the time a violent storm had been brewing in the West, and as the angry man continued to blaspheme there came a sudden clap of thunder and blue flames shot down on the centre of the ring, frightening and sending the card players in a scatter. Bill knew then it was the voice of God.

Another time he was seated at a Hotel bar having the Occasional drink. Once more there was a Thunder Storm brewing. A bare wire ran above the bar and just as Bill lifted his glass to drink, lightning struck it and blue flames flew down along the wire. For the lightning to strike twice seemed much more than a coincidence to Bill.

It was Vic Brain who bestowed a Paul Harris Fellowship award on him for the lifetime he'd spent working for the betterment of his people, effectively making Bill Naden Jnr. the first Aboriginal Man in Australia to be awarded one of Rotary's most prestigious awards.



The Naden Family:

L/R Back: Bill, Ralph, Dorothy (Mrs. Towney), Pastor Naden, Hubert, Mrs. Stella Naden, Madeline, Lionel.

L/R Front: David, Dawn (Mrs. T. Reid, Paul and Neville.



*Bodies painted and waiting to dance
L/R: Ralph Naden two of his young charges and Tommy Peckham.*



Ralph teaching Reg Humpries the finer points of Aboriginal Dance.