

'We were not natives in the way they thought we were', says Dallas Phillips, who is talking to me about her mother, Mavis Phillips née Walley's collection of photographs. 'Of course, we were native to the land,' she continues. *But we were modern*, is the implication. She tells me about how splendidly her mother dressed, of how she got 'dolled up' whenever they went into town. Dallas directs my attention to the meticulous way she and her siblings are dressed in the photograph amidst the dandelion. To gaze at this picture is to open one's eyes to a world rich in spontaneity and innocence. The beauty of the children, the thriving dandelion, the confident framing of the moment, are all indubitable. What else does Dallas see in this photo? 'It shows how well Mum cared for and provided for us; how well we were sheltered and loved.'

'It's a tribute to our dad, too,' Dallas continues, highlighting that her parents were a strong team. They had to be, to survive the indignities and hardships they faced as mother and father to a young Ballardong Noongar family whose lives were legally governed by Protectionist and Assimilationist policies in Western Australia during the twentieth century. 'Mum and Dad had to get permission to get married from Neville-the-Devil [A.O. Neville, the notorious so-called Chief Protector of Aborigines]', Dallas tells me. In the years we've known each other, this is something that I hadn't heard before but which, depressingly, does not surprise me, given the ubiquity of Neville in all areas of life—both public and intimate—for every Indigenous person in WA. However, of the many outrages to cultural dignity and autonomy brought about by the government, according to Dallas the worst for the family began shortly after the era of Neville with the implementation of the Native Welfare Act (1954), which led to the family's forced removal from the Smith's farm at Goomalling to the Goomalling Reserve. 'That is when we went down,' says Dallas, explaining how the family went from leading self-sufficient, sustainable lives on the farm where 'everyone worked as a team' and 'nothing was wasted' to living in crowded and deprived conditions with other Indigenous families on the reserve. 'It was basically apartheid', says Dallas. Here, the family was made dependent on rations and subject to curfew, unable to leave and enter the main part of town without written permission. With the nocturnal visiting of wadjela men to the reserve came grog, violence, and sexual exploitation. And eventually came the greatest trauma: the removal of children to New Norcia, ostensibly to get an education but in actuality to perform unpaid domestic labour and most tragically, to be exposed to the high risk of child sexual abuse. In 2017, Dallas would bravely give evidence at the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, an important step in her journey toward healing. In its final report the commission found one in five Benedictine priests from 1950-2010 allegedly abused children (triple the average for Catholic institutions in Australia).

The story is difficult to tell in a few short paragraphs. It is difficult to tell even in many long ones. The story goes well beyond ordinary hardship into the territory of forced displacement, social exclusion, systemic abuse, fragmentation of family and culture, and intergenerational trauma. Yet with the photographs taken by Mavis Phillips this story also enters the territory of hope, beauty, and strength, reminding us that Noongar people like the Phillips family not only survived but found ways to thrive even under the gravest existential threats. The endurance of the tin holding Mavis's negatives—carried by her daughter for over 40 years until she brought them to CANWA's attention in 2015—attests to this. That over 300 of the original negatives (that number over 1000) could be restored as we see them today seems a thing of utter joy. As Dallas puts it, 'what she captured is just gold.' With the earliest photos dating from the late 1930s and the latest from the 1970s, this collection of images shows something that is rarely seen in the historical record: Noongar life as it was lived and valued from a Noongar point of view.

Since the discovery of photography and the founding of the Swan River Colony—they happen to be nearly contemporaneous—photography of Indigenous people has been used by government workers, missionaries, ethnographers, and anthropologists as a dehumanising instrument of knowledge and control. ‘I’ve seen a lot of Noongar photos that are nothing like my mum’s’, says Dallas, pointing out how unstaged and alive her mother’s photos appear in the contrast. While missionary photographers compelled their subjects to sit still and smile, only to take the frilly dresses away once the camera was packed down, ‘[Mavis] captured us as we were.’

The Mavis Phillips née Walley Collection enters the historical record bearing radical evidence of joyful and connected lives. At the same time, the collection evidences the specific joy that Mavis found in photography. This impressive woman, a resourceful mother raising 11 children in the Wheatbelt, happens to be one of the earliest known Indigenous photographers in Australia. Remembered for constantly ‘clicking away’, she seems to have found in photography a joy for visual composition and experiment, a modern pleasure in gazing, and a love for looking at beloved subjects—family, nature, and home—as they were to her: *just gold*.

Written by Dr Lucy Van in conversation with Dallas Phillips, 2021.