

Desperately seeking family

Yesterday was the third anniversary of the apology to the Stolen Generation. Andree Stephens meets a woman who, at nearly 100 years old, is still searching for clues about her missing family. Hopefully, the region can help her.

She loves fishing by the river, growing beautiful flowers and occasionally banging the sticks to accompany an amped-up guitar when there's a get-together.

She is the matriarch of generations of children and lives in a stately Queenslander full of life and family. If only Daisy Melba Archer knew her past. "I am a member of the Stolen Generation," she says gravely. "I remember I was with my grandparents down at the riverside. They noticed me because I was the only half-caste. The rest were dark. Police come and grabbed me. Just took me. Nobody knew nothing. My parents didn't know, they were working down on the farm somewhere. I was just swimming with the other kids."

She smiles. "Oh, yeah, swimming down that river with no clothes. In that year there were hardly clothes," she giggles. "I remember my grandad Billy, he used to cut those banana leaves. We kids, we were sticky beaks and we watched what he'd do. He used to trim it - trimming it, trimming it - and you know, he'd make a skirt for himself for that privacy there. He got that skirt and walk about in it banana leaves. Grandma too.

"I remember we were swimming down the river. I was the only pale one there, you know so when the police come they picked me up straight away. "They forgot to rub me with charcoal," she adds cheekily.

Then like a chant, she repeats: "I'm a Stolen Generation, they stole me from my parents and I don't know nothing."

It takes just a little minute to sink in. This slight lady with a gentle, yet compelling voice is a living, breathing fragment of Australian history.

Polite, funny, dignified and gracious, she recalls her story, which began close to 100 years ago and which remains, to so many who are searching on her behalf, a mystery unsolved. And time is precious in the ongoing detective work to find anyone with a connection to the young river girl who has become one of the oldest living members of this group of indigenous Australians who were separated from their families as part of a nationwide assimilation program.

The Stolen Generation, as they have been named, were children who were forcibly removed from their indigenous communities and families and taken to institutions or adopted or fostered to families, so they could be educated, socialised and put to work in a white Australian society.

On July 19, 2011, it will be Daisy's birthday and her family, with assistance from a government agency, wants to try to find someone from that indigenous past to attend her centenary celebrations. Daisy was born in 1911 in Cloncurry, the daughter of Polly and granddaughter of Billy and Kitty.

"That's how much we know," says her daughter, Gloria Oui. "Polly was a full-blood and she worked, so Mum was more or less brought up by Billy and Kitty, her grandparents. They are the only three names we have.

"Polly worked at this place, (run by) white bloke," Gloria continues. "He was a grazier or whatever. He had young girls working there and you can imagine the rest. "So Daisy knows that name, but we've never looked down that path I get a bit thingy about it, you know, there were a lot of girls like Polly."

But Daisy is not thingy about any of it. She is matter of fact about her father and remembers only once seeing him in the distance. Gloria says the family has no leads on what happened to Polly or to Daisy's grandparents. "They lived out in the bush in those days," Gloria says. "There were no such things as houses. The old fella was a full-blood, he talked language. They were always talking language. If they never took her she would have probably grown up talking language."

But someone, somewhere, must know what happened to her family after that day on the river.

"It breaks my heart," says case worker Nick Thompson, of Link-Up Queensland. "We usually have a great success rate with reuniting families, but this one - we've hit a lot of brick walls. I just really want to help her."

Link-Up was formed in 1984 in response to concerns raised by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community in Queensland that members of the Stolen Generation were disproportionately dying in prisons. These concerns were later realised when the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody found many cases investigated were of people who had been separated from their families and communities due to the actions of past government policies

and practices.

The Bringing Them Home: The "Stolen Children" report (1997), by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, confirmed the devastating effects the removal of children had in later years, revealing more than 90 per cent of deaths in custody were of people who had been displaced.

The acknowledgement of the Stolen Generation and its consequences after the release of Bringing Them Home, in turn sparked national political debate over what action governments should take to push forward the process of reconciliation.

When the Labor Government won the election in 2007, then prime minister Kevin Rudd promised to make amends to indigenous Australians over past policies and treatment. On February 13, 2008, the Government held a national Sorry Day, at which Mr Rudd delivered his apology, broadcast across the nation and around the world, to the Stolen Generation and indigenous Australians.

The issue of reconnecting families has continued to gather strength over recent years and more doors are opening for those trying to search for kin. But still governments scratch their heads over how to support indigenous communities better. Poor health, lower education standards, poverty and high custodial rates continue. There are more Aboriginal children in care than during the Stolen years and debate is again surfacing over separation and segregation.

Nick says he learned of Daisy's story through her son, George, who had been giving a speech about his mother to a forum held at Mareeba on the first anniversary of the apology in 2009. "I asked him about her and suggested I try to help," Nick says. "I'm glad I have met her. She's a wonderful woman. "I had to ask her about her life story and she's a character all right. She would say my father was white, how else do you think I got this funny colour!'. She is precious."

What has been established, through Nick's work and that of Gloria, her husband David Oui and the Archer family, is that Daisy was removed from the river and taken to Yarrabah to live at the Girls Dormitory in 1917. She was given the last name of Melba. From old documents in David's possession, one can scroll through the names of children and adults removed from families between 1916 and 1922. One line a person, the pages are similar to an accountant's ledger. The reasons for their removal are sketchy and, at times, shameful. So many were taken because they "would not work" or had a "bad influence on others in the district". Some were "causing trouble at various camps", some needed to be brought up among their "own race". There was Lena, who was "cheeky, troublesome and dangerous". She was sent to Palm Island. Or Tommy, who was a "cripple" and unable to work. And there was Daisy, a six-year-old girl from Cloncurry who was taken "for her own benefit", accompanied by the contentious notation: "with parent consent". Daisy remains sanguine over her removal and philosophical about her life at the Girls Dormitory. "They treat me OK," she says. "I had to work, I had to cook and to sew. I had to respect myself, that's what I learned." And was it a good place? "Well, I can't say anything because that's the only place I grew up. And you wouldn't believe - I grew up to be a school teacher. And a Sunday school teacher!"

Gloria says her mother worked at Yarrabah until her marriage at the age of about 26. She was also a cook at the local hospital. "Mum was a wonderful cook," she says. "I was great at making bread," Daisy adds. "Big trucks would deliver the flour straight to the kitchen. We'd get the flour and make the dough, mixing it up, punching it down. "We would put it in rows of great big bread tins, cut it up, then bake it in the cement ovens. Not like today I was making that bread and we'd put it out and leave it for the baker to come along."

Daisy met Charles Archer while working at Yarrabah. They married and moved out to Bucky cattle station where Charles worked as a ringer. After several years, they moved back to Charles's country, Djungan, at Mt Mulligan, where he became a coal miner. They had eight children.

"Daisy camped in Mareeba to have us kids," Gloria says. "There was a hospital but I don't know. So she just had us and took us straight back out on the train to Mulligan." Charles built a house a little away from the township on the banks of the Hodgkinson River and Daisy built the first of her famous flower-filled, fruit laden gardens. Life was simple. There was no electricity, they used a wood stove for their meals and water was carried from the river in buckets.

"She sent us all to (Mulligan State) school," Gloria recalls with a grin. "In our starched clothes. That old iron." Daisy smiles listening to her daughter. "She'd have the clips in my hair and the ribbons and curls I mean, we lived in the bush, but we were in our shoes and socks and we'd walk through the bush."

When the mine, then the township, closed from about 1958, the Archer family again jumped on a train and headed for Mareeba. They camped on the Granite River. Charles worked on the roads up at Mt Surprise and built another

house for the Archers on the council reserve. "Yeah, we just camped beside the river," Gloria recalls. "We had our bath, we just jumped in the river there and whatever. Then when Dad built us a house, there we were back at school. "That was the first time I ever saw electricity," says Gloria, remembering an incident with a school teacher and an instruction to boil the jug.

Daisy would provide plenty for her family, catching jew fish, turtles, perch and mouth all mighties.

She gardened, sewed and did needle point and was a strict mum, Gloria says. No cigarettes or alcohol passed her lips. After about six years, the Archers moved into town, the first indigenous family to buy a house at Mareeba.

Sadly, Charles died in a car accident a few years later.

Daisy never remarried. After his death, she packed up the house, moved to Innisfail for a few years, but missed Mareeba and returned, buying a house in Doyle St. After 20 years, she sold up and retired to a pension cottage at Dimbulah.

Again, her gardens were the talk of the neighbourhood but after a short stint in hospital - the only time she was ever ill - Daisy was invited to stay with family at Wungu. She made a final move into a nearby elderly home but when that closed, moved to Gloria and David's Mareeba house. And it is a good arrangement, Gloria and Daisy agree. Yet the search for her original family is pressing.

Why now, after all these years? "Oh, the family were meant to start this sort of thing ages ago," Gloria says rolling her eyes. "But Mum was always moving around, visiting Tennant Creek, climbing Uluru, riding camels in Broome. She would never slow down. Even now, I tell you what! "So it wasn't until later in life that we thought, well, we've got time here now."

David and Gloria have taken Daisy on road trips. Three years ago, they went back to Cloncurry, bumping their way across the state in a four-wheel-drive. "Mum travelled really well," Gloria says.

They visited the original, old wooden bridge. "We took her down to the river there and she cried. And we cried. "I washed my face with that water," Daisy adds quietly. "I cupped my hands and I drank from that river."

The Archer family began the search in the '80s, contacting regional police stations in Daisy's country, Kalkadoon.

There have been heart-wrenching disappointments. Then they accepted help from Link-Up. "With this young fella, Nick, we had a meeting and he sort of spoke about things," Gloria says. "So we gave him our bit of information to go on. It went from there. "It made me feel a bit lighter knowing that and I said to him, if you don't come up with it, mate, that's OK too. Because I know that we have tried. And he's been really great. "At one point, he came here after running into so many brick walls and asked us if we wanted to close the case. And I said, oh just leave it for now and we'll try a bit more."

While the search is difficult, it is with hope they continue. "I mean wouldn't it be great if we could find someone before her birthday," Gloria says. David is also determined to grant another wish for his mother-in-law. A birth certificate.

There is nothing on the records and without one, she doesn't formally exist. While a retrospective certificate can be drafted, there is "a lot of red tape, too much". "I want to try and get it for her," David says. "Because then she will get a letter from the Queen for her 100th, which would mean so much to her." And David, like Gloria, is willing to persist for Daisy. She is a treasure in their home. "Mum has an amazing sense of humour," Gloria says. "I mean with us three living here, me and David - well, David is an amazing son-in-law - I mean, you have to have a sense of humour. We laugh and we joke and we carry on. That's what makes it work. "And Mum just never sits around," Gloria continues. Up and dressed by 7am, Daisy is meticulous in keeping her own room neat. She washes and cleans herself up, then cleans the bathroom before breakfast. "I have porridge and tea and a bit of bread," Daisy says. "And sometimes I say, I'd like some scrambled egg and toast for breakfast, please' and Gloria gives it to me. Then afterwards, I clean up my mess and wash and wipe the dishes."

Daisy once decided the easiest thing to do to keep the household in check was to have David put a hook by the sink so she could leave a tin cup by the tap. "I left that cup there for them to drink! Then rinse and dry that cup," she chuckles. David and Gloria often take Daisy on outings," Gloria says. "Even a couple of years ago we took her to the beach fishing. She throws out a line and she'd be struggling with it. She'd catch a little silver and she'd be struggling," the women both roar with laughter.

They also take Daisy to Wungu where they have a caravan and camping spot and for regular outings to the shops and to church. Daisy, Gloria says, remains independent and in great health. She will never take a pill and the only thing she does to ease sore joints is rub Vicks into them.

These days, she is content to join in the sing-alongs at home. Gloria and David keep a couple of guitars and amps and she keeps rhythm with sticks. Or she listens to her favourite singer, Marty Robbins, on her vivid pink CD player in her room. It is the biggest technological concession this woman makes to the modern world - a woman who has

witnessed the travel revolution, from cars, aeroplanes and even space flight to the invention of television, computers and mobile phones. But she never learned to drive. "No, I'd be smashing them up," she giggles. And she concedes to watching a little television - anything resembling a western or her favourite show, Deal or No Deal. "Things have changed. I have grown up a lot since I was a kid from Cloncurry," Daisy says.

If you have any information about Daisy Melba Archer, please, contact Nick Thompson at Link-Up (QLD) Aboriginal Corporation, Apunipima Cape York Health Council, 18 Scott St, Parramatta Park. All communication will be strictly confidential. Ph: 042 0306 502, Fax (07) 4027 9665, www.link-upqld.org.au.

Daisy Melba Archer will celebrate 100 years of life in mid-July. The family is hoping to organise a huge party with community support and will invite local dignitaries, friends and relatives, including her great and great great-grandchildren at a community hall at Dimbulah. The celebrations will include music and traditional foods.

