

THE MOWANJUM CENTENNIAL : 100 YEARS OF A WONDERFUL PEOPLE

On 5 March 2014, the Kimberley Society heard from **Dr Peter Graham AM**, a retired ophthalmologist who is recognised internationally for his delivery of eye health care services in remote communities. In presenting an overview of the Mowanjum community's history, and fondly recalling some of its people, Peter told of Royal Flying Doctor Service work in which he conducted clinic visits to remote Aboriginal communities in the mid-1950s. That took place before he and his wife Gwenyth worked in Indonesia, where two of their three children were born. They returned to Perth in 1969 but kept in contact with old friends, especially the "Mowanjum Mob", during many return visits to the Kimberley.

Mowanjum community is on the Gibb River Road about ten kilometres south-east of Derby. Several hundred people live there. They are Worrorra, Ngarinyin, and Wunumbal people who came together in the early 20th century at Port George IV (Kunmunya Presbyterian Mission) and Walcott Inlet (Avon Valley Station, later known as Munja).

To provide context for his talk, Peter drew on books that record the Mowanjum people's history. The earliest was the rare but recently republished J R B Love's *Stone-Age Bushmen of To-day, Life and Adventure among a Tribe of Savages in North-Western Australia* (Blackie & Son Limited, London, 1936). Maisie McKenzie's work, *The Road to Mowanjum* (Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1969) chronicled the years during which the missionaries and Aboriginal people moved from Kunmunya to Wotjulum (on the coast) and then to the original Mowanjum site (now part of Derby Airport). The most recent book, *Mowanjum : 50 Years Community History*, was published by the community in 2008. Its historical component provides background and context for images, recollections and stories gathered by the community.

Other books written by Mowanjum people tell of their culture and life in their community. Those books include *Visions of Mowanjum : Aboriginal Writings from the Kimberley* (Rigby, Adelaide, 1980) by Daisy Utemorrhah, Elkin Umbagai, Buruwola Algarra, Jean Wungunyet, and David Mowaljarlai. More recently Valda Blundell worked with Donny Woolagoodja and other Mowanjum people to produce *Keeping the Wanjinias Fresh : Sam Woolagoodja and the Enduring Power of Lalai* (Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle, 2005).

Mowanjum, in addition to its residential area, has a [Community Resource Centre](#) and a spectacular [Art & Culture Centre](#). The community also has outstations on the Kimberley Plateau and the coast, and in the Buccaneer Archipelago.

At the outset Peter acknowledged, firstly, the Mowanjum community, who had given consent for his use of images or names of deceased people, and secondly, the Floreat Uniting Church, who have supported Mowanjum for many years. Their support is a continuation of the Presbyterian connection. It was during the earlier phase that Peter became aware of the people who became known as the "Mowanjum Mob". His mother, as part of the family's involvement with the Presbyterian Church in Cottesloe, used to contribute old clothes to the Christmas Box of the Kunmunya Mission.

Peter's personal contact began in 1954, when he and Gwenyth married and made their first home in Derby. His job description was "Flying Doctor, Leprosarium Doctor" and, in the language of the day, "Native Hospital Doctor". That period predated the move to Mowanjum. When people visited Derby on their lugger from Wotjulum—for work or medical treatment—Gwenyth and Peter got to know them.

The first of the people Peter recalled was Elkin—named after a beautiful sea shell by her parents Ruby and Njimandum. Born in 1921, she was lucky to survive at birth and it was only due to her parents' later intervention that she was able to marry a man of her own choosing (Sam Umbagai). Elkin went on to become a strong and influential leader as well as one of 150 women whose lives and contributions to WA were featured in the book *Reflections* in 1979. Elkin and Sam's daughter Heather became a nurse and was not only the first woman to be voted into the all-male Mowanjum Council but was also its first chairwoman.

Other Mowanjum people about whom Peter spoke included Elkin's brother Alan Mungulu—another outstanding leader—and his wife Gudu, one of Mowanjum's matriarchs. Then there was Pudja—also a leader—and her husband Albert Barunga (a British Empire Medal recipient); Yertigal and his son Brian; Paddy Morlumbum, his son Samson and granddaughter Joy, who became a stalwart of the Christian Council leaders of Mowanjum; David Mowaljarlai; Laurie Utemorrah; Sam Woolagoodja; Jack Bear (once a stockman out Mt House way); Daisy Utemorrah; and Alison Burgu. One of the interesting stories attached to the images involved Vera Maru (shown at a Christmas Dinner at Kunmunya in the 1930s), her son Yertigal (the gardener at Gwenyth and Peter's Derby home), and Yertigal's son Brian (who spent weekends with them in Perth after winning a bursary to Scotch College).

Some of the photographs were taken many decades ago, by people such as J R B (Bob) Love, while others were taken by Peter in and since 1954. Bob Love and his fellow missionaries featured in the talk, as did other non-Aboriginal people who helped to make Mowanjum what it is today. The young couple Robert and Frances Wilson were the first to point the way. With an assistant named G B Segrott, they built a house and got to know the Worora. Bob Love joined them in 1914 and contributed a great deal. Peter also spoke of later church input and the sequential moves that brought the community to Mowanjum. His overview made it clear that a lot of disruption and disappointment occurred during and because of those moves.

The move to Derby, and the selection of the name Mowanjum, which means "settled at last", should have brought those moves to an end. But, with land needed for airport expansion, the final move had yet to be made. With that decision, Peter said, one of the elders couldn't resist suggesting another name change to Maranggam, which means "never at rest".

In the meantime, Bud Crockett (an American cattleman) had worked with the community to set up a viable business at Pantijan and other outstations. Bruce Godwin, a farmer from Victoria, had also worked with the people for ten years, donating a tractor, ute and plant—all of which he drove there with his brother-in-law.

Attending the May 2013 Centennial in Derby gave Peter a chance to join old friends in their celebration of a significant anniversary of the beginnings—after millennia of nomadic bush life—of modern community at Kunmunya. And that was the story he and Gwenyth shared with us, '100 Years of a Wonderful People'.

Cathie Clement