

Centenary Flashback: Aboriginal housing history, part 1

NB: This article contains images of Aboriginal people who have passed away.

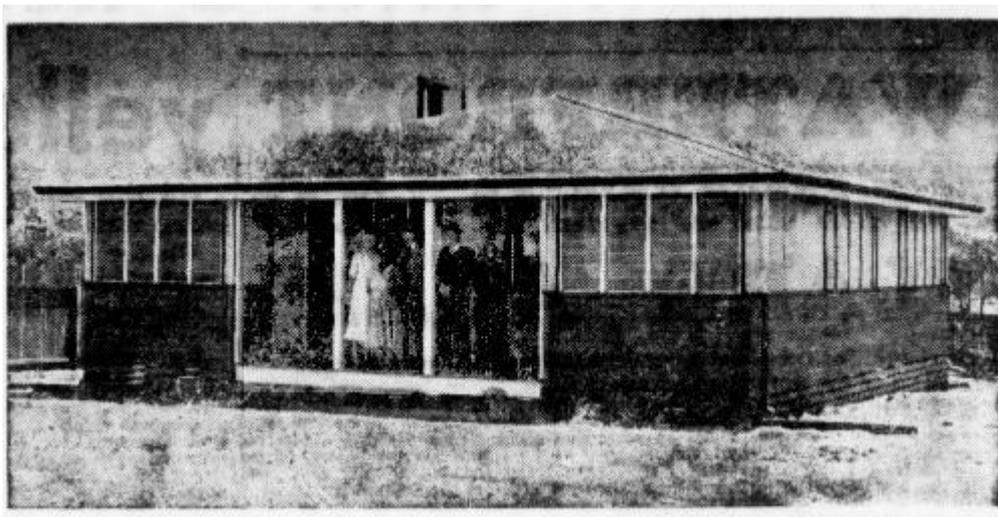
This year's centenary encourages staff to look towards our future by learning from our past. While we may not always be proud of our history, it is important to recount it honestly in order for us to understand how we have come to where we are today.

In 1953, the Department, then called the State Housing Commission, implemented the Native Housing Scheme – a Federally-funded scheme which signalled the Department's official entry into Aboriginal housing.

The scheme was established to address 'the immediate necessity to provide permanent homes to replace dilapidated and insanitary bush humpies'.

The Commission worked in partnership with the Department of Native Affairs to implement the scheme; one acting as the housing authority and the other providing the special knowledge of Aboriginal conditions and requirements.

The first two homes built under the scheme were in York in 1954. The houses were built on land purchased by the Yarran and Lawrence families, who had lived in York all their lives. Later in the year, the first metropolitan house was built under the scheme in Eden Hill for the Parfitt family.



The first metropolitan house for an Aboriginal family in Eden Hill, 1954

"A native husband and wife, who have not before known the common conveniences of sewerage, electric light and water in the home, were handed the keys of a new State Housing Commission home," The Sunday Times reported in November 1954.

"It is significant from the point of assimilation that there is every likelihood of the Parfitt family having for neighbours, white people on either side. There is no color (sic) segregation."

Later in 1954, the Commission received a petition, written by a group of locals, against the allocation of a Commission house to an Aboriginal family in a country town.

A check on the family after two months of occupancy revealed the house was clean and well-kept and the children well-behaved. Local police also described the husband as "a desirable citizen, hardworking and very careful in money matters."

"I am disappointed and disgusted at the attitude of people who display bias against our coloured cousins," former Housing Minister H.E. Graham told the Sunday Times.

"This family will definitely stay in the house. Instead of people being hostile they should be proud of the fact a native, despite natural obstacles, could raise himself to such a high standard."

By 1959, only 20 per cent of Aboriginal housing tenants were meeting the financial, social and domestic obligations required to remain in State housing. The Commission attributed this to the fact that 'many of these families came directly from the bush where the facilities were primitive and there were only limited prospects of regular employment.'

In an attempt to overcome the problems associated with the abrupt shift from 'primitive' accommodation to a house in a white neighbourhood, the Commission introduced a transitional housing scheme.

Transitional houses provided very basic accommodation on the outskirts of town in areas known as 'native reserves' or 'native settlements'. If families proved they were able to care for their transitional house and pay rent, they were transferred to a standard Commission house.

To be continued...



Ms Dolly McVee and her family outside their transitional home in Merredin's Aboriginal Housing Settlement, 1963. Most transitional housing was situated on the outskirts of country towns where Aboriginal people were segregated from the main town. Photo courtesy of The West Australian and permission given by Ms. McVee's family



Children attending kindergarten at Pinjarra Native Reserve, 1963. Photo courtesy of The West Australian



Until 1954, Aboriginal people were prohibited from entering Perth CBD.



East Perth in the 1960s - known then as 'the slums' was mostly populated by Aboriginal families.

Photo courtesy of The West Australian