

# Marella Mission Farm

1953 – 1978

**Other Names:**

- Marella Farm for Aborigine Children
- Marella Farm

## Details

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Marella Mission Farm originated in the early 1950s with Gwen and Keith Langford-Smith fostering Aboriginal children on their farm property at Kellyville. From 1953, Marella Mission Farm operated as an institution where Aboriginal children were removed to.

Keith Langford-Smith was a missionary who rose to fame in the 1930s for his accounts of flying across Arnhem Land in his plane, which were published in newspapers extensively. Langford-Smith was also the Superintendent of the [Roper River Mission](#) from 1931-1933, from where he was dismissed in controversial circumstances (*Marella: The Hidden Mission*, p.6).

In 1948, Langford-Smith started the Sky Pilot Fellowship, which produced evangelical Christian radio broadcasts where he would recount his experiences in the Northern Territory. He used these broadcasts to raise funds and in 1954, formed the Sky Pilot Fellowship Ltd as a not-for-profit company, to both run the Mission Farm and receive donations.

The general administration of Marella from 1950-1986 was conducted by Norma Warwick, who was secretary-treasurer of the Fellowship.

The stated aims of Marella were to foster Aboriginal children born in New South Wales to mothers who had been evacuated from the Northern Territory during World War II, making Marella an institution created to deal with a second generation of Aboriginal children removed from their families. However, children from other Aboriginal communities were also removed and sent to Marella. *Marella: The Hidden Mission* states that children were removed to Marella from New South Wales, Queensland, Victoria and the Northern Territory.

While a privately-run institution, Marella had close links to the Aborigines Welfare Board. Investigations by the NSW Stolen Generations Reparations Scheme found that:

*[Aborigines Welfare] Board records show that when the Child Welfare Department raised concerns in the 1950s that Marella was not complying with provisions of the Child Welfare Act 1939 requiring regular licensing inspections, the Board successfully rebuffed the department's attempts to introduce inspections. In doing so, the Board assumed direct responsibility for overseeing the home's operations. While there remain gaps in the scheme's knowledge of the extent of Board influence over Marella, it is evident that the placement of many Aboriginal children at Marella occurred with the knowledge and awareness of the Board ([Interim Report](#), p. 31).*

Conditions at Marella have been described by survivors as “cruel” and that the children were treated “like slaves”. Rita Wright, who was one of the first children removed to Marella, has described how the children were required to do hard labour and chores on the farm. They were also forced to call Gwen and Keith Langford-Smith “Mum and Dad” ([Rita Wright, “An individual’s memories of the Stolen Generation”](#)). Many survivors have reported their required chores: milking cows, feeding animals, preparing food, washing clothes and bedding and looking after younger children. Rita Wright stated: “We children kept that farm going. We were the ones doing all the work” (*Marella: The Hidden Mission*, p.19).

The children initially slept in a chicken pen shed which had been converted into living quarters, and it was not until the late 1960s that a dormitory was constructed at the insistence of the Child Welfare Department ([Marella – Out of Hiding](#)).

The newsletter *Sky Pilot News* was published from 1954 and contained stories and photographs of the Aboriginal children at Marella.

Marella was funded by a combination of donations from the public, fundraising at fete days, and some government funding. *Marella: The Hidden Mission* states that there were frequently over 20 children at the property at any time, and that their ages ranged from babies to teenagers. Initially, girls were sent to Marella with boys also being sent there from the late 1950s. After 1972, changes to child welfare regulations meant that children under five were no longer sent to Marella.

Survivors have reported never having enough food while at Marella. Jasmine Franklin stated:

*All our foods were basic. We had porridge full of weevils every morning and old fruit, stale biscuits or cakes that were donated. We were always hungry, eating berries and other bush tucker we could find, and we became very resourceful. Even on the way to church on Sundays we would pinch oranges and hide them in the bush for later. We were always caught but it was worth it (Marella: The Hidden Mission, p. 14).*

Former residents have also described punishments, including canings and beatings, and being forced to polish the lino floors all day. Survivors have also reported that sexual abuse occurred at Marella.

After the closure of the [Kinchela Boys’ Home](#) in 1970, some of the boys from Kinchela were brought to Marella.

From the mid-1970s, the growing movement for self-determination for Aboriginal people saw focus on Marella. In 1976, The *Sky Pilot News* reported that Aboriginal activists “wanted to close Marella” and that they had objections due to white people fostering Aboriginal children, and because Aboriginal culture was destroyed as the children were forced to be Christian (*Marella: The Hidden Mission*, p. 9).

Marella Mission Farm was listed as participating in the Commonwealth Government study of children’s homes that was reported as *Why are they in children’s homes: report of the ACROSS children’s home intake survey* in 1979.

In April 1978 Marella Mission Farm Ltd was formed to take over the assets and liabilities of the Sky Pilot Foundation, so that the land at Kellyville could be donated. At this time Marella ceased operating as an institution and children were transferred to [Havilah Group Home](#) and then later to other Church of England group homes.

Marella Mission Farm Ltd continued to sponsor the Church of England Homes Marella Project, also known as [Marella Aboriginal Temporary Care](#), a family group home for Aboriginal children.

The Kellyville site was taken over by the Parramatta Regional Mission, run by the Uniting Church. It was later subdivided. It is bounded by present day York Road, Presidents Avenue, Green Road and Marella Avenue. It contains the Bernie Mullane Sporting Complex and YMCA, Kellyville High School and housing.

In 2009, Marella Mission Farm was the subject of a touring exhibition that was curated by Zona Wilkinson and Anne Loxley for the Penrith Regional Gallery and Lewers Bequest. The exhibition was called *Marella: the Hidden Mission* because so few residents of western Sydney knew it was there. A [catalogue](#) produced as part of the exhibition includes survivors' experiences of their time at Marella.

## National Redress Scheme for people who have experienced institutional child sexual abuse

In 2021, the New South Wales government has agreed to be a funder of last resort for this institution. This means that although the institution is now defunct, it is participating in the National Redress Scheme, and the government has agreed to pay the institution's share of costs of providing redress to a person (as long as the government is found to be equally responsible for the abuse a person experienced).

## Gallery

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### The mission farm entrance in 1962

**Description:** This image shows the entrance to Marella Mission Farm.



### An individual's memories of the Stolen Generation

**Description:** Rita Wright talks about her experiences at Marella Mission Farm as a survivor of the Stolen Generations. This is an excerpt from the TV show *Insight* (SBS), episode "Looking After the Kids", which originally aired on April 19 2016.

## More info

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### Related Entries

#### Run by

- [Sky Pilot Fellowship \(23 May 1949 - c. 1986\)](#)

#### Related Organisations

- [Marella Aboriginal Temporary Care \(1979 - 2000\)](#)  
The Sky Pilot Fellowship, which Marella Mission Farm and was involved with Marella Mission Farm Ltd, sponsored the Marella Aboriginal Program.  
Date: 1979 - 1986
- [Roper River Mission \(1908 - 1988\)](#)  
Keith Langford-Smith, who ran Marella Mission Farm, was previously the Superintendent at Roper River Mission
- [Havilah Group Home \(1979 - c. 1985\)](#)  
When Marella Mission Farm closed, children were sent to Havilah Group Home.
- [Kinchela Training Home for Aboriginal Boys \(1923 - 1970\)](#)  
When Kinchela Training Home closed in 1970, some boys from Kinchela were brought to Marella Mission Farm.

## Resources

- Irish, Paul, [Hidden in Plain View: Aboriginal Historical People and Places in an Urban Sydney Landscape](#), 2009

- Marella Mission Farm Ltd, *Sky pilot news*, 1978 - 1986

# Records

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For more information and to access your records, follow the links below:

## Records

- [Records of Marella Mission Farm \(1948 - 1986\)](#)
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You can view this page online by visiting <https://www.findandconnect.gov.au/entity/marella-mission-farm/>