

## **The Darug - Traditional Owners of Western Sydney.**

Cabramatta takes its name from the Cabrogal band of the Darug-speaking people that lived around Liverpool and Fairfield when the British first came to Australia. The Cabrogal name comes from the *cobra* or *cabra* grub, an edible freshwater worm which breeds in submerged wood. These shipworms are plentiful in creeks and waterways and were an important food source for the Cabrogal people.

For tens of thousands of years Aboriginal people lived here in harmony with their country. Darug culture is rich in spiritual meaning, with individuals linked through kinship relationships and a close relationship with the place in which he or she was conceived. This relationship carried with it responsibilities to land, community, plant and animal life. These responsibilities were taught by the Elders of the community. Aboriginal Law regulated the customs, ceremonies and conduct of the Darug. These laws were often passed from generation to generation through song, dance and story.

In the bush there was plenty of food if you knew where to look. In fact there was so much food there that groups could live in one area for weeks or even months at a time. Darug tradition and tribal law stipulated that you may only take from the land what was necessary for survival.

Women gathered the basic foods - shellfish, fruits, roots and small game. Yams were cultivated along creekbanks and in open forests. Many vegetable foods were poisonous without expert preparation - *burrawang* had to be soaked in running water for two weeks before being ground into flour and then baked as flat cakes.

Men hunted, and were known as skillful tree climbers, often hunting possum, koalas and flying fox. They set snares for quail and dug pitfall traps for small mammals. Fish traps were set along creeks and rivers. Men also caught eels, platypus, yabbies, mussels, tortoises and water birds. Huge mud oysters were harvested in estuarine waters.

Over the flat or undulating shale country in this area Aborigines camped in *gunyahs* – windbreaks made of branches and sheets of bark. Creeks contained rocks and boulders suitable for making stone tools, and the Darug developed a sophisticated toolkit of spears, coolamons, traps, snares, nets, digging sticks and other technologies.

This life was to change dramatically with the arrival of the Europeans. Even before the first contact between the inland Darug and white colonists, smallpox or *Galgala* had spread from the settlement at Sydney and decimated many Darug communities.

When European settlement in Sydney's West began, the Darug were not recognised as having any prior ownership. Although early European intrusions onto Darug land were greeted with friendship, as the British colony spread, competition for food resources and land led to frontier violence and guerilla warfare. White farmlands removed many traditional food sources, resulting in a food shortage. Farmers also failed to pay the Aborigines who helped them to gather their crops. There was open hostility between colonists and the Darug for many years, with troops often deployed to protect settlers' interests and conduct punitive expeditions. On occasions Aborigines were massacred and their bodies hung from trees to terrorise those still living.

After 1810 Governor Macquarie took a number of steps to assimilate Aboriginal people into the British colony. Several Cabrogal children were among the boarders at the 'Native Institution' established first at Parramatta and later moved

to the 'Black town'. Here Aboriginal children were separated from their families and taught to forget their culture, heritage and languages.

The Darug fought not only to protect their lands, but also to maintain their culture. The Native Institution was closed down after Aboriginal families reclaimed the children. Corroborees and other ceremonies continued well into the 1830s. As late as 1843, reference is made to an envoy from the Richmond Tribe talking to the Cabramatta Tribe.

After the traditional methods of hunting and gathering ceased to be an option, some Darug were forced onto reserves or missions, along with members of the neighbouring Gandangara and Darkinjung Tribes.

In 1888 The Aborigines Protection Board was set up, supposedly to protect Aboriginal people. In reality it denied them the same rights as other Australians and controlled every aspect of their lives. It took land from Aboriginal people to set up its reserves and missions. Land which had been granted to the Darug by Governor Macquarie was now taken away. Thus people who had been independent were made dependant on government charity.

In 1907 the Aboriginal Protection Act invested the board with even more powers. This resulted in great numbers of Aboriginal children being removed from their families to be brought up in white foster homes throughout the State. Many children were trained as domestic servants for white masters and mistresses.

Aboriginal communities were severed, and generations of Aboriginal people grew up in ignorance of their Aboriginality and cultural identity. Over the years many Darug have kept their identity a secret.

The Darug today are regrouping yet again, as families are rediscovering their links with each other, and their connection with this country. Through

organisations such as the Darug Tribal Aboriginal Corporation, Darug people today have a growing awareness of kinship ties and their responsibilities as custodians of this land. This organisation began in 1988, under the name of Darug Link. Through reunions and other activities, the Darug meet to - tell stories, to listen to others, and to share in the making of the country's Dreaming. The Corporation has also organised re-enactments and members conduct classes in schools and universities.

Today the Darug people have been joined in the western suburbs of Sydney by Torres Strait Islanders and by Aborigines from all over Australia, creating the largest concentration of Aboriginal people anywhere in New South Wales. The cultures are not only preserved, but are growing stronger. Local Aboriginal families have maintained aspects of their many cultures while having a lifestyle otherwise indistinguishable from any other Australian family in the community. Theirs is a story of resistance, survival and now reaffirmation.