

‘Smokey Joe’

Alf Miller was most likely born in Ringarooma, Tasmania on June 2, 1916.

It seems that Alf may have had a hard early life, with his oral history speaking of being knocked about by his father as a young bloke, leading to him not being able to talk properly or shave. “I was in a terrible state” he said. Alf’s comments may suggest that his father was a violent man who abused him and as a result Alf may have suffered from the lifelong effects of that.

Alf arrived in Mandurah in 1948 after a recommendation from Ted Hanson in Margaret River. He was previously smoking fish at Hamlin Bay, and it would seem he hoped to undertake some sort of fishing here in Mandurah. He arrived by bus from Perth and with nowhere to stay he was lucky enough to be given permission by the Sutton family to camp on their farm property on the Mandurah Estuary. The rent for the site was negotiated at five pounds (ten dollars) per year.



He originally camped in a tent but gradually he accumulated timber from various sources and began building a small hut. This was added to over the years. His observations of nature gave him knowledge of the local fisheries, particularly prawns, the waterways and the changing conditions of the estuary.

He originally tried to make a living from catching, smoking and selling fish but that was not a success. He bought a small rowboat and was given a fishing net. He then started catching fish and, when he could, prawns. This venture was very profitable and provided Alf a good income. He built a series of racks in the estuary for drying his fishing nets. These can still be seen today. He also successfully netted mullet which he sold in Perth as the Mandurah fish canneries had closed by then. He was also one of the many volunteers who were involved in the 1957 rescue of a boy who had become trapped in a borehole.

With the sale of Sutton Farm to Town & Country in the early eighties Alf was no longer able to stay at his waterside campsite. Through negotiations between the City of Mandurah and Town & Country Alf was offered a free, fully furnished unit in central Mandurah where he lived for many years.

In conclusion, it would seem that Alf Miller lived a quiet life in Mandurah. He was a student of the natural environment in which he lived. He was part of the community but also an observer of all around him and only “progress” necessitated him leaving his much-loved riverside home.

References

Miller, Alfred James. “Oral Memories of Alfred James Miller,” interview by Jan Baker on March 7, 2006, in Mandurah Western Australia. Mandurah Museum Oral History Collection, Mandurah, WA.

