

Troubled Times

Investigation 2

A HEALTH SCANDAL – 23 BABIES DIE



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Investigating a health scandal 1949

Introduction

Albury Pioneer Cemetery has a large number of grave sites, but tucked away in a back corner is a cluster of very small graves. This investigation is about the sudden death of babies at Bonegilla.



Bonegilla Museum - Health Scandal 1949

Watch this short introduction:

Bonegilla Experience: Troubled Times - Health Scandal

<https://youtu.be/VvS0DpRhAyE>





Questions

01

Why did the Minister for Immigration, Arthur Calwell, warmly welcome some children but not others?

02

Why do you think the media gave so many different reasons for these children dying?

You will investigate the causes of these babies' deaths and the consequences for Bonegilla's migrants and the Australian community.

Background events



Arthur Calwell, the Minister for Immigration, visited the Bonegilla Migrant Reception and Training Centre on the 1 July 1949. He cheerfully welcomed newly arrived Displaced Persons to Australia and to Bonegilla. The local Border Morning Mail noted from his speeches the Government's plans to increase the flow of migrants to Australia and to expand the already much bigger and improved Bonegilla Reception Centre.

Calwell made a personal inspection, first of the hospital and then of the accommodation facilities. He praised Departmental officials and the local administrators, especially for the way they had won the high regard of the Geneva-based International Refugee Organisation. As a result of an official IRO visit that had included Bonegilla in January, he could proudly say, 'No other country in the world is doing as much for the reception and placement of displaced persons'.



Calwell spent a considerable time in the children's ward at the hospital. He posed for photographs with a bed-ridden child and with another group of healthy smiling children. He reminded the press that those selected to come to Australia were comparatively healthy, in spite of the privations of Europe and the high levels of malnutrition there both during the war and in the immediate post-war years.

In September 1949, two months after Calwell's visit to Bonegilla, Albury Hospital reported that seven newly arrived infants at Bonegilla had died from malnutrition in just over a month. There were also reports of additional infant deaths in other migrant accommodation centres.

Metropolitan newspapers seized on what was plainly a national health scandal. By the end of the year twenty-three infants who had arrived in late 1949 were dead.

Key Inquiry Question

- *What were the causes and the short and long-term consequences of a national health scandal at Bonegilla in 1949?*





Inquiry 1 – Twenty-three babies die

Why did these babies die?

You will be working as an historian with primary sources. You will research archives and relevant documents that allow you to investigate the reasons for these babies suddenly dying.

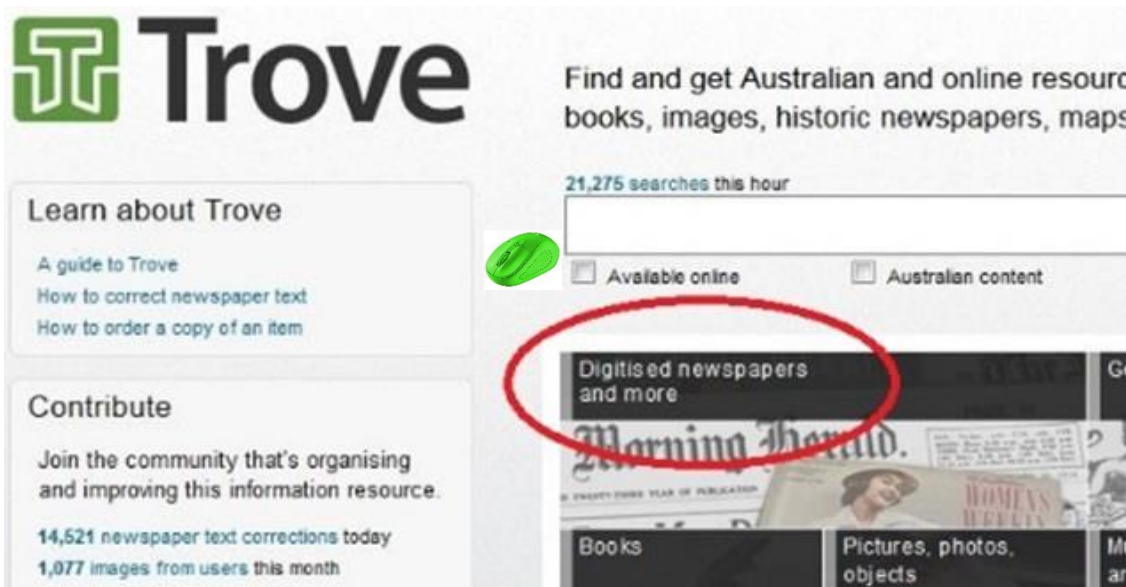
Examining newspaper reports of the deaths



Archive 1 – Open the link below to go to Trove at the National Library of Australia

<http://trove.nla.gov.au/>

1) Find and open the link: “Digitised Newspapers and More”



2) Click on the Adv (Advanced) search function

Digitised newspapers and more

Search articles for

Keywords



Search

Adv

OR

Browse articles by

Titles

Place

Date

Category

Tag

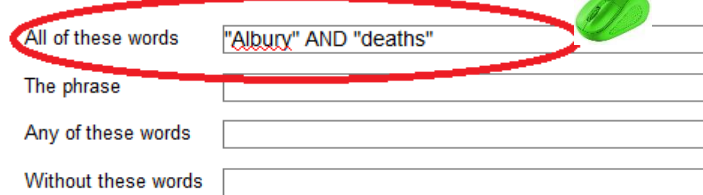
3) Enter at 'all of these words':

"Albury" AND "deaths"

(include the double inverted commas & the AND)

Advanced search - Digitised newspapers and more

Enter search terms in at least one of the fields below ?



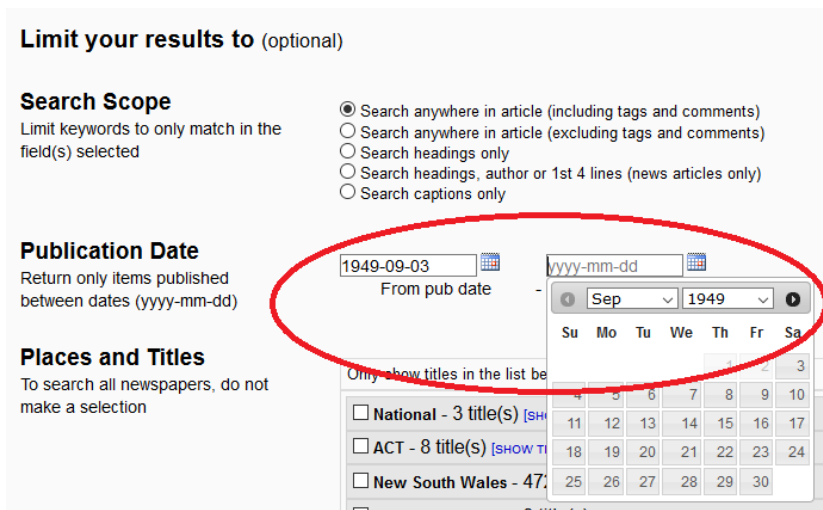
All of these words

The phrase

Any of these words

Without these words

4) Select the date range: 1949-09-03 to 1949-09-24



Limit your results to (optional)

Search Scope
Limit keywords to only match in the field(s) selected

- ☒ Search anywhere in article (including tags and comments)
- ☐ Search anywhere in article (excluding tags and comments)
- ☐ Search headings only
- ☐ Search headings, author or 1st 4 lines (news articles only)
- ☐ Search captions only

Publication Date
Return only items published between dates (yyyy-mm-dd)

1949-09-03 -
From pub date

Places and Titles
To search all newspapers, do not make a selection

Only show titles in the list below

- ☐ National - 3 title(s) [SHOW]
- ☐ ACT - 8 title(s) [SHOW]
- ☐ New South Wales - 47 title(s) [SHOW]
- ☐ Northern Territory - 8 title(s) [SHOW]

5) Article Category: click 'article'



Article Category
Return only items in these categories

- ☒ Article
- ☐ Advertising
- ☐ Detailed Lists, Results, Guides
- ☐ Family Notices
- ☐ Literature
- ☐ Humour
- ☐ Obituaries

6) Enter -

Search

7) In the Sort by box: select 'Date (earliest first)'.
Now click 'Sort'.



This is a basic search that should retrieve over 200 results and may include some results unrelated to the investigation. Scan through all the results and you will see reports of the migrant infant deaths at Bonegilla but there will also be reports of deaths from other migrant centres in newspapers from many places all over Australia.



Question

03

There was a general public interest and unease about the infant deaths. Why do you think the public was so concerned?



Archive 2 – Trove at the National Library of Australia “The Age”

<http://trove.nla.gov.au/>

Finding out what happened

8) Under “Refine your results” go to “Title” and select “The Age”



ACT (6)
National (1)

▼ Title

- The Daily Telegraph (S... (10)
- The Sun (Sydney, NSW :... (10)
- The Sydney Morning Her... (9)
- Daily Advertiser (Wagg... (8)
- Examiner (Launceston, ... (8)
- News (Adelaide, SA : 1... (8)
- The Age (Melbourne, Vi... (8)**
- The Herald (Melbourne... (8)
- Newcastle Morning Hera... (7)

Intensive Probe Into Deaths Of 7 Migrants
Mirror (Perth, WA : 1921 - 1956) Saturday 3
... Intensive Probe Into **Deaths** Of 7 Migrants Car disclosures that **deaths** have been directly attrib

MIGRANT CHILDREN DIE IN HOSPITAL; M
Barrier Miner (Broken Hill, NSW : 1888 - 1954
... Bonegilla migrant reception camp, nor-thern V more **deaths**. "Some of the poor little things have

INFANT MIGRANTS' DEATHS. FROM MALN
Cairns Post (Qld. : 1909 - 1954) Saturday 3
... -night"? The series of **deaths** occurred: after 1

9) In the Sort by box: select ‘Date (earliest first)’.

Now click ‘Sort’.



Digitised newspapers and more

Showing: 1 - 20 of at least 311 [Refine search](#)

Sort by: **Date (earliest first)** [Sort](#)

Says Bonegilla Deaths Avoidable Albury Report Attacks Conditions on Ships
Daily Advertiser (Wagga Wagga, NSW : 1911 - 1954) Tuesday 6 September 1949 p 1 Article
... Says Bonegilla | **Deaths** Avoidable | **Albury** Report Attacks | Conditions on Ships **ALBURY**, Monday: The ... medical officers of the **Albury** District Hospital. It does not cover the first three **deaths** in the hospital ... 699 words



Search limited to: [clear all](#)

Category: [Articles](#)

Title: [The Age \(Melbourne, Vi...](#)

Dates: [1949 09 03 to 1949 09 24](#)

Refine your results:

- Place: [Victoria \(9\)](#)
- Title: [The Age \(Melbourne, Vi...](#) (8) [Go](#)
- Category: [Article \(9\)](#)
- Restricted: [No](#)

Digitised newspapers and more

Showing: 1 - 8 of 8 Refine search [Sort by: Date \(earl](#)

MIGRANTS DIE AT ALBURY Inquiry Into Mortuorisation
The Age (Melbourne, Vic : 1954 - 1954) Saturday 3 September 1949 p 1 Article
... children, age between one and two years, have died from malnutrition in **Albury** District Hospital ... The last **death** ... occurred s ... century Commonwealth health official said tonight a special ... 810 words

Infant Suffers Bonegilla Camp Ward Scene
The Age (Melbourne, Vic : 1954 - 1954) Monday 5 September 1949 p 3 Article
... Infant Suffers Bonegilla Camp Ward Scene **ALBURY**, Sunday ... Journalists who visited Bonegilla ... "The medical superinten ... 150 words



Question

04

What were some of the reasons given for the deaths of the babies by the Age newspaper?

10) Open the following news articles in your Trove search for the news that prompted media attention. Read the article “Migrants Die at Albury”

MIGRANTS DIE AT ALBURY Inquiry Into Malnutrition

CANBERRA, Friday. — Seven European migrant children, aged between one and two years, have died from malnutrition in Albury District Hospital in the past few weeks.

*MIGRANTS DIE AT ALBURY Inquiry Into Malnutrition
The Age (Melbourne, Vic. : 1854 - 1954) Saturday 3
September 1949*

11) Return to results page by clicking back top left.

12) Open *Malnutrition in Ship Blamed* article for an analysis of the causes of the deaths.

REPORT ON CHILD DEATHS

Malnutrition in Ships Blamed

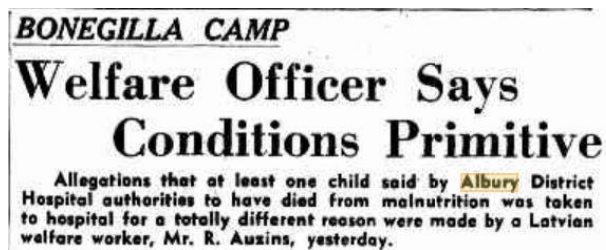
ALBURY, Tuesday. — Proper provisions in migrant ships from Europe for feeding the healthy, and adequate provisions for the sick, would have prevented the deaths of most migrant children from Bonegilla.

*REPORT ON CHILD DEATHS Malnutrition in
Ships Blamed.*

*The Age (Melbourne, Vic. : 1854 - 1954)
Wednesday 7 September 1949*

13) Return to results page by clicking back top left.

14) Open *Welfare Officer* article for criticism of camp conditions and a response to the criticism from the International Refugee Organisation (IRO).



BONEGILLA CAMP Welfare Officer Says Conditions Primitive. The Age (Melbourne, Vic. : 1854 - 1954) Wednesday 7 September 1949

15) Open *Blame for Deaths* for a report by the Minister, Arthur Calwell. Read his public comments about the deaths.



MINISTER'S REPORT Blame for Deaths of Migrant Babies Denied The Age (Melbourne, Vic. : 1854 - 1954) Thursday 8 September 1949

Albury Base Hospital denied responsibility and suggested conditions at Bonegilla may have been to blame. The Minister, Arthur Calwell, denied that the hospital at Bonegilla was inadequate. He suggested the children were not properly cared for on the ships bringing them to Australia. The International Refugee Organisation, which organised transport to Australia, promised an investigation. It was eventually to blame the conditions in European refugee camps. Other reports suggested that the parents were at least partly to blame. They were described as 'ignorant', 'confused', 'frenzied' or 'hysterical'. It was claimed they gave their infants the wrong foods to eat.

? Questions

05

Thinking about all the reasons that were given for the deaths of these babies, who, or what, do you conclude was most to blame and why?



Archive 3 – Trove at the National Library of Australia “Canberra Times and Sunday Herald”

<http://trove.nla.gov.au/>

Two other newspaper reports on the infant deaths

- 1) As previously - Go to Advanced Search
- 2) Enter at ‘all of these words’: “Albury” AND “deaths”
- 3) Select “Publication Date “ from 1949-09-07 to 1949-09-07
- 4) Go to “Places and Titles”
- 5) Find ACT and then click on [\[SHOW TITLES\]](#)

Publication Date
Return only items published between dates (yyyy-mm-dd)

From pub date to pub date

Places and Titles
To search all newspapers, do not make a selection

Only show titles in the list below that

<input type="checkbox"/>	National - 3 title(s) [SHOW TITLES]	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	ACT - 8 title(s) [SHOW TITLES]	8 selected
<input type="checkbox"/>	New South Wales - 472 title(s) [SHOW TITLES]	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Northern Territory - 8 title(s) [SHOW TITLES]	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Queensland - 99 title(s) [SHOW TITLES]	

6) Select The Canberra Times.

Publication Date
Return only items published between dates (yyyy-mm-dd)

From pub date to pub date

Places and Titles
To search all newspapers, do not make a selection

Only show titles in the list below that... [\[SHOW FILTERS\]](#)

<input type="checkbox"/>	National - 3 title(s) [SHOW TITLES]	
<input type="checkbox"/>	ACT - 8 title(s) [HIDE TITLES]	1 selected
<input type="checkbox"/>	Canberra Community News (ACT : 1925 - 1927)	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Canberra Illustrated: A Quarterly Magazine (ACT : 1925)	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Canberra Times (ACT : 1926 - 1995)	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Federal Capital Pioneer (Canberra : ACT : 1924 - 1926)	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Federal Capital Pioneer Magazine (Canberra, ACT : 1926 - 1927)	

7) Then select **Search** and open the following article.



*I.R.O. Official Calls For Investigation Of Infant Migrant Deaths LONDON, Tuesday.
The Canberra Times (ACT : 1926 - 1995)
Wednesday 7 September 1949.*

? Questions

- 06 What does the report in the article says was wrong with the Bathurst Reception Centre, and why do you think the immigration authorities disliked this report?
- 07 Why do you think the medical officer at Bathurst Reception Centre was critical of camp conditions, but the medical officer at Bonegilla was not?

8) As previously - Go to Advanced Search -> Enter at 'All of the words': "Albury AND "deaths".

9) Select "Publication Date " from 1949-09-11 to 1949-09-11

10) Go to "Places and Titles"

11) Find NSW and then click on [\[SHOW TITLES\]](#)

12) Select The Sunday Herald

Publication Date
Return only items published between dates (yyyy-mm-dd)

1949-09-11 From pub date 1949-09-11 to pub date

Places and Titles
To search all newspapers, do not make a selection

Only show titles in the list below that... [SHOW FILTERS]

- ☐ National - 3 title(s) [SHOW TITLES]
- ☐ ACT - 8 title(s) [SHOW TITLES]
- ☐ New South Wales - 472 title(s) [HIDE TITLES] 1 selected
 - ☐ Sun - Sunday Edition (Sydney, NSW : 1910)
 - ☐ Sun and New South Wales Independent Press (Sydney, NSW : 1843)
 - ☐ Sun-Herald (Sydney, NSW : 1953 - 1954)
 - ☒ Sunday Herald (Sydney, NSW : 1949 - 1953)
 - ☐ Sunday News (Sydney, NSW : 1919)
 - ☐ Sunday Sun (Sydney, NSW : 1903 - 1910)

13) Then select **Search** and open the following article.



No. 1 TRAGEDY Mother- Love Killed Some D.P. Babies HOSPITAL CARE WRECKED BY MISTRUST

The Sunday Herald (Sydney, NSW : 1949 - 1953) Sunday 11 September 1949.

? Questions

- 08 How does this Sunday Herald article differ in tone and content from those in the Age and the Canberra Times?
- 09 Why did various groups try to shift responsibility for the deaths?
- 10 Where do you think the Australian public might have placed the blame for so many infant deaths?



Inquiry 2 – Managing the News

How did the Department of Immigration try to defend the reputation of the Bonegilla Reception Centre and its other migrant accommodation centres?

On 17 September, a fortnight after the news of the deaths first appeared, the Australian Women's Weekly published a report of a visit it was invited to make to Bonegilla Hospital. The reporter, Mary Coles, had prepared a favourable article on the Beautiful Balts first arriving at Bonegilla under the title "Romance in the air at Bonegilla migrants", Australian Women's Weekly, 3 January 1948.

Australian Women's Weekly



Archive 4 – Open the link below to go to Trove at the National Library of Australia
<http://trove.nla.gov.au/>

- 1) Find and open the link: "Digitised Newspapers and More"
- 2) Search 'Tense drama for fight for migrant babies lives'

Trove Digitised newspapers Q Adv

Home Newspapers: / Browse

Digitised newspapers and more

Search articles for

Tense drama for fight for migrant babies lives

Q Search Adv

OR

Browse articles by

Titles	Place	Date
Categories	Topic	

3) Open article Australian Women's Weekly 17 September 1949. Read the pictures and captions



? Questions

- 11 Why might the Australian Women's Weekly have been given special access to show how 'devoted doctors and nurses' looked after sick infants?
- 12 How did the reporter and the photographer try to reassure the Australian public that all was well at Bonegilla?
- 13 How successful might such an article have been?

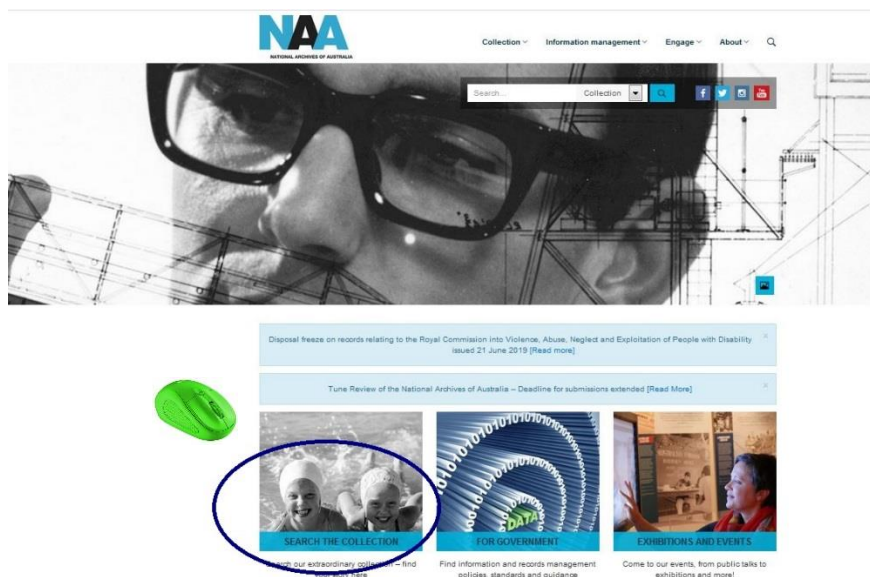
National Archives of Australia



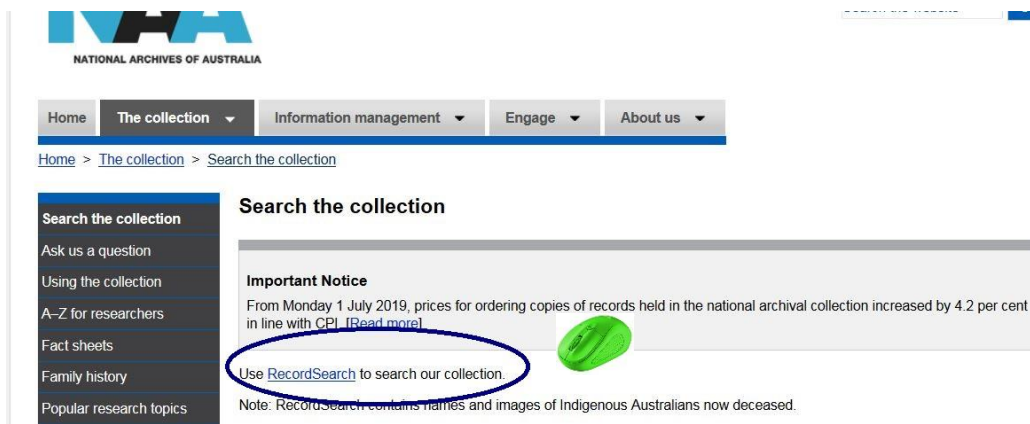
Archive 5 – Open the link below to go to the National Archives of Australia

<http://www.naa.gov.au/>

1) Scroll down the page to: ‘Search the collection’



2) Find and click on ‘RecordSearch’



3) Select 'Advanced Search' and go to 'Items' at the bottom of the page to bring up the required search window.

Australian Government | NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF AUSTRALIA | RecordSearch | Login

Basic search | **Advanced search** | Name Search | Photo Search | Passenger arrivals | Help

Advanced search | Welcome guest

Newly scanned records | RecordSearch Forum | View previous searches

Commonwealth Record Series (CRS) System

Agencies are government departments, statutory authorities etc. The Archives registers agencies with a CA (Commonwealth Agency) number.

Examples:
CA 7, Department of External Affairs [], Melbourne, 1901-1916
CA 241, Australian High Commission, United Kingdom [London], 1910-ongoing
CA 1673, Antarctic Division, 1949-ongoing
CA 264, Rationing Commission, 1942-1950

All levels
Organisations
are made up of
Agencies
Series
Items

Functions are performed by

Commonwealth Persons

Hover over the buttons for more information about each level. Click to search at that level.

4) Enter the following number in into the "Item Barcode" panel:
8118398

Basic search | **Advanced search** | Name Search | Photo Search

Advanced search - Items

Search for information about record items.

Keywords in title | Keywords in title | using | all words |

Exclude | Exclude keywords in title | using | all words |

☐ also search notes

Series number (eg A1838) | Series number |

Exclude | Exclude series number |

Control symbol | Control symbol |

Exclude | Exclude control symbol |

Item barcode | 8118398 |

Date (eg 1921 or 1939 to 1945) | From date | To date |

Physical format | Any |

Exclude | None |

Then you need to select to 'View digital copy'

 Australian Government  NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF AUSTRALIA
Your story, our history

View multiple pages



7) These pages are an important part of a long report by the O S Bethwick, the health inspector, on conditions at Bonegilla in September 1949. Continue reading to the end of the report to find out about conditions at the centre.

The inspector reports that the food was ample and in general of good quality. The meat and vegetables were fresh. Overall, however, cleanliness was not satisfactory.



Questions

- 14 What were the inspector's main criticisms of the kitchens, the accommodation huts, the ablutions blocks and the latrines?
- 15 Who was expected to read and act on this report?

8) Next 'jump to page' 205 for the October report.



Questions

- 16 What had been done to improve the place?

9) Finally 'jump to page' 198 and read through to page 201 for the December report.



Questions

17

What was the cause of the gastric problems in the inspector's opinion?

18

Speculation: Why might the physical conditions of the place have been so bad in 1949?



Key Inquiry Question

Now return to the Key Inquiry Question on page 6 and record your responses to this historical inquiry question.



Troubled Times

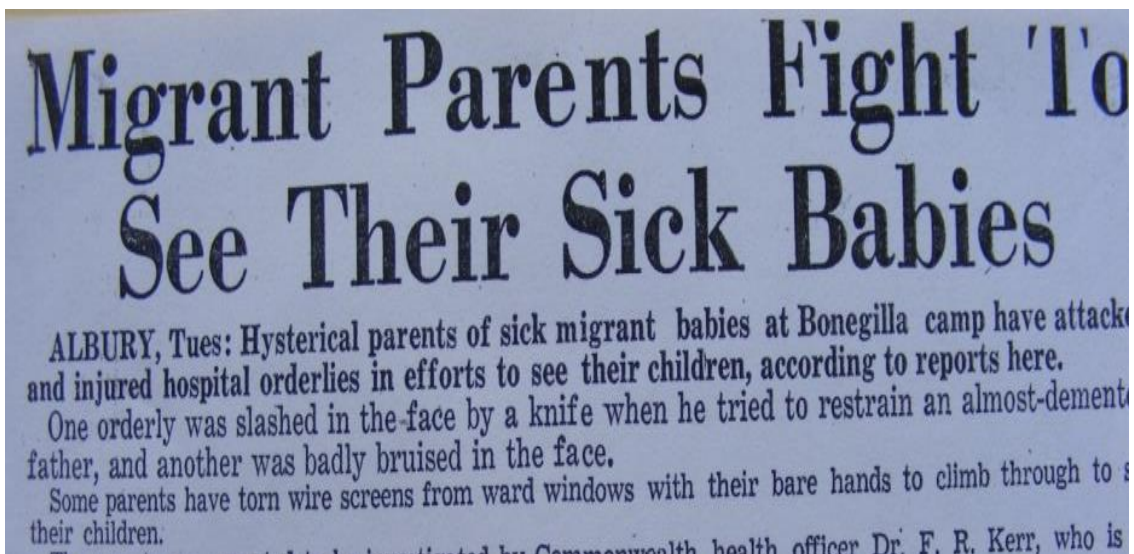
Investigation 2 (Extension)

Exploring other issues

- Blame the parents?
- A migrant mother's viewpoint.
- How were the children treated?
- Teenagers at Bonegilla

Issue 1 – Were parents to blame?

An Albury Base Hospital spokesman observed that, 'The mothers could not speak English and it was difficult to advise them what to feed the children'. He ventured the opinion that 'some had not had good food since they were born'. Melbourne's Herald thought 'some parents were ignorant of child welfare and have been providing improper food'. As you have seen, Sydney's Sunday Herald ran a story on how 'MOTHER-LOVE KILLED SOME D.P. [Displaced Person] CHILDREN'.



Question

19

Why might the newspapers have published such stories?

Issue 2 - A migrant mother's point of view



Inga Krain, the parent of a sick child, kept unhappy memories of the hospital visiting arrangements for parents:

"We arrived into Melbourne on 29 September 1950 and travelled by train to Bonegilla. It was getting dark and a bus took us to Bonegilla from Albury train station. We had to go through more checks and the matron at the hospital took Harriet out of my arms. 'That girl's got whooping cough', she said.

Harriet became very ill initially from whooping cough and then we discovered she had tuberculosis. Harriet was in Bonegilla Hospital for many months. I was only allowed to visit her once a week on Sunday for 30 minutes. I used to crawl on my tummy through the grass to catch sight of Harriet; she was out on the veranda, you see. It was just inhuman to do that to a mother and there were quite a few of us."
(Belongings, NSW Heritage Centre)

? Questions

- 20 Why do you think there were serious misunderstandings between parents and medical staff?
- 21 Why would migrant parents have found it difficult to support their sick children?

Issue 3 -What care was taken in receiving child migrants other than the very young?



The ablution block washrooms with their T-bar taps and wash troughs were basic. They fitted the war-time needs of fit young service men and women living in near-field conditions. No change was made to the facilities as it moved from being an army camp into a migrant reception centre accommodating families as well as the fit and young.

The facilities were deemed sufficient for the displaced persons from Europe, who, almost all, were drawn from European refugee camps with similar conditions. After all, the migrants were expected to be at Bonegilla for only three or four weeks. Neither the facilities nor the furnishings were child-size.



There was no school for displaced children, 1947-1952, who, like their parents, were expected to be only at Bonegilla for a short time. When Australia started to take in Assisted Migrants in 1952, a state school was opened to cater for the children of staff, who were working at the camp on two year contracts.

Transient children had no schooling but they might attend their own separate class to learn English with the language instruction unit. Assisted migrants from the Netherlands were the first to baulk at the lack of schooling by organising their own classes for children.

? Question

- 22 Why do you think the education of displaced children was not considered as important as that of assisted migrants?

Issue 4 -Was any particular care taken to meet the needs of teenagers at the reception centre?



It was only in the 1960s that much attention was given to secondary school aged children. Buses were arranged to take students to secondary schools in Wodonga. At a new Creative Arts Centre school-aged children were involved in expressive dancing,

gymnastics, painting, puppet making and acting. They went camping, where they learnt basic bushcraft. They put on concerts featuring their versions of Elvis Presley and the Beatles.



There were no special classes or tuition offered for secondary school students. Like these students depicted in Pix at Bathurst High School, near the Bathurst Reception Centre, they were expected to pick up English 'by sitting next to Nelly'.

? Questions

- 23 Was the playground the best place to learn English and Australian ways?
- 24 What kind of facilities and entertainment might have best met the needs of teenagers at a reception centre?



At Bonegilla childhood ended abruptly at 16 when the young were expected to take up jobs and to pay a higher tariff. They might apply for permission to continue their education, if their parents showed they could and would support them.

In this photograph Jules Schreiber hovers anxiously over his twin daughters, Ava and Ingrid, as they are interviewed and assessed for jobs shortly after they turned 16. Employment officers complained of their on-going difficulty in placing young immigrant workers, especially if they were to avoid unskilled positions with few prospects of learning or advancement.

Migrant men were expected to become labourers, women were to be domestics.

? Questions

- 25 Why were two officers involved in the interview?
- 26 What gives the impression that the employment office was a busy place?
- 27 What do you think might have been the kinds of jobs that awaited 16 year olds?



Thinking about troubled times

- *Why investigate the health scandal of 1949?*
- *Why did contemporaries think the health scandal newsworthy?*
- *Why might this health scandal still be considered important to people wanting to find out about:*
 - *the challenges faced by displaced persons;*
 - *the character of the Bonegilla Reception Centre;*
 - *the ways the Australian Government managed the post-war immigration program;*
 - *the ways the Australian community responded to the sudden influx of large numbers of people from overseas?*
- *Why did the media pay particular attention to the way migrant children were received?*