

# Katitiya palya nyinangu yirrirti: Their teeth were good then



*Above: Willy Nakumpala identified himself as the tallest child, standing at rear. This is consistent with his age, around 11 or 12, at the time. British Dental Journal. 1948*



*Left: John Heath on right. Willy Nakumpala identified the man on the left as Tjaliwara Tjakamarra. British Dental Journal, 1948*



*Willy Nakumpala Tjungarayi, whose impression was taken by Heath in 1946 at Haasts Bluff and again in 1947, shown here at Papunya in May 2009*



*Mavis and Herman Malbunka at Ioplera, 2009. Herman's impression was taken in 1946 by Heath. It is uncertain whether Herman was also examined by Heath in 1947*

The National Museum has a repatriation program to help Aboriginal communities to bring back their ancestral remains from overseas. In 2003, the Museum received a collection of dental casts from the Royal College of Surgeons in London. These casts were made by a dentist called John Heath during visits to the Central Australian communities of Haasts Bluff and Hermannsburg in 1947.

Casts are produced from a mould or impression taken directly from a living human body. A substance such as plaster is then poured into the mould to make a model identical to the original. Casts fall into a grey area in terms of repatriation. Although not actual human remains, they are intimately connected to the person from whom they were taken. For this reason, the National Museum treated the dental casts from Central Australia in the same way as other human remains and contacted the relevant communities to seek advice.

This situation was somewhat unique in that some of the people who had their casts taken in 1947, as children, were still alive and were able to be contacted and consulted in relation to their own casts. In May 2009, the National Museum visited these people and their communities. Images of the casts and photographs taken by Heath's photographer were shown to people from Ipolera (an outstation of Hermannsburg), Haasts Bluff, Papunya and Kintore. These included Herman Malbunka and Willy Nakumpala, who were named by Heath, as well as people who were likely to have been resident in Hermannsburg and Haasts Bluff as identified from the 1955 census and their descendants. The consultations with people from Haasts Bluff and their descendants were carried out in Pintupi/Luritja.

The collection of dental casts from Central Australia consists of 164 casts taken mostly from children of school age. John Heath led two expeditions to Central Australia. On his first trip in 1946 Heath obtained casts at Hermannsburg and Haasts Bluff as well as from children from the Jay Creek settlement (who were in Alice Springs Hospital at the time). Heath's 1946 trip was shortened when two assistants contracted dysentery. Heath then returned in 1947 to Haasts Bluff and Hermannsburg to complete the research. The 1947 expedition involved a party of eight, including three dentists, a radiographer and a chef. Two government-supplied trucks were used to carry four tons of equipment to the two remote communities. The dental casts were later sent by Heath to Sir Frank Colyer at the Royal College of Surgeons in London, where they remained until their return to Australia in 2003.

In 2009, reaction among Aboriginal communities in Central Australia to the news that the casts were back in Australia was positive. It was felt that the collection would be useful to teach others about the early history of the two communities. Haasts Bluff was a ration depot, where limited rations were used to supplement a predominantly traditional diet. People who lived there could recall how they lined up for the dentist in much the same way as they did to receive rations. The examination of their teeth using various scientific instruments would have been strange and frightening to children at the time. Medical intervention in Aboriginal communities was not unique to Heath's visit. It was consistent with attitudes and policies of the missions and government at the time, as it is today.

In reflecting on that period today, Aboriginal communities remain optimistic about the potential of the dental cast collection. Rather than restricting display of the casts, the people consulted were happy for the collection to be seen and the story to be told. It is the communities' wish for other Australians to learn about the history of dental health in remote communities where there is a strong desire for a high standard of dental care and the provision of good dental health services. It was felt that the collection would show how healthy their teeth used to be. In the words of Willy Nakumpala, 'katitiya palya nyinangu yirrirti' (their teeth were strong back then), and of Mavis Malbunka, 'At school they never used toothbrush and toothpaste — good food they gave to eat'. She said the casts would be good to display, 'that way you can see their teeth are healthy'.

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