

## Aboriginal people on the Holt Sutherland estate, c.1880



From back row left: Jim Brown, Joe Brown, Joey, Biddy Giles and Jimmy Lowndes.

Biddy Giles is one of the few Aboriginal women from the 19<sup>th</sup> century whose name we know. She was born Bi-yar-rung around 1820 into the Gweagal clan of the Dharawal speaking peoples and lived her whole life on Dharawal land.

A well respected, formidable woman, Biddy moved effortlessly between European and Indigenous societies. She died in Sylvania in the 1890s.

(Sutherland Shire Libraries)

## **Biddy Giles, a remarkable indigenous woman**

The names of few Aboriginal people from the 19<sup>th</sup> century stand out. They were generally marginalised and deprived of their ancestral lands, living in camps on the edges of white settlement. Biddy Giles, a member of the Dharawal speaking peoples, stands proud as an Aboriginal person whose life spanned both the Indigenous and European worlds, moving between and interacting with both societies.

Biddy was born Bi-yar-rung around 1820 into the Gweagal group of the Dharawal people, and she managed to live her whole life on her people's country. Married to an older Gweagal man, Cooman or 'King Kooma', Biddy left him to marry Paddy Burragalang (also known as Paddy Davis) and moved from Kamay Botany Bay to his country of Five Islands (Wollongong) further south in Dharawal country. Here she had two daughters, Rosie and Ellen and lived for about 20 years.

Her husband Paddy died around 1860 and Biddy moved to the Georges River with a new partner, an Englishman called Billy Giles. They lived on the western bank of Mill Creek (Gurugurang) in a farmhouse they acquired after the murder of its absentee owner, Dr Alexander Cuthill in 1854. An extended family lived with them including two Aboriginal children. They had quince trees, goats, wild honey, oysters, wallabies and local fish from the river.

During the 1860s shooting and fishing parties came from Sydney to the Little Forest/Mill Creek area and Biddy and Billy acted as guides. They shared their knowledge of the river and its wildlife, telling stories and sharing bush tucker meals such as goanna or black bream prepared by Biddy. This can be seen as an early version of eco-tourism, long before it became fashionable. Accounts of some of these trips with Biddy survive, visitors marvelling at her unfailing ability to find fish, her control of her hunting dogs and the skill with which she could rustle up a delicious meal from local produce.

Biddy died at Sylvania in the 1890s. Her daughter Ellen, with her husband Hugh Anderson, later lived at Salt Pan Creek, not far from her mother's house at Mill Creek. It is believed that archaeological remains of a house, recently located on Dr Cuthill's original land grant on Mill Creek, are the probable remnants of one of the homes Biddy occupied. Only an archaeological excavation can possibly determine if it is indeed the remains of Biddy Giles' home.

### **References:**

- Goodall H, Cadzow A, Giles, Biddy, Dictionary of Sydney, 2014, [http://dictionaryofsydney.org/entry/giles\\_biddy](http://dictionaryofsydney.org/entry/giles_biddy)
- From the collections of the State Library of NSW 42[a730005 / PXA 773 / Box 6, 42] from Collection 01: Australian Indigenous Ministries papers and pictorial material, 1903-1998, Mitchell Library.

Note: Mill Creek is a tributary of the Georges River rising behind the Lucas Heights Recycling Centre (tip) and flowing into the Georges River west of Alfords Point.