

# Women of pearl industry have many

AMY WILLIAMS

UNVEILING of a statue for the women in pearling two weeks ago was a tangible indication there are stories buried deep in the heart of Broome's history.

Stories of blackbirded female divers in the early days of pearling, and of the women who made up the families of divers from the early days through to today, are begging to be told.

The image of a pregnant woman thrusting a pearl shell up in her hands as she swims furiously to the surface of the water has been immortalised by the statue.

It stands on a significant area of Roebuck Bay's foreshore, across the road from the old Conti hotel, now the Mercure.

It is hoped the newly-lawned spot will become a gathering spot for locals and tourists alike.

At the opening, one of the organisers of the statue, Anthea Demin, read a memorial piece.

"The location of this memorial is chosen because it is here that the wives,

children, families and friends of lugger crew anxiously watched for the return of the luggers on spring tide or watched as they sailed out to sea on the neap tide," she said.

"Here the luggers would be laid up on the foreshore, where the Asian indentured workers camps were set up and families and friends visited. This was a favourite spot for children to play and fish all day long."

Anthea's mother, Sally bin Demin, whose grandfather was the first in three generations of pearl divers in her family, said it was very important the stories of women in pearling were now told.

"Back when I was young, no-one talked about it, it was all hush-hush, just whispered about," she said. "But in my time I've seen a lot of deaths and pains in families."

One of the many families connected with Broome's strong pearling history are the Poelina family.

Simon Poelina first came to Broome in 1936 from Kupang, Indonesia, for a two-year contract as a diver.

But he stayed and, after some time,

met Nyikina/Yawuru woman Dorothy Hunter.

One of her sons joined Simon as a diver. The couple had six children, including local man Neville Poelina, who was a diver in the 1980s and 90s.

He and sisters Anne, Sue and Vennesa still live in and around Broome.

Neville's ex-wife, Jenny Poelina, said the women in pearling stories were an integral part of Broome's history, not just because of the blackbirding that happened early on, but because of the sisterhood among the mothers, wives, sisters and daughters of men involved in modern pearling.

"It's representing these women who had to say goodbye to their loved ones when they went to sea, not knowing if they would come back," Jenny said.

"For me it was not a stressful time, but there was always a bit of anxiousness."

Jenny said she was a Nyikina woman, not from Broome, but with strong connections to local indigenous and non-indigenous women, all the "grass widows" left behind.

"I imagine it would have been similar back in the early days – and those men were away for up to three months at a time," she said.

Simon and Dorothy's grandchildren and great grandchildren are now learning their family's history and appreciating, along with the older members of the family, how important it is the role of women is recognised.



Anthea bin Demin.



Jo Cowdrey, Jenny Poelina, Buna Tuaty Poelina with Cleo Dowell, Rahaney Poelina with Taio Dowell and Zaripha Poelina with Halimah Barnes.