



MY SURVIVAL AS AN ABORIGINAL

STUDY GUIDE

Curriculum Links: This film will have interest and relevance for teachers and students at Secondary and Tertiary levels. Curriculum links include: Indigenous studies; Australian History; SOSE; Legal studies; Media Studies and English.

FURTHER TEACHERS NOTES CAN BE FOUND ONLINE AT
<http://australianscreen.com.au/titles/my-survival-aboriginal/>

For Further information and sales: www.balladfilms.com.au

My Survival as an Aboriginal • Synopsis

1978 • Australia • Director: Essie Coffey

My Survival as an Aboriginal delves beneath surface appearances to reveal a strong resistance to assimilation and loss of identity, as the late Essie Coffey, a Muruwarri woman, takes us into the Aboriginal struggle for survival.

Coffey, also affectionately known as the Bush Queen, was a singer and activist from the far northwest of New South Wales. "My Survival as an Aboriginal" rocked Australia and the world with its presentation of hardships and the atrocities committed against Aboriginal people.

One of the first films to be made under the direction of an Aboriginal person, *My Survival as an Aboriginal* tackles difficult issues head on and from an Aboriginal perspective.

Coffey starts with the issue of land rights as she contrasts the poverty, dislocation and depression of being confined to the tiny local reserve, "Dodge City", with the beauty of the surrounding bush where – as she shows us – there is food and medicine in abundance. The contrasts of white history and black history - white education and black education – are vividly brought to life.

The conflicts of living as an Aboriginal under white domination are highlighted through Coffey's work with the Aboriginal Legal Service. And the complex causes of alcohol abuse in the Aboriginal community are powerfully expressed through word, image and song.

Yet, in an astonishing dream sequence which she dubbed "the white nightmare", Coffey dismisses the choice of living in the white society. Instead, she opts for quietly sitting by the campfire with her husband and family around her, eating Johnny cakes and fish from the river. Indeed, the importance of family in Aboriginal life is a precious thread which runs strongly throughout the film.

Songs performed in the film include Dougie Young's "I Don't Care Who Knows" and Essie Coffey's signature song, "Bush Queen".

For further information and teachers' notes: visit the *My Survival as an Aboriginal* website: <http://australianscreen.com.au/titles/my-survival-aboriginal/>

This celebrated film won numerous Australian and International film awards, including:
Winner, Documentary Section, Greater Union Awards, Sydney Film Festival; Rouben Mamoulian Prize, Best Short film, Sydney Film Festival; Red Ribbon, American Film Festival; Certificate of Merit, Chicago Film Festival; First Prize (ex aequo), Cinema Du Reel; Finalist, Documentary Section, Australian Film Awards.

ESSIE COFFEY • BIOGRAPHY

Essie Coffey, affectionately known as Bush Queen, was born Essieina Shillingsworth near Goodooga, N.S.W., the youngest of eight. Her mother was Ruby Bailey and her father, Donald Shillingsworth, known as Goodgabah, was a tribal elder of the Muruwarri people. Essie was brought up in the bush and as a teenager worked with her family on stations throughout Northwest New South Wales. Upon her marriage to Albert Coffey, she settled on the banks of the Barwon River at Brewarrina and began her family. In 1969, the Coffeys moved to the Reserve at West Brewarrina, known as Dodge City. There Essie raised eight children and ten step-children.

In the 1960s, Essie, along with Steve Gordon and Tom Winters, founded the Aboriginal Movement in Brewarrina, establishing the Western Aboriginal Legal Service in the 1970's. Essie was also on the N.S.W. Lands Trust and the N.S.W. Advisory Council. She was well-known throughout the state as a Country & Western singer and song-writer.

In 1985, Essie was awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia for her services to her people.

In the 1990s, Essie was a Supervisor of the Community Development Employment Program in Brewarrina, a member of the Wakamurra ASTIC Regional Council for Northwest N.S.W., Co-founder of the Aboriginal Heritage & Culture Museum of Brewarrina, on the Board of Ngemba Housing Cooperative, an inaugural member of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation and Co-founder of Magunya Aboriginal Women's Issue organisation. She had a particular interest in women's affairs and helped to create the first women's knock-out football team in the Northwest region.

Essie Coffey's passion for her culture and her entertaining and outspoken defense of her people are tangible in her films. As a charismatic, dedicated woman, she invites the audience into her community. She never flinches from showing the devastating impact of colonisation, yet her films propose solutions and bubble over with good-humoured cultural pride.

In later years, Essie developed renal failure and became the subject of the film *Big Girls Don't Cry*, by Aboriginal filmmaker Darren Ballangarri. (<http://australianscreen.com.au/titles/big-girls-dont-cry/>) She passed away on January 3rd, 1998.

FILMOGRAPHY

1978: Director/Co-Producer: *My Survival as an Aboriginal*

Co-Producer: Robin Campbell, *Old Feller Now* (Dir. Alec Morgan)

1993: Director/Co-Producer (with Martha Ansara & Kit Guyatt) *My Life as I Live It*

As an actor:

1976: *Backroads* (Directed by Phil Noyce)

1980: *Women of the Sun, 2nd part*

FILM TECHNIQUES

- *My Survival as an Aboriginal* differs from many television documentaries which rely on experts and outsiders to explain what we are seeing about other people and places. In this film Essie tells her own story. She is the only person who addresses us, the viewers. It is her voice which is used over footage to present her point of view. As the director, Essie controls what we see and what we know about her own life and her own community and this control is revealed within the film itself. Does such an obviously subjective approach make the film more or less believable for you? What is the difference from a film which stands back and delivers an opinion from the outside? What is the value of personal testimony? What is the value of the appearance of objectivity?

- This documentary was shot in 1978, before video was available, on 16mm colour film. In those days, film was much more expensive to shoot than video is now and had to be used sparingly. Furthermore, the cinematographer could only shoot ten minutes of film at a time before having to stop and reload the camera. This meant that every picture had to count and these limitations had an effect on the way the story was told. Can you see sequences which have been influenced by the need to communicate information without shooting too much film?

- Documentaries like this one often consist of material which is gathered on the spot, as things happen, and later, in the editing process, it is necessary to give the film a narrative and ensure that it communicates clearly. In this film, there are different types of sequences used to tell the story. What devices are used to structure the narrative of this film and to ensure that viewers understand what is happening? .

- Filmmaking relies on different shot sizes to tell the viewers where we are and what is happening. When is the camera closer to people and when is it further away? What shots in the film make sure that we know where we are in a location or environment and what it looks like? What size shots are used to convey emotion?

- Music plays a big role in this film. Why do you think the music that was used in the film was selected?



I DON'T CARE WHO KNOWS • written by Dougie Young



*They say it's a crime, drinking beer and wine
It's gonna lead a poor man astray.
When it comes to grog, I'm a fair dinkum hog
I guess I was born that way.
I'm gonna drink it and roam til the cows
come home
If it gives my poor heart ease
I don't care who knows, I work for my
dough
I'll spend it as I please.*

*I was cutting a rug; they threw me in the
jug
And as the magistrate looked down
He said, Youngie Doug, you're a
wine-loving mug,
You're a menace to this town.
I'm gonna put you away; in the cell you
will stay
Until you learn more sense.
I broke down and cried. It was a doggone
lie
For I wasn't the same he said.*

*I spent a day in jail and they paid my bail
And as they opened up the big iron door.
I shook my head as I sadly said,
I'll never get drunk no more.
I made a vow I'll give it up for now
And let the blood roll down my vein
Until a friend of mine, he had a flagon of wine
So we turned it on again.*

*People in town they just run us down
And gave us a big bad name
Say we drink and fight, but it's quite all right
Because the other is doing same
But after a while, they're gonna hang their
heads
For we wasn't such a very bad guy
I'm feeling sad and I'm gonna be mad
If they hang around my grave and cry.*

*They say it a crime drinking beer and wine
It's gonna lead a poor man astray
When it come to grog, I'm a fair dinkum hog
I guess I was born that way.
I'm gonna drink it and roam til the cows come
home,
If it give my poor heart ease.
I don't care who knows, I work for my dough
I'll spend it how I please.*

OVERCOMING PROBLEMS

In *My Survival as an Aboriginal*, Essie does not shy away from dealing with the problems confronting her community. What makes her approach different is that she explains WHY. One problem which is less hidden in Aboriginal communities than in mainstream society is alcoholism. What reasons does Essie give for the drinking we see in the film?

Essie never claimed to be an angel. Both she and her family have had to deal with alcoholism, as do many other people in Australia today - Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal.

You can get help if you are an alcoholic or dependent on other drugs or if you are the child or close relation of a drug or alcohol-dependent person. Special support groups such as AA, Al-Anon, Alateen and others, along with individual counselling, exist to help people through this problem.

- Find out what these services are in your area.
- Invite a representative to come and talk to your class or group
- Find out how to start a self-help group of any kind.
- How can groups help us to overcome or work through our problems?
- Some people believe it is better to solve their problems individually, by themselves? Do you agree?

In trying to give up alcohol, Essie finished up in hospital in a coma for ten days and nearly died. A vision of her family pulled her back. She says she felt *"I got a second life and a second chance. So my faith in living's in my people and for my people. I overcame my problem. If I can do it so can you."* Of course, alcohol is not the only problem facing Essie and her community - in many places, Aboriginal people face discrimination, poverty, poor health, bad housing, lack of employment, loss of culture and a host of other problems. These can have a devastating personal effect, but Essie tried to inspire others around her to change themselves and change the world for the better.

ACTIVITIES

- How do you overcome problems?
- How can people like Essie Coffey inspire us to change our world and our own feelings?
- Do you have someone who is your personal inspiration?
- Who are some of the inspiring people of the past century? What are their qualities and achievements?
- Try to find such people in as many cultures and countries as you can.



A Day at a Time



Essie Coffey

Bush Queen dies

TRIBUTES were flowing in yesterday after the death of prominent Aboriginal rights activist Essie Coffey, better known as the "Bush Queen of Brewarrina".

Mrs Coffey, a film maker, OAM recipient and Aboriginal rights campaigner, died on Saturday in hospital at Brewarrina, in north-western New South Wales.

Aged 56, she had been ill for about three years.

ATSIC Commissioner Steve Gordon said he was shocked and saddened by the death of an inspiring woman who had an "insatiable drive" and "clear vision for Aboriginal communities".

Mr Gordon worked for more than 30 years with Mrs Coffey, helping her and other community members to establish the Aboriginal Movement in Brewarrina during the 1960s.

"I believed that because Essie saw our people rounded up on the back of trucks and sent to reserves, she was committed to see change during her lifetime," he said.

In 1991 Mrs Coffey was appointed to the first National Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation.

In 1985 she was recognised for her work and awarded the OAM after turning down an MBE.



Mother of 18 is a folksinger

ABORIGINAL FOLK singer, Essie Coffey, is a big woman who is not afraid of tackling big things.

As vocalist with the Aboriginal dance band, the Black Images, Essie was on stage at Sydney's Regent Theatre recently during a series of Folklife Concerts held as part of the Festival of Sydney.

Down from her home town of Brewarrina, she talked to me about her music, her 18 children and her welfare work among Aborigines.

Essie Coffey (her tribal name, Essieina Goodgabah, means "flower in a honey tree") was born 38 years ago on the banks of the Culgoa River, near Goodooga, NSW.

With her father, an Aboriginal tribal elder, her mother and her eight brothers and sisters, Essie lived a nomadic life as a child. The family wandered from one station to the next, looking for work.

"Often we'd pitch camp on the banks of a river," she recalled. (Rivers and river banks seem to run like a recurring motif through the story of Essie's life). "We used to work on the stations at whatever was offering."

Long before women started demanding the right to be trained in male occupations, young Essie was learning to work beside her father and her brothers.

Still only in her teens, she became an expert wood cutter, fencer and horse breaker.

"It was a wonderful life," she recalls. "If I could go back and live my childhood all over again, I'd do

it. I'd live every minute of it again, if I could."

Of her 18 children, she says simply that they are "no trouble."

"They're all good children and they all pitch in and help. My husband and I hardly ever have to ask them to do anything. They all do their share."

Eight of the children are their own and the other 10 are adopted.

Essie also runs the Aboriginal Legal Office in Dubbo and is a member of the NSW Aboriginal Advisory Council and the Aboriginal Lands Trust.

In her "spare time" she teaches Aboriginal culture to the school children in Brewarrina and has recently produced an hour long film, called "My Survival as an Aborigine".

PEOPLE MAGAZINE

MARCH 22nd. 1979.

Stills taken for the film



Bush Lesson • Essie Coffey with young people of Brewarrina



Essie Coffey and family • "Dodge City", West Brewarrina, NSW



Essie Coffey in the van with cinematographer/co-producer Martha Ansara shooting on the top.



CREDITS: MY SURVIVAL AS AN ABORIGINAL
By Essie Coffey

Producers: Essie Coffey, Martha Ansara, Alec Morgan • Camera: Martha Ansara

Editor: Kit Guyatt, • Sound: Annemarie Chandler

Production: Alec Morgan, • Production Assistant: Rosalie Higson

Titles: Lee Whitmore • Additional editing: Kimball Rendall

This film was made with the assistance of
the Creative Development Branch, Australian Film Commission.

I Don't Care Who Knows.

Written by Dougie Young.

Performed by Essie Coffey.

Bush Queen.

Written by Essie Coffey, Fred Edgar.

Performed by Essie Coffey, Fred Edgar and Zac Martin.

www.balladfilms.com.au