

‘Assimilation involves helping Aborigines attain acceptable living standards’. Aboriginal assimilation promoted through food related material published in Dawn magazine.

July 2026

In January 1952 the first issue of Dawn was released. It was published by the Aboriginal Welfare Board. The Board was composed of 10 men, one of which is Aboriginal.¹ Its cover masthead called it A Magazine for the Aboriginal People of N. S W. It was issued monthly between 1952 – 1969 to Aboriginal residents of stations and reserves and those living independently in country towns and cities. The magazine was a free publication. I found no information on how it was distributed but I imagine it went in bulk to stations and reserves and was individually mailed to Aborigines living in towns. It published reports from stations and reserves – which often included births, marriages and deaths - Aboriginal sports teams and identities, cultural events like dances, concerts, celebrations of the like of Christmas, Aboriginal legends and discussions about assimilation.

I could find no information on who provided content for the articles on food matters nor recipes, but none were ascribed to an Aboriginal author. They read more like they have been reproduced from other uncredited sources.

That the magazine was a vehicle for promoting assimilation there is no doubt. In an introduction to the magazine the Chief Secretary of New South Wales Clive Evatt wrote:

“DAWN” appearing for the first time in the first month of the New Year, 1952, represents a further step on your progress towards that goal which has been set – your assimilation as a race, with the general community.²

Assimilation had been the policy since 1937 pursued by the Commonwealth and State governments whereby:

all aborigines and part-aborigines are expected eventually to attain the same manner of living as other Australians and to live as members of a single Australian community enjoying the same rights and privileges, accepting the same responsibilities, observing the same customs and influenced by the same beliefs, hopes and loyalties as other Australians.³

I want to look at assimilation as promoted through three vectors in the first ten years of Dawn 1952 – 1961, vegetable gardens, recipes, and healthy foods. The vectors were published through regular articles In the Garden, Home Hints, recipes, and articles on healthy foods and other short form articles. Were these gardens, recipes and healthy food advice intended as vectors of assimilation?

Two photographs published in the magazine make this intent very clear at least in the kitchen. In 1953 Dawn published two photographs contrasting two kitchens: The old – A Humpy Kitchen

¹ The Aborigines Welfare Board, Dawn Vol 1 No.3 March 1952 pp.6-7

² Evatt, Clive, Dawn Vol.1 No.1 January 1952 p. 1

³ The Policy of Assimilation, Decisions of Commonwealth and State Ministers at the Native Welfare Conference, January 26th and 27th 1961.

showing a woman at a table in a crowded and gloomy space, the floor covered with rubbish, and The New - A Modern Kitchen showing a family group sitting at a large wooden table in a light-filled curtained room, the table being set with cups and plates, a vase of flowers and an older woman cutting an item of food.⁴ In July 1961 the intent became very clear. A photograph was published showing a non-Aboriginal woman helping an Aboriginal woman put a dish into a stove. The text reads 'Assimilation involves helping Aborigines attain acceptable living standards'.⁵

Also, gardening and recipes were regular features in Australian women's magazines of the time such as the mass circulation Australian Women's Weekly.⁶ Arguably, the Board's intention was to emulate these magazines of 'assimilative' domestic authority.

In the Garden

It is the ambition of almost every gardener to surround the house with colourful blooms and at the same time grow fresh vegetables that are so necessary and so welcome in every kitchen.⁷

I want to look at the advice given for growing vegetables.

As was customary in garden advice columns in other magazines, the Dawn listed the vegetables to be planted each month. In January lettuce, marrows, parsnips, cabbages, beans, carrots, cauliflowers, radishes, rhubarb, squash, turnips.⁸ To which were added in October artichoke, asparagus, capsicum, cucumber, egg plant, endive, leek, okra, peanut, spinach and spring onion.⁹ In June 1953 a chart for sowing was published including depth of sowing, method of sowing and days to emergence.¹⁰ There was an even more detailed chart in March 1959.¹¹

Note the out of the ordinary vegetables – artichoke, asparagus, egg plant, endive, okra, peanut - vegetables that would not commonly be found in a domestic Australian garden of the time. No recipes were published for these.

In September 1953 Dawn published an article How Much Does It Hold? giving amounts for feed-measuring for farm animals.¹²

Why Not Try Fish Pond Farming? asked an article in March 1954. 'If you can construct one close to the homestead, so much the better ... It can be used to irrigate the house garden and orchard'.¹³

In February 1955 Seedlings In The Garden was published.

⁴ The Old - A Humpy Kitchen, The New A Modern Kitchen, Dawn Vol.1 No. 2 February 1952 pp. 2-3

⁵ Dawn Vol.10 No. 7 July 1961 p.15

⁶ 'By the end of the 1950s, the Australian Women's Weekly was selling over 805,000 copies a week. More than half of all Australian women read the magazine.' How the Australian Women's Weekly spoke to '50s housewives about the Cold War, History Guild. Nov 28, 2021

⁷ In the Garden, Dawn Vol.1 No.1 January 1952 p.17 1952 Backpage

⁸ In the Garden, Dawn Vol.1 No.1 January 1952 p.17 1952 Backpage

⁹ In the Garden, Dawn Vol.2 No. 10 October 1952 Backpage

¹⁰ Useful Sowing Table, Dawn Vol.2 No 6 1953 Backpage

¹¹ Vegetable Seeding at a Glance Back, Vol 5 No. 3 March 1959 Backpage

¹² How Much Does It Hold? Dawn Vol. 2. No. September 1953 p.8

¹³ Why Not Try Fish Pond Farming?, Dawn Vol 3. No.4 March 1984 pp. 9 - 10

Home grown seedlings too, are often preferable to store-bought stuff ... Buy the best seed always, and remember that special seed, at perhaps 2s 6d a packet giving you perhaps twenty dozen plants is a lot cheaper than seedlings at 1s 6d and 2s a dozen. Most first-class shops have special seeds - look for them: and you will be more than pleased with the result.¹⁴

Dawn advised seeing the ground was well fertilised with fertiliser, lime or mulch. It published information on making compost¹⁵ and liquid manure¹⁶ and made recommendations on fertiliser¹⁷.

Occasionally it published long articles on a particular vegetable, for example turnip with information on its requirements (soil, fertiliser, water) and cultivation¹⁸.

In May 1956 it published Some Handy Hints In The Garden, a set of eight images with brief explanations of garden tools and how to make them or maintain them.¹⁹ For example, a trowel could be made by cutting a spoon and hammering it into shape. It followed this up with further Handy Hints in the following three issues.

Recipes

From its first issue the Dawn published recipes and general kitchen advice. These were often in the Home Hints pages but also as featured sets of recipes.

The Home Hints page header when publishing recipes was a cartoon of a non-Aboriginal woman holding a wooden spoon in each hand. All the illustrations accompanying articles on the home, the garden, health and handy hints for home repairs and other matters, and health matters were of non-Aboriginal individuals.²⁰

In 1953 the article Make Those Lunches Interesting said:

Lunch should make its contribution to the daily food requirement ... A lunch that is carried to school or work can be Just as nutritious as a meal at home.... At school a good lunch for children consists of:

Filled sandwich or rolls.

A piece of fruit.

A plain or flavoured drink.

¹⁴ Raise Your Own Seedlings, In the Garden Vol.4 No. 2 February 1955 Backpage

¹⁵ Compost is necessary in the garden, In Your Garden, Dawn March 1953 Backpage

¹⁶ How to Make Liquid Manure, In Your Garden, Dawn Vol.2 No.7 July 1954 Backpage

¹⁷ Manuring and Fertilizing, In Your Garden, Dawn Vol.8 No.8 May 1959 Backpage

¹⁸ Turnip, In Your Garden, Dawn Vol.9 No.4 April 1960 Backpage

¹⁹ Some Handy Hints, In Your Garden, Dawn Vol.6 No.3 May 1956

²⁰ In fact, all the illustrations throughout the entire magazines were of non-Aboriginal individuals. The header for a story of a Summer Camp shows non-Aboriginal children playing on the beach. The only exception being for the regular column Pete's Page which had a drawing of a seated Aboriginal man holding what appears to be a spear across his lap. Some articles about Aboriginal traditional life had headers of Aboriginal figures all black. The magazines masthead is an Aboriginal man's head in profile. The only appropriate depiction of non-aboriginal individuals is the header for the monthly report of the Aboriginal Board which shows a be-suited group of men sitting at a table.

Cakes, sweet biscuits, and chocolates are not recommended as a part of school lunch because so often they are eaten first and spoil the appetite for the essential foods.²¹

Also, in 1953 Dawn published recipes for Spiced Pineapple Juice, Pineapple Cup and a sweet potato Souffle.²²

Home Hints in November 1954 gave recipes for Toffee Apples, Coconut Ice and Fruit Slices.²³ Recipes in April 1954 were for Lancashire Hot Pot, Braised Rabbit, Savoury Mince and Dumplings, and Dumplings.²⁴

Some Delicious Recipes were published in 1954 – Welsh rarebit, bean savoury, bean and nut chowder, sausage casserole, cheese on toast among them.²⁵

Home Hints in March 1954 gave instructions in various cooking methods: braising, stewing, pot roasting, and pressure cooking. It also noted ‘Other Economical Meats’:

Minced meat, minced steak, sausage mince for pies, sausage rolls, rissoles.
Sausages.
Ox liver, and calf’s liver
Corned beef²⁶

The avocado pear was described in 1955. Its taste was ‘a combination of several flavours, including egg, nut, cheese lettuce, and asparagus. It can be used as a savoury in omelettes and cocktails, as a basis for a good salad, and as a sweet’.²⁷

In 1958 recipes were published for Pineapple and Veal Rice, Singapore Pudding, Colonial Squares, Apple Fluff, and Cheese Vegetable Creme.²⁸

In January 1959 it published short recipes for Teacake, Plain Scones and Sponge Sandwich.

Home Hints in 1960 gave recipes for jam making – Fresh Peach, Ripe Apricot, Passionfruit Jelly, Mandarin Marmalade, Fig Conserve.²⁹

All these recipes are the kind to be found in women’s magazines of the time.

Healthy food

In August 1952 Dawn published a one-page article Your Children’s Meals Food Is Very Important.

These are the ESSENTIAL FOODS: Milk and cheese, meats and eggs, fruits, vegetables and whole-grain cereals.³⁰

²¹ Make those Lunches Interesting, Dawn Vol. 3 No.11 November 1953 p.14

²² Some Summer Recipes, Dawn Vol. 3 No 12. December pg.8

²³ Home Hints, Dawn Vol.1 No. 11 November 1952 p.14

²⁴ Recipes, Home Hints, Dawn Vol. No.4 April 1954 p.17

²⁵ Some Delicious Recipes, Dawn Vol.3 No.6 June 1964 pp. 10 - 11

²⁶ Money-Saving Main Dishes, Home Hints, Dawn Vol.3 No.3 March 1954 p.13

²⁷ The Avocado Pear, Dawn May Vol.4 No.9 May 1953 p.6

²⁸ Home Hints, Dawn Vol.7 No.8 August 1958 p.12

²⁹ Jam Making, Home Hints, Dawn March 1960 Vol. 9 No.3 p.16

³⁰ Your Children’s Meals Food Is Very Important, Dawn Vol.1 No.8 August 1952 p.15

In 1955 Dawn published Food Around the World which carried information on The Work Food does in the Body. It also gave information about The Five Essential Food Group and gave 'patterns' of foods for breakfasts, lunch and dinner.³¹

In 1957 Dawn published Vegetables for Health an article largely on the effect of Vitamins but also discussed carbohydrates, proteins, calcium and 'other minerals, all of which are essential' and 'are mainly derived from other foods we eat and those that are absorbed by eating vegetables are actually supplementary none the less valuable'.³²

Native Foods

In May 1953 the Dawn carried an article on A Northern Health Survey Milk and Vegetable Short. The overall finding of the research was 'many diets were deficient in certain nutrients particularly calcium, Vitamin A, and Vitamin C'. The report suggested that 'These diets would be improved if the natives ate more indigenous foods such as berries, seeds, roots, wild fruits, leaves, snakes, goannas, grubs and insects'.³³

No reports of similar research in New South Wales were published in Dawn. However, it did carry three articles about native foods over the 10 years that are the focus on this article. How to Make Bread described 'Oo-cara-pa' making flour from Burrawang nuts.³⁴ The Honey Pot Ant described the insect, and hunting for it. It stopped short of saying how they were eaten.³⁵ In 1956 an article on Groote Island had a description of native foods there including the Burrawang nut, sugar bag or wild honey, swamp roots that are cooked up as a vegetable.³⁶

No recipes were given. At the same time there was no suggestion that these were 'unassimilated foods'. I don't see them as a vector in assimilation.

Evidence of 'assimilation'

Was their evidence of assimilation in the two vectors?

Vegetable gardens

In November 1953 the Board said:

On some of the Aboriginal Stations community gardens are maintained and, in these instances, the rations are supplemented by home grown vegetables. It is the Board's aim to have the community gardens established wherever practicable as well as private gardens connected with the Aborigines homes.³⁷

In April 1953 a Garden Competition was announced. Yates and Co (seed merchants) donated 100 packets of vegetable and flower seeds which would be made available to Station residents for their home gardens.³⁸ In a later page Dawn announced that readers could write in for the seed packets.

³¹ Foods Around the World, Dawn Vol.5 No.1 January 1955 pp. 4-5

³² Vegetables for Health, Dawn Vol.6 No.4 April 1957 p.5

³³ A Northern Health Survey Milk, Dawn Vol.2 No.5 May 1953 pp.22-23

³⁴ How to Make Bread, A Special Featurette by Miss Elizabeth Taylor, Dawn Vol.4 No.9 September 1955 p.7

³⁵ The Honey Pot Ant, Dawn Vol.10 No.11 November 1961 p.12. The article was a reprint from the national magazine Woman's Day.

³⁶ Groot Island. A Romantic Spot, Dawn Vol.5 No.7 July 1956 pp.8-89

³⁷ Ration Allowance, Dawn Vol. 2 No.11 November 1953 p.13

³⁸ Garden Competition Again, Dawn Vol.2 No.4 April 1953 p.3

Many station residents, particularly those in new homes, are taking an interest in their gardens and it is believed that this offer will be rushed.³⁹

In January 1954 Dawn reported:

The Boggabilla Station has recently been overrun by grasshoppers, and the residents have been disheartened to find their vegetable and flower gardens ruined. However, they have not given up hope. The gardens must continue, come what may. Unfortunately, the excessive heat has also, to a very great degree, aggravated the destruction of the vegetables.⁴⁰

In February 1954 photographs were published of the gardens Nanima School, winner of the garden competition. One showed the vegetables in the garden, - potatoes, onions, corn pumpkin, cabbage and spinach. The other showed garden beds ready for planting.⁴¹

In June 1954 there was a photograph of Joe Simpson in his vegetable garden at the Cowra single men's quarters. A large pumpkin is pictured.⁴²

Also, in March 1955 it was reported that with the Board's assistance five members of the Cabbage Tree Island Station had begun private market gardening.⁴³

In March 1956 it was reported that at Tabulam 'The majority of cottages have their own vegetable gardens. A small community garden is also conducted by the school.'⁴⁴

In 1961 there was a photograph of A Fine Station Garden. While showing an area of neat, cultivated ground it was too distant to see what vegetables were growing there other than what looks like some brassica.⁴⁵

The vegetables grown in the community and individual's gardens were quite limited and were common kitchen vegetables in Australia. Does this make for assimilation in the Board's terms? If the basis for it is that those whose gardens are mentioned had never gardened before perhaps.

Recipes

The evidence here is less than for vegetable gardens.

In December 1959 there is a picture of a woman holding two iced cakes. It is not related to any content in the issue⁴⁶.

In October 1953 there is a photograph of Mrs. Ellie Mary Goolagong cutting her birthday cake which may have been home-made.⁴⁷

³⁹ Free Seeds, Dawn Vol.2 No.4 April 1953 p.23

⁴⁰ News From Boggabilla, Dawn Vol. 3 No.2 January 1954 p.21

⁴¹ Garden Competition, Dawn Vol.3 No.2 February 1954 pg.3

⁴² Something to boast about, Dawn Vol.3 No. 6, June 1954 p.7

⁴³ Cabbage Tree Island Station Dawn Vol.4 No. 3 March 1955 p.6

⁴⁴ Tabulam Sees Improvements, Dawn Vol5. No.3 March p.6

⁴⁵ A Fine Station Garden, Dawn Vol.10 No.6 June 1961 p.9

⁴⁶ Two iced cakes, Dawn Vol. 8 No.11 December 1959 pg. 21

⁴⁷ Dawn Vol. 2 No. 10 October 1953 p.18.

In 1960 the Dawn published a report of a children's Christmas party at Brewarrina at which 'Thirty dozen cakes were made by lady residents of the station.'⁴⁸

Is this evidence of assimilation in the Board's terms? If those whose cakes were pictured had never made a cake perhaps.

Healthy Foods

There was no evidence of assimilation in the Board's terms through these.

The context for Dawn's food related articles

Assimilation through these two vectors was constricted by two things:

- Availability of ingredients for dishes and kitchen utensils
- Finances and Board practice here
- Managers' practice.

Ingredients for dishes and kitchen utensils

Weekly rations were provided to residents of stations and reserves. In 1953 this was published as the Ration Allowance.

Item	Quantity
Flour	10lb
Sugar	2 lb
Tea	4 oz
Jam	12 oz
Dripping	1 lb
Potatoes	2 lb
Onions or dried peas	8 oz
Baking Powder	4 oz
Rice	1 lb
Oatmeal	8 oz
Powdered Whole Milk	12 oz
Soap	4 oz
Meat	4 lb ⁴⁹

Most of the recipes published required a range of ingredients that are not on this ration list. For example, mixed herbs, fish (though these could be caught at stations and reserves near waterways), ox liver, calf's liver, corned beef, bead, butter, cheese, peaches (unless grown on the property though none were mentioned), lemons (also not mentioned as growing on any of the stations or reserves), apricots, pineapples, avocados, even something as commonplace as eggs.

A look at the items to be held in a manager's stores, albeit from 1941, show they were only for rations.⁵⁰ It is unlikely to have been changed in the 1950's.

Some of them could be bought at town shops but particularly in rural areas where most stations and reserves were located and much of the Aboriginal housing, they may not have stocked them either.

⁴⁸ Brewarrina, Dawn Vol.9 No.1 January 1960 p.5

⁴⁹ Ration Allowance, Dawn Vol. 2 No.11 November 1953 p.13

⁵⁰ Item 70. Method of Obtaining Supplies, Manual of Instructions to Managers and Matrons of Aboriginal Stations and Other Field Officers, 1941

Kitchen utensils mentioned in the recipes are also unlikely to have been in residents' homes. The meat ration needed to be minced for sausages and minced meat dishes but it's unlikely residents would have a mincer.

Finances

As noted earlier Dawn suggested 'Buy the best seed always, and remember that special seed, at perhaps 2s 6d' a packet. What was the income amongst Aboriginal people between 1952 – 1961 which would prompt a purchase like this?

Aboriginals were eligible for Commonwealth income supports. I have been unable to get accurate information for 1952-1961 of the number of unemployed and how many of them were Aboriginal.

A Maternity Allowance was available for women to 'provide financial support towards the expenses associated with the birth of children'.⁵¹ The amount was £15 where there were no other children, £16 where the mother has one or two other children under 16 years of age, or £17 10s 0d three or more other children.

In 1950 the Child Endowment payment was 5/- for the first child.⁵²

Between 1952 and 1961 the Age pensions was \$351 (£175 in 2026) to \$546 (£273 in 2026) per annum.⁵³

The Unemployment Benefit and Sickness was passed in 1945. At the commencement men and women aged over 21 and over received 22 shillings a week.⁵⁴

I found no data on how many Aboriginal individuals received benefits. However, arguably spending 2s 6d on a packet of seeds was unthinkable for those on these various benefits.

There was a barrier to spending benefits money on things like seeds. In the 1950s, the states tightly controlled Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's lives. Many people could not access government payments and those who could were often paid indirectly.

When Ruth Hegarty started a family, she received Child Endowment and Maternity Allowance. Ruth Hegarty remembers the property managers where she lived at Cherbourg settlement controlling how she spent most of her payment.

For instance, Child Endowment was provided as a tab for store goods rather than as cash. On payment day, mothers would line up before the store opened with order forms in hand, hoping to secure what they needed.

At the end of the month, mothers would fill out a form and apply to receive their remaining payment.

⁵¹ Every Woman Eligible, Dawn Vol. 3 No. 4 April 1954 p.

⁵² First Child Endowment from June 20, The Advertiser 9 February 1950 p.1

⁵³ Maximum basic rates of pension from 1 July 1909 to 5 October 1961, Social Security Guide July 2026

⁵⁴ Unemployment Insurance, National Museum of Australia

‘Many Indigenous people,’ says Services Australia did not receive social service cheques until the mid-1960s, highlighting the systemic inequities of the period.⁵⁵

I also do not have any figures for the number of Aboriginals in employment over these years. There are reports of the kind of employment they were engaged in.

Permanent Employment Increasing

The number of aborigines settling into permanent employment is increasing. Many are securing work with the Railway Department, Shire and Municipal Councils, and the Department of Main Roads. The majority engage in rural employment much of which is seasonal.⁵⁶

Until 1969, employers systematically withheld wages and entitlements from Aboriginal people, paying them instead to the Aborigines Protection Board. Many Aboriginal ‘apprentices’ (children as young as 14) had over 80% of their wage paid to the Board and its successor, the Aborigines Welfare Board. This money was meant to be paid out to them when they turned 21 but, in most cases, it was not.⁵⁷

Managers’ practices

Dawn suggested:

If you are living on an Aboriginal Reserve, see the Manager now about drawing some seeds for your garden.⁵⁸

Managers had extraordinary control over the lives of residents.

4. Managers of Stations.

The Manager shall: —

(1) have the general management and control of all persons on the | Station under his charge, buildings, stock and other property; deal with all manner of things affecting the good order and conduct of all persons residing on the Station; and devote all his energy to the moral and social welfare of the aborigines resident on his Station;

(3) encourage the able bodied, particularly those of lighter caste, to leave the Station and become assimilated into the general community, provided always that the Manager is of the opinion that they are capable of maintaining themselves and their families in a reasonably creditable manner;

(5) exercise a constant supervision of the. Aborigines on the station; endeavour to see that they do not squander their earnings; encourage them to improve their homes and their standard of living, and to become self-respecting members of the community;

(6) be accountable for all rations, clothing, medical comforts, etc. and their distribution, as authorised by the Board;⁵⁹

In these circumstances asking for seeds, which the Manager may very well not have, is perhaps not a benign request. There were cases of Managers abusing their power. The 1939 walk off from

⁵⁵ Reflection, 1950s, Services Australia 2026

⁵⁶ Permanent Employment Increasing, Dawn Vol.5 No.2 February 1956 p.11

⁵⁷ Returning Stolen Wages, Justice and Equity Centre 2026

⁵⁸ In Your Garden, Dawn Vol.1 No.1 January 1952 Backpage.

⁵⁹ Manual of Instructions to Managers and Matrons of Aboriginal Stations and Other Field Officers, 1941

Cummeragunja Mission, administered by the Board was in protest at the practices of the Manager there.⁶⁰

Conclusion

This article set out to investigate whether the Aboriginal Welfare Board's magazine Dawn used food matters to promote assimilation. Two photographs published in Dawn described above make this intent clear. Material from the magazine cited above in In the Garden, Home Hints and recipes pages perhaps are evidence of some degree of 'assimilation' in the terms of the Aboriginal Welfare Board. However, there were limits with the practical and financial means of Aboriginal residents on stations and reserves and possible inimical Managers' behaviour to 'assimilate' through these vectors.

⁶⁰ 4 February 1939: The Cummeragunja Walk-Off, Common Ground