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## **Bones tell of past steeped in horror**

By Zach Hope  
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THEY are the Northern Territory's undocumented atrocities: Aboriginal men, women and children murdered by pioneers outside Daguragu, the bones scattered, burned or buried in the bush.

Most Australians know of Port Arthur and Hoddle St, but only the descendants of the dead know of Tartarr and Wirrilu.

"Imagine how scared they must have been," local man Phillip Yamba Jimmy told the NT News on a recent visit.

"We should be educating the young generation about what happened here. Both kartiya (whites) and ngumpin (blacks), learning what really happened." At Tartarr, also known as Blackfellow's Knob, Aborigines were caught butchering cattle for food.

Men with rifles and Aboriginal trackers returned soon after and shot anyone they could.

The version told by Mr Jimmy has it that people were sat around a tree and murdered one by one.

He said families let the dead decompose in the sun then collected the bones in paperbark and carried them 10km to Seale Gorge, a sacred site of the Gurindji and associated tribes.

It is a peaceful and shaded place. A creek runs through it all year and ancient art is painted on the escarpments.

Mr Jimmy said he dreamt of this place the previous night.

At least one set of bones had survived more than a century of Wet Seasons and was accessible with a short climb.

The bones are unmistakably human, though only expert forensic analysis could hope to find a cause of death.

After a long rest, Mr Jimmy called out again in Gurindji: "Okay, we are going now" . The Tartarr story featured on the 1967 land petition signed in thumbprint by Vincent Lingiari and other Wave Hill walk-off leaders and sent Governor-General Lord Richard Casey.

"This (Daguragu) is the main place of our dreaming only a few miles from the Seale Gorge where we have kept the bones of our martyrs all these years since white men killed many of our people," they wrote.

"On the walls of the sacred caves where these bones are kept, are the paintings of the totems of our tribe".

Locals say Wirrilu, or Blackfella's Creek, about 25km away from Tartarr, was an earlier (perhaps late 1800s) and more brutal event. Here white men on horses picked up frightened toddlers and flung them into rocks, they say.

The bodies are reportedly still next to the creek, underneath still-visible mounds of stone.

The NT News could not find a version of either massacre with a date or the numbers of the dead.

In Yijarni: True stories from Gurindji Country to be released at this month's Freedom Festival commemorating the 50th anniversary of the walk-off, Ronnie Wave Hill spoke of seven early massacres of the region.

According to his stories, Seale Gorge is not just a resting place for the murdered, but a massacre site in itself.

"Two (white) men heaped up wood until there was a large pyre," he said. "Then they dragged them (bodies) one by one - and old man, another woman, another man, dragging them across.

"They threw them all on the fire.

"They didn't bury them the decent way.

"They just threw them on the fire and burnt them like dogs." The two men were later speared by Aborigines and thrown on the same pyre. "That's how ngumpin would sometime get their own back," he says. "It wasn't all one-sided with just kartiya killing Aboriginal people ... it was revenge when they killed those two (white men)." Author and historian Darrell Lewis wrote extensively of the region's violence in his book *A Wild History* and knew the stories. "I don't know of any documentation, but it doesn't mean it's myth and legend," he said.

Mr Lewis said settlers changed the way they spoke about murders after the southern outrage stemming from the copper mine massacre near Daly River in 1884, a year after cattle first arrived at the Victoria River region.

"You don't get much documentation or anything explicit (after this time)," Mr Lewis said.

"You might get euphemism: "We taught them a lesson" or "we dispersed them". The stories circulated among the whites out there, the insiders, but it didn't get out." Mr Lewis said there could be a connection between the stories told in Daguragu and the first police officer in the region, Mounted Constable Willshire, who arrived in 1894 after escaping murder charges in Central Australia.

According to Lewis, Willshire talks of several violent encounters in his memoirs *Land of the Dawning*.

One of those encounters was at Black Gin Creek, not far from Tartarr. Willshire wrote: "It's no use mincing matters - the Martini-Henry carbines at this critical moment were talking English in the silent majesty of those great eternal rocks." The brutal pioneer history of the Northern Territory is not taught in schools.