Play and Folklore

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Editorial address: Dr June Factor, Australian Centre, University of Melbourne, Victoria, 3010, Australia
Phone: +61 3 8344 7235 **Fax:** +61 3 9347 7731 **Email:** j.factor@unimelb.edu.au

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GPO Box 666E, Victoria, 3001, Australia. **Phone:** +61 3 8341 7378 **Email:** playfolklore@museum.vic.gov.au
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Museum Victoria collection placed on UNESCO Australian Memory of the World Register

Deborah Tout-Smith

The Australian Children's Folklore Collection has become the first Museum Victoria collection accepted onto the prestigious UNESCO Australian Memory of the World register. The Register identifies highly significant archive holdings and library collections around the world. Other items on the Australian register include the Endeavour Journal of James Cook, Mabo case manuscripts, and the Walter Burley and Marion Mahony Griffin design drawings of the City of Canberra.

Continued ...

UNESCO – Australian Memory of the World

The Australian Children's Folklore Collection is regarded as one of the largest and most significant collections of its kind in the world. It documents children's folklore and play from the 1870s to the present – their games, rhymes, riddles, jokes, superstitions and language – and reflects the cultural and regional diversity of childhood in Australia and beyond.

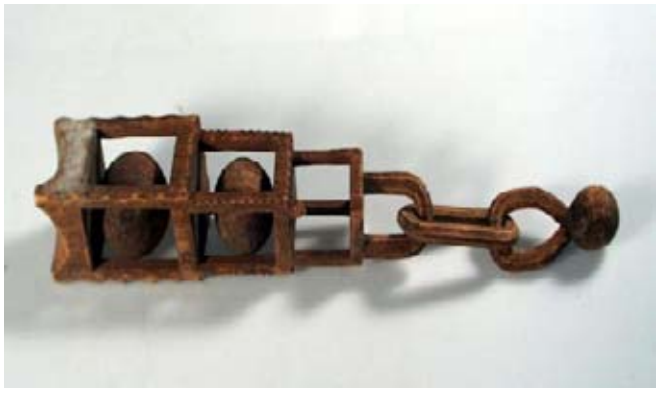
The Collection includes over 10,000 children's playground rhymes, jokes and games collected from children and adults from the early 1970s through to the present, field recordings of rhymes and songs in 10 languages, documentation of Aboriginal children's play, interviews and photographs collected from Melbourne and regional schools, and fieldwork and research of children's lore and language by undergraduate and postgraduate students.

"Wash the dishes" game, Melbourne school playground, 1954

Source - Australian Children's Folklore Collection, Museum Victoria

Significantly, the Collection contains research notes and articles from the eminent US children's folklorist Dr Dorothy Howard, who came to Australia as an American Fulbright scholar in 1954 to study Australian children's folklore. Her work provides a rare insight into Australian children's folklore in this period, and will shortly be the subject of a book published by Museum Victoria in early 2005, entitled *Child's Play: Dorothy Howard and the Folklore of Australian Children*.

The Collection also includes over 300 games and toys from Australia and throughout the world, dating from the late nineteenth century.



Rattle – made in USA about 1900

Source - Australian Children's Folklore Collection, Museum Victoria

The UNESCO Australian Memory of the World Register will increase public awareness of the Australian Children's Folklore Collection, and provide further impetus for research and sponsorship opportunities.

Deborah Tout-Smith is the Curator of Cultural Diversity, Museum Victoria

Global Games...Make a Difference

Cathy Hope

The school playground is the main venue for social interaction of children. Here they have a chance to chat, to meet their friends and most importantly to play. And it's here that children have the chance to learn to organise their own free time, to make their own choices about play.

Children tend to measure the success of their day on how well they have played at school. Strong friendship bonds are established through play and the rewards of happy playing impact on personal life, filtering into classrooms and family life as well. 'Children hunger for friendship almost as much as love, and play is an arena for friendship and enmity,' says Dr June Factor, play folklorist. 'Play is universal among mammals and integral to the human imagination.' ('Play', Saturday Extra, *The Age*, 26 June 1999)

Our Australian society is showing increasing concern for the health and well-being of children. Headlines abound: 'Schoolkids face ball ban', 'Cost of Childhood Obesity', 'Exercise Safeguards Children's Hearts', 'Sports Vital for Social Interaction', 'DVT TV Threat Claim', 'The Bubble-Wrap Generation', 'Bully Blight: Time to Act', 'My Fear of School: Bullies make Girl's Life Hell.' Gwenda Davey advises:

> *Hard-pressed teachers and carers, faced with more demands on their time and skills, might be encouraged to know that children themselves have some of the answers to obesity and ill-health through their own traditional playground games.('Losing Weight may be Child's Play',* The Age*, 15 January 2004)*

It's not just Australia where there is concern. During 2000 in England it was recommended by Government school inspectors that Grange Infants School, Derbyshire, should encourage everyday playing of games such as hopscotch, skipping, clapping, etc, to help remedy behavioural problems. According to Head Teacher Margaret Hassell:

> *The children were either wandering around aimlessly or spending time just running around. But this has made a real difference to everyone and it's amazing to see how much the children are enjoying themselves. The response has been amazing and they have all really enjoyed the skipping, clapping and chasing games.' ('A game way for children to play' by Zena Hawley – www.educationDerbyshire.co.uk)*

St Mary's Primary School, Rawtenstall, England, was given a £6,000 National Lottery grant in 2003 to buy hoops, marbles, balls, skipping ropes, etc. According to Head Teacher Julie Frazer: 'The children didn't know about taking turns, sharing, social skills, communication and ball skills. We wanted to raise standards and the self-esteem of the children by introducing games and playground activities so that there was less time for tension and boredom.' ('Play's The Thing For Discipline' by Suzanna Drew-Edwards Telegraph Weekend, 22 March 2003)

Living and teaching in China during 2000, everywhere I went I soon became aware that the energy from children at play is phenomenal. Laughing, shouting, singing, hand-clapping, dancing, spinning, running, their chatter is incessant. Elastics play was widespread. The great majority of children I observed at play glowed with good health and happiness.

Games such as hopscotch, skipping, clapping games, string games, jacks (knucklebones), marbles and hoops are all survivors, inherited and adapted global games that have endured for centuries. This needs to be recognised and celebrated with children by endorsing these games for their everyday play.

We can enhance the status of game-playing in the playground by planning for appropriate play spaces in playgrounds, expanding children's repertoire of games and giving children easy access to the play equipment they need. Acknowledging the wide range of games that already exist in the playground is the first step. Encouraging students, skilled in such games as elastics, clapping games and marbles, to teach peers and younger ones to play, fosters the passing on and cultural exchange of these games. Once children know the games, they can use them at any time in their spontaneous play.

Source - Cathy Hope

'My favourite game is elastics because it is fun to jump as high as you can go.'
Tayler, Year 3, Patterson Lakes, Victoria, 16 December 2003

'I enjoyed elastics because Tayler taught me and because I had never played it before.'
Sarah, Year 3, Patterson Lakes,Victoria, 16 December 2003

'I learnt how to play the elastic game and I really enjoyed it. I liked the game because I never knew that you can play lots of games with elastics and they play them around the world.'
Alzenna, Year 3, Patterson Lakes, Victoria, 16 December 2003

Children experience much joy seeing their playground rhymes in print. A valuable project for a school is to collect clapping, skipping and counting out rhymes being used in the playground. Every contemporary playground has a varied repertoire of playground rhymes. These can be typed up, illustrated by the children, perhaps accompanied by digital photographs, and compiled into a book. This book of the children's playground rhymes will be most sought after as reading matter, borrowed for home reading and frequently taken out to play.

Children are resourceful and have the ability to entertain themselves with very simple equipment. A Playtime Box can enhance the children's play opportunities.

Suggested Contents for a Playtime Box:

- Long skipping rope for group skipping
- 3 or 4 individual skipping ropes
- 3 or 4 small balls
- several bags of marbles (assorted types)
- 6 strings 1.4 metres long made into loops for string games
- small durable spinning tops
- 3 elastics
- 4 sets of Jacks (Knucklebones)
- bucket of thick coloured chalk and smooth flat stones for hopscotch markers
- hoops

Each of the 26 classes at Derinya Primary School in Victoria, Australia, has a Playtime Box for pupils to select equipment from at recess and lunchtime.

Here's what the pupils had to say:

'It's good for kids.' Year 1 student

'Everyone's smiling because they have things to do.' Year 2 student

'It's been really, really, really fun.' Year 3 student

'Instead of just walking around the school at lunchtime you can borrow things and play with your friends.' Year 3 student

'It stops fights because everyone is having too much fun.' Year 3 student

'People would ask you to join in their games because you can have heaps of players in these games. They'd let you play. You can never have too many players.' Year 4 student

People who aren't really keen on 'Tiggy', 'Soccer', 'Football', 'Hide and Seek' and other running games now have something to do and that can involve their friends as well.' Year 5 student

'We talk about the rules before we start the game. We get good ideas about the way to play from each other. We say, "Does everyone agree?"' Year 6 student

'Everyone has something to do, so no one feels alone. Everyone is safe because everyone is joining in and playing together.' Year 6 student

Hopscotch

Hopscotch play beside busy roads is not encouraged, so primary schools have a vital role: plenty of chalk and suitable areas in the playground allow children to feel at ease to play hoppy. This is a game demanding quite complex skills: hopping, aiming and kicking the marker from square to square, balancing while you kick, following a sequence of play, and playing within defined boundaries. These are all skills useful for a number of games.

Source - Cathy Hope

'You kick with your foot and try to control the stone by hitting hard or soft. Where it hits your foot is important. It's good for your aiming skills. It's good to build up soccer skills.'

Terrence, 9, February 2004

'It's challenging and if you put more spaces you have to hop longer. The hopping helps your balance. It wears you out. It takes patience because sometimes it takes about seven shots to get the marker in the right space.'

Tom, 10, February 2004

Chalk used to be very commonplace in classrooms and children could often salvage a stub of chalk for hopscotch. Now white boards and markers have almost replaced the traditional blackboards and chalk. But chalk is cheap: buckets of thick coloured chalk are readily available at about $2. A supply of chalk needs to be available on an everyday basis from each classroom. Chalk-drawn hopscotch patterns are harmless to playgrounds and wash away when rain comes. (It's not that children rely entirely on chalk to draw their patterns. Children are ingenious in what they use to scratch out a pattern. Sticks, soft stones and pieces of tan bark will do the trick.)

The provision of permanent hopscotch patterns is well meant but the reality is that children would rather have some areas of unmarked concrete and provision of chalk to draw and have hopscotch ownership. Gwenda Davey, specialist in children's folklore, pleads with adults, *Hands off the hopscotch ..... Let the kids draw their own* ('Traditional play is vital', Education Age, *The Age*, 19 July 1988).

String Games

String Games fascinate children. They are amazed at the shapes they can produce with their fingers from one loop of string.

Source - Cathy Hope

'String figures are lots of fun. My favourite is 'Cat's Whiskers'. It is fun to do.'
Meg, Year 3B, Mt Eliza Primary School, Victoria, 3 June 2003

'They're really fun to learn. They look good. Your fingers have to be flexible, not really stiff, so you can bend your finger back and reach the string. You have to stretch your fingers out really far. You have to remember all the game. You've got to co-operate because sometimes you need two people for the game. You can do magic tricks and even make it look fancy. It's good to learn new games and pass them on.'
Terrence, Patterson Lakes Primary School, Victoria, 9 February 2004

'It gets frustrating because just one wrong move mucks you up and you have to start all over again. It's good exercise for your fingers. It warms your fingers up and you get used to fiddling with other small things. It gives your fingers strength. It's fun when you finally get it.'
Tom, Derinya Primary School, Victoria, 10 February 2004

Clapping Games

Clapping games are a childhood phenomenon known throughout the world. They delight children, generating much laughter, excitement and happiness, and are a highly valued release for children after being cooped up in classrooms for several hours at a time, a chance to make as much noise as you wish without reprimand.

Clapping games give children the chance to connect with each other. Playing these games helps children 'belong' and this brings comfort and security. Most times children play in pairs but sometimes form a circle to include more players. Players engage in eye contact and enjoy the sense of responsiveness and regular contact by touch. These games require close physical contact and help children feel comfortable about touch. Learners eagerly copy the sequence of hand-claps and parrot the chant. They keenly focus and concentrate, listen to and follow instructions, memorise and achieve so they too can participate with their peers.

> '*They're challenging to remember them.' Michael, 8, February 2004*

> *'It takes patience to learn how to do it and to teach others. They're fun because you can make up your own rhyme and make up your own clapping pattern.'*
> *Tom, 10, February 2004*

> '*You can make new friends by doing a clapping rhyme with new people. The new people could teach you a new one you've never done before.'*
> *Terrence, 9, February 2004*

Jacks

> '*The game of knucklebones or jacks has endured into the age of Nintendo and Gameboy.'*
> *('Play', Larry Schwartz, Saturday Extra,* The Age*, 26 June 1999)*

Jacks is an ideal game for schools. It requires little space and can be played almost anywhere inside or outside on a smooth hard surface, at any time of the year. It's also suitable for playing on a hot day under the shade of trees and ideal to play on wet days when confined to playing indoors. It's generally a quiet game for 2 – 4 players in a group. Players normally set the rules before they begin play and the game varies from simple to complex routines according to group agreement. The skill development required sets a personal challenge for each child playing. It takes time, patience and laborious individual practice to gain competency in throwing and catching jacks. Perseverance pays off. Skilled players can develop great finger dexterity performing intricate manoeuvres.

> *'We enjoyed playing jacks. Some people thought it was easy but it was actually hard when they first tried it. It was hard catching one jack on the top of your hand but it was fun.' Wes, Alex and Angus, Mt Eliza Primary School, 3 June 2003*

Children are the custodians of the world's rich play culture. Schools have a responsibility to ensure that children are supported in their role by fostering play for today and for the inheritance of children in the future.

Cathy Hope **www.globalgames.com.au** consults with and visits primary schools to assist in the setting up of playtime boxes and conducts playground games sessions with children. During 1988-89 she was state-wide Education Officer at the Children's Museum in Melbourne, Australia, during the 'You're It!' exhibition on children's games. She is the author of *Hopscotch, String Games, Clapping Games, Jacks, Skipping Games, Elastics* and *Marbles*, seven books in the Chatterbox Series, Pearson Education, 2004.

Bowling for – Vietnam?

Gwenda Beed Davey

Children's folklorists often refer to the famous painting we know as Children's Games, painted around 1560 by Pieter Brueghel, to indicate not only the antiquity of some children's playlore but also its astonishing continuity. Of the more than eighty games shown by Brueghel, most are still played in Australia today. There are a few exceptions: girls' singing/circle games have gone in the last few generations, and bowling hoops is no longer a popular children's pastime in Australia. Not so in an earlier period! Mrs Gladys Reardon (Timbs) was born in 1905, and was recorded in 1988 for the New South Wales Bicentennial Project. In her interview, preserved at the National Library of Australia, she described how hoops were popular in the years before the First World War:

> *In the winter time we had to get out and bowl the hoop if you were cold. Well you'd bowl the hoop round Holdworth Street and up around Ocean Street and down into Jersey Road and up – up Holdworth Street; you'd be hot as Hades because that would warm you up. Every winter you had to go up to this newsagent, at the corner of Queen Street and Holdworth Street, and hold your arm out and they'd measure the hoop – it had to come up to your armpits – well by that time next winter, you'd need a size larger, see, because you'd been growing so much.*

Bowling hoops has not died out in every country, however. In 1999 and 2004 I saw children bowling hoops in places as diverse as Seoul, Korea, and in Sapa, in Northern Vietnam. In October 1999 the Korean Folk Museum in Seoul was holding a program of traditional games for school-children, and as the photograph indicates, bowling hoops was one of the activities provided. Unfortunately I don't know whether the game is still current among Korean children, or whether it was simply revived for the Museum's program.

Hmong boy with hoop, northern Vietnam, 2004

Source – Gwenda Beed-Davey

The hoops photographed in Vietnam were certainly part of spontaneous play. Interestingly, both the Korean and Vietnamese hoops were considerably smaller than the 'armpit length' described by Mrs Timbs in Sydney, many years ago, and they both had a wooden handle and bent loop at the end, suggesting that they may have been manufactured toys.

A Vietnamese (Hmong) boy was photographed this year holding a shanghai or slingshot, a rare sight to contemporary Australian eyes. Our Gradgrinds and Grundys would have a conniption fit.

Gwenda Beed Davey is co-editor of *Play and Folklore*. She is an Honorary Research Fellow in the Cultural Heritage Centre for Asia and the Pacific at Deakin University, Burwood, Vic.

Recollections of Quarry Hill State School, Bendigo, Victoria

Peter Ellis

The following are extracts from a longer memoir written by Peter Ellis, held in the Australian Children's Folklore Collection at Museum Victoria.

I think I started at Quarry Hill State School in 1951. I say think, because I believe we were in 'bubs' grade that year and first grade the following year. For the first couple of months, possibly six months, some of us were housed and taught in the Methodist Church Hall on the corner of Russell Street and Harkness Street. We used to play in the asphalt yard fronting Russell Street between the church and the hall. Around the corner there was a shop in the hollow on the left as you walked across Harkness Street towards the main school. We could buy drinks and lollies there, possibly at recess, certainly at lunchtime.

There were times when on the way home from school we would skip to our hearts' content and sometimes sing songs such as Waltzing Matilda. There was always a cautious eye to the cross street intersections however, as the Catholics from St Joseph's travelled this way and sticks and stones and ambush to our peril always remained a possibility. Stupid wasn't it. Sometimes we'd take the long way home and play on mullock heaps, skiing down the slopes wearing the soles out of our shoes and getting our clothes absolutely ingrained in fine grey sand. Mum didn't seem to mind or complain, it all went into the copper to be boiled up with soap and then through the washtubs to rinse and then run through the wringer and hung up on the line to dry. Plain black leather shoes or sometimes lace up boots (ankle height) were our general footwear and you had white 'sand-shoes' or runners for sport.

There were other times when going to school up over Hyett's Hill we'd stop and eat the seeds from the pods of the Cootamundra Wattle. They just tasted like peas. Sometimes on the way home there was a bit of show and tell under the canopy of that Cootamundra Wattle.

Hyett's Hill was a popular spot for billy carts and in those days the street between one side of Reginald Street and the other was not closed off. We were always careful and had sentries posted to warn of approaching cars (which wasn't that often). The usual trick was to come full pelt down Hyett's Hill and then do a U turn into the other side of Reginald Street.

Boy playing in Aspendale, Vic
Source – Museum Victoria

The playground used to extend all the way down to the very back fence. The girls occupied the higher slope with 'housie', the outlines of home with all the rooms marked with rows of rocks and small stones. They'd try to con the boys into playing husbands or fathers and so on, but this was only very occasionally taken on board. The boys usually raced up and down the hill over the various tracks. Generally it was simply chasey. There were also other simple games such as What's the Time Mr Wolf, Hopscotch and Hide and Seek. In my first year, there were no shelter sheds. These were built either in that year 1951 or within the next year or so. When they were established they became the venue on wet days for lunch and then British Bull-Dog. At first I steered clear of this thinking it was nothing but for ruffians. Then as I grew a little older and more confident, I absolutely loved it. I think as a kid I was fairly quick on the pins and able

to dodge extremely well. Still can and I could usually outrun those who'd try to do me in. I also had the advantage of being what was called 'double jointed'. Any kid that put my arm right up my back, to their surprise, with a little loop under the arm, I was gone, escaped, out of their reach.

The boys also played cars on the Malcolm St side of the school. We all had our favourite piece of rock and these were z'roomed down and up the well worn grooves of the slope. Sometimes a centipede would be uncovered and we were terrified of being bitten by these. There were false rumours of them being deadly, more likely they were confused with scorpions.

I suppose the other main activity was variously between playing cowboys and Indians and cops and robbers. With the former it was bang you're dead, or the opposite from the Indians but lots of wah wah's using the hand wavering over the mouth and things like 'stick em up'. I don't think I've heard this since I was a kid.

Marbles were another main activity. There used to be the 'big ring' and then there was my favourite, 'poison'. You needed to be in grade 5 or 6 I think to play this, mainly because of prime ground beyond the bike shed and just out of range of those kicking a football. There were three holes in a line dug or ground into the earth with your heel, and then another to the side of the last hole. These little courses were as sacred as golf courses and nobody could wait until playtime or lunch to burst out and occupy their territory. The object was to land your marble in each of the little holes, and knock your opponent out of the road as you went. When you reached the third hole successfully, then you had the prime objective of arriving in the fourth hole to the side, which was 'poison'. This allowed you to return back through the other holes and knock any oncoming opponents to buggery.

The girls would play skippy and there were always several with the ordinary single skipping rope or perhaps slightly longer with two skipping together. However there was one enormous big rope quite some yards long. There would be several girls at least skipping inside this rope. Every now and then one or two would swap over so those turning the rope could have a go.

The local bonfires were held in November on Guy Fawkes Night. The whole population of the streets around that block would accumulate all their sticks and unwanted wood and rubbish, which would build up over weeks or several months in a nominated location. It was really something to look forward to. Everybody gathered around and we often had crackers, generally Tom Thumbs, there were penny bungers, but I think these were discouraged at the bonfire. Other fireworks such as Roman Candles, Catherine Wheels and rockets were a feature. Also it was popular to roast spuds in the coals. We didn't have aluminium foil in those days. The potatoes were generally wrapped in a couple of layers of damp newspaper and buried in the coals. You had to scrape all the ash and black skin off before you could eat them.

A half-pint of milk was issued to every child at morning recess. These had been delivered in crates and sat on the shady side of the school, although in summer the milk could end up fairly warm by recess. It was pretty hard sometimes to drink half a pint and later the bottle size was reduced to a third of a pint. Originally the bottle caps were of waxed cardboard seated just inside the rim. You had to push them in and risk spilling some of the contents. Later they had a tab to allow you to pull the cap out. In the middle 1950's aluminium foil caps were introduced. They were crimped over the bottle rim. Then tinsel type colours came in as well with the caps in deep blue, green and possibly red. Many boys collected the coloured caps as well as the plain silver caps and decorated the wheels of their bikes in concentric circles alternating with silver, blue and so on. The foil caps were easily wrapped around the spokes of the wheel.

Peter Ellis has lived all his life in Bendigo, Victoria, and was the inaugural president of the Bush Dance and Music Club of Bendigo and District. He is a musician and folklorist, specialising in traditional social dance, as well as a noted field naturalist.

Book Review

Judy McKinty

The Long, Sticky Walk by Edel Wignell; illustrations by Dee Huxley (72 pages)

Published by University of Western Australia Press, under the Cygnet Young Fiction imprint, 2003.

Price $12.95 (inc. GST).

This book is an Australian story for children, its origins in the folklore of rural New South Wales. In the 1880s a teamster left his family on their selection near Narrabri for a two-month season of wool-carrying in Queensland. The family had provisions for two months, but when floods prevented the father's return the mother realised that their food would not last, and to survive she would have to get her children, a 3-month-old baby, a 3-year-old and a 5-year-old, to Narrabri, 11 miles (17.7kms) away. They set off walking through the heavy, black soil left by the flood, but the children found the going too hard, so the mother carried them one by one. She left the baby with the oldest child, took the second child as far as she could while still within sight of the others, then returned for the baby, and made a third trip carrying the oldest child.

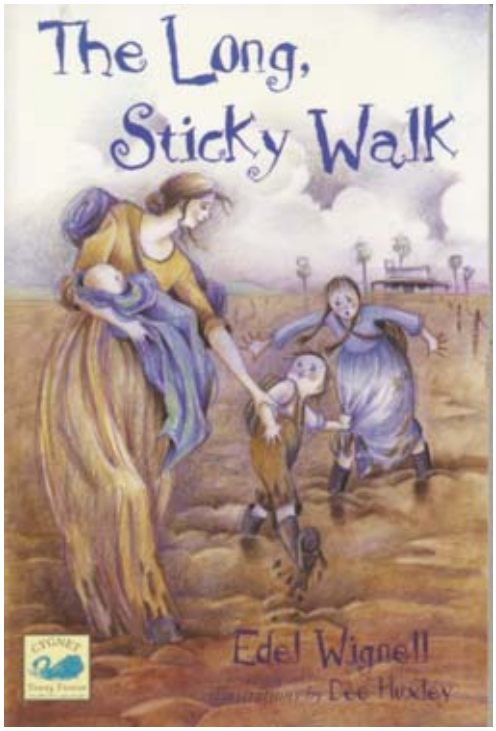
This anecdote was written by folklorist Bill Beatty in *A Treasury of Australian Folk Tales and Traditions*, published in 1960. His version ended: 'When the mother and children were picked up, just out of Narrabri, the mother was unconscious; she did not know how many days and nights the eleven mile trip had taken. In all she had walked sixty-six miles, carrying the children thirty-three miles of the way. Mother and children were cared for in the township, and all recovered.'

Edel Wignell, who has published over 70 books for children, tells the tale of 5-year-old Emily, her little brother James, her mother and baby Ann, who find themselves stranded in their farmhouse in the middle of a flood, and have to make the long journey to safety through the sticky, smelly, black mud.

Edel describes the realities of living on an isolated farm in the 1880s: removing weevils from the flour, learning to recognise the warning signs of bad weather coming, having to make do with their store of food for lengthy periods, and keeping the children amused when confined to the house during bad weather. The farm is not big enough to support the family so the father has to work as a teamster. He has never been away from home for two months before, and the children miss him and look forward to his return. While he is away, the mother looks after the farm and cares for the children, one of whom is still breastfeeding.

The story is told through Emily's eyes. She is the eldest child, and her mother relies on her to help with the farm and the other children. The devastation of the flood is described as Emily sees it – buildings and bridges washed away, animals drowned, the familiar landscape transformed into a quagmire. Throughout the ordeal, the strength and determination of Emily's mother is evident as she carries the children in her arms or on her back, and reassures them when they are afraid. The reunion with the father is a joyous ending to the story.

Edel wrote the book as 'a tribute to the courage and endurance of the first European settler women and children of Australia'. Dee Huxley's evocative cover illustration skilfully depicts the farmhouse, the difficulty of walking in the thick mud, the mother's strength of character and the children's reliance on her. The black-and-white illustrations throughout the book capture the feeling of the storm building up, the family's preparations ahead of the storm, the arduous journey of the little group and the joy of being reunited with the father.



The Long, Sticky Walk is an adventure story, written to be easily read. The tale has a folkloric origin and there is family and child folklore woven through the book. Baby rhymes, songs, games and a riddle are shared by the mother and the children as part of their life on the farm and during their long, sticky walk.

Judy McKinty is an independent folklorist/researcher with a special interest in children's play. She has been closely involved with the Australian Children's Folklore Collection for over a decade, researching and collecting children's folklore. Her research includes an oral history project on Aboriginal Children's Play with June Factor. Recent projects include a multicultural games program for Australian Volunteers International and string figures workshops in Bunjilaka Aboriginal Gallery, Melbourne Museum.