

GROWING UP IN FRONTIER TIMES

My great-grandfather Tom Chivers was born in a bark hut in September 1844, by the Yarra River opposite its junction with Diamond Creek. By then Tom's older brother Willie was four and spoke Woiwurung as fluently as he spoke English.

Willie was soon giving his little brother Tom piggy-backs on daily excursions with their Aboriginal playmates. This included a boy named Lanky who was a year and a half younger than Willie and three years old than Tom. Lanky was to remain a lifelong friend and when he died in May 1929 at age 88, he was by far the oldest Aboriginal man in Victoria. Willie also coincidentally died three months later in August 1929 at age 89.

These daily excursions with their Aboriginal playmates became even more regular after Willie and Tom's mother died in 1849. Lanky's parents, Murrum and Mary were then more than willing to take care of Willie and Tom on a daily basis. This could extend for several days when John was away carting goods to the goldfields. The longest of these was a two week trek to Hanging Rock and back, in November 1851.

Many stories of these hunting and walkabout adventures have been passed down our family. One tale I loved hearing was how Tom and Willie were taken duck hunting at Bolin-Bolin Billabong in Bulleen. When they got to the billabong, a flock of ducks was contentedly paddling around in the middle. One of the men stood on the bank and successively threw three boomerangs over the billabong above the innocently cruising ducks. As each boomerang returned it was caught and thrown again, so that the three boomerangs were circling in the air at the one time.

The ducks all looked skyward, alert to the moving objects as maybe an eagle or hawk hunting them. Whilst the ducks' gaze was averted, another man with a dilly bag slipped into the billabong and swam out under the ducks. He could of course then see the legs of the ducks treading away in the gloomy water above him.

Reaching up he grabbed an unsuspecting duck by the feet, dragged it down and stuffed it into his dilly bag. The remaining ducks were none the wiser about their mate next to them suddenly disappearing with a neat plook, because none took flight. So he repeated the process half a dozen times. Maybe the remaining ducks just assumed that their mates had gone duck-diving.

Another trick in hunting ducks involved less exertion and was described to me by the famous Gunditjmarra Elder, Reg Saunders. A hole was dug in the soft earth of the river bank. Some worms were then broken up and placed in a line from the water up into the hole. The hunter then retired under a shady tree and waited. Fairly soon a duck would come out to eat the worms and make its way up into the hole.

Once in the tunnel the duck found out something it had never known before. Ducks can't walk backward. So it just sat there waiting for its neck to get wrung. Kentucky Fried Duck seemed to have been quite a popular meal in those days.

It is interesting that Willie and Tom were allowed to wander with their Aboriginal mates as far to the west of the bark hut as they liked. The story passed down about hunting at Bolin-Bolin in Bulleen is testament to that. However John their father completely prohibited them from going further east than the canoe tree that was about five hundred metres from Major Newman's homestead. John obviously made the rule to ensure that the boys didn't go with their friends onto Newman's land and risk being shot at by him.

All his life Tom told stories to his children and grandchildren about these early days and he always kept a range of artefacts and weapons for them to inspect. This is demonstrated in the story from the early 1920s when my mother was at primary school. Tom, her grandfather was by then nearly eighty. Mum and her brothers and sisters wanted to show him the new wonder of the age, a wireless crystal set radio.

Their grandfather listened briefly and dismissed it out of hand. He said that tribal people had radio receivers that they used every day before going hunting. John then got a spear from behind the kitchen door and took the children out into the paddock to show them how Aboriginals used radio.

Tom drove the spear into the ground and got each child to put their ear to the end of the spear and listen carefully. He said Aboriginal people did this each morning and could tell everything that was happening in a two or three mile radius. They all took turns to listen and he then told them that the percussion they could hear through the spear was the kangaroos jumping in O'Brien's paddock over the next hill.

Tom passed down a treasure trove of such anecdotes that clearly showed the sophistication of Aboriginal thinking and the science embedded in their cultural practices.