

THE LEGENDARY JIMMY DAWSON

Like anywhere else, the early settlers in our local area had a mixture of attitudes toward Aboriginal people. The vast majority ranged from reasonably accepting to relatively indifferent, but there were only a few others at either end of the spectrum from harsh to embracing.

For instance Major Newman, James Anderson and John Hughes were settlers who would willingly shoot at Aboriginal people with murderous intent. At the other end of the scale there were local settlers like John Chivers, John Green and Jimmy Dawson who established lifelong Aboriginal friendships and an abiding interest in Aboriginal culture.

I feel a particular affinity with Jimmy Dawson. He was a very early settler at Warrandyte and has contributed more to my knowledge of Aboriginal culture than any other individual. Apart from this and sharing the same first name, we also share the same birthdate of the 5th of July, albeit 135 years apart.

Jimmy Dawson and his wife Joan, who was the niece of African explorer Mungo Park, arrived from Linlithgow in Scotland with and together with George Selby's family, settled near Anderson's Creek in May 1840. Jimmy had the foresight to bring a prefabricated house with him. He arrived only four months before my great-great grandfather John Chivers came to Templestowe in September 1840.

Jimmy and John were of a similar ages, Jimmy being born in 1806 and John in 1809. They were neighbours, contemporaries and like-minded people who obviously must have known each other. However there is no oral history as to how well. As far as I know they were the only two settlers in the district who learned to speak Woiwurung fluently, although it is likely that the Reverend John Green also had a reasonable command of the language.

Jimmy Dawson's only child Isabella was born at Warrandyte in 1843. Like my great-grandfather Tom Chivers, who was born a year later in 1844, Isabella maintained a lifelong interest in Aboriginal culture and language.

The Dawson family prospered in their time at Warrandyte, so in 1844 Jimmy purchased a cattle run at Port Fairy. On his arrival there Dawson quickly established strong Aboriginal friendships. This was made easier by him finding that the Woiwurung language he had learned at Warrandyte was very similar to the Hopkins River languages of Kirraewurrong and Tjapwoorong.

The federation of tribes in the Western District of Victoria commonly identify as 'Gunditjmara' which literally means '*members of the civilized people*' and they have a most fabulous history. They fought an eighteen year war against colonisation from when the Henty's first arrived in 1834. It ended in a final massacre of 200 people at Lake Condah in 1852, with the bodies thrown into the lake.

Against the odds the Gunditjmara survived and produced a whole series of champion cricketers, footballers, boxers and soldiers. I was so enamoured with their history that in 1984 I made a documentary film called *'The Fighting Gunditjmara'*. Through the records left by Jimmy Dawson, particularly on how the tribal football game (Marngrook) was played, I was also able to decode the totemic structures and processes behind the traditional Skin Group system. The accuracy of this was later being confirmed to me by tribal sources.

In 1881 Jimmy Dawson produced a book *'Australian Aborigines'* from the notes he and his daughter had collected over their lifetimes. Dawson did an unprecedented job in recording several Gunditjmara languages and culture for the benefit of future generations. He was however no passive bystander. Throughout his 94 year life Jimmy was a fearless advocate for Aboriginal people, right until his death in 1900.

For instance, he gave evidence at the 1877 Royal Commission and severely criticised the assumptions on which native policy was based. He considered Aboriginal people were entitled to government support without obligation, to compensate for the loss of their lands. He reviled their treatment as a conquered people with no rights. He believed it was completely unfair to restrict their freedom of movement whilst pressing unpalatable employment and religion on them. It has taken another 150 years for the rest of us to catch up to Jimmy.

Also in the 1880's, Dawson collected money from the settlers around Camperdown, to erect a monument to a famous Elder who had died and been buried outside the cemetery. However when some settlers refused to contribute, Jimmy went to Melbourne with a list of names of the settlers who had been involved in the infamous *'Sunday Hunts'*. Many Aboriginal people had been murdered in these heinous events, but nobody had ever been brought to account.

Jimmy presented this list to the editor of the Argus, Frederick Haddon, and demanded he publish it. When Haddon refused, the 80 year old Jimmy Dawson laid waste to the Argus office with his walking cane. Right to the end Jimmy Dawson remained a true friend and fearless advocate for all Aboriginal people.