

THE HISTORY OF THE YARRA

The geological history of the present-day course of the Yarra starts about 800,000 years ago. Volcanic eruptions in the Great Dividing Range spewed molten lava down into the northern and western areas of Melbourne and blocked the course of the Yarra through there. The flat areas in the northern and western suburbs are therefore these lava plains. With these lava flows filling up the drainage systems to the north and east of Melbourne, huge inland lakes developed around Whittlesea and Yarra Glen.

Gradually, the Plenty River wore its way south along the eastern edge of the lava flow, thereby creating the Plenty Gorge. At the same time the Yarra gradually wore the Warrandyte Gorge to join the Plenty at Bulleen, the site of another inland lake. The final course of the Yarra was then worn through the Kew Gorge around the southern end of the lava flow.

Until about 8000 years ago before sea levels rose, the Bay area was dry. The Yarra flowed south through what is now Port Phillip Heads, then west across the Tasmanian land bridge. Rising seas after the inter-glacial period then began filling the Bay to its present level.

The fascinating part of all this is how the Woiwurrung story on the creation of the Yarra has so accurately reflected this geological process. Rather than having a Dreamtime story of the creation of the river by the movement across the landscape of a giant Snake Creator Spirit, the creation of the river is attributed to two Ancestor Heroes. In other words, it is a record of the living memory of the geological process that had been witnessed over the period of human occupation, which probably exceeds 100,000 years.

Two Ancestor Heroes, Barwool and Yan-Yin, each decided to free their land from the great waters. Legend had it that a previous Ancestor-Hero, Moyarra, had tried to free the land from water by digging a channel south to the sea, but had to give up. This story is geologically correct, because when Yarra Glen-Upper Yarra area was a huge inland sea, it emptied south from Woori Yallock down toward Tooradin.

So Yan-Yin began digging a channel south with his stone axe to free Morang from water, and in doing so created the Plenty Gorge. At the same time Barwool started digging a channel east to free Moorool from water and in doing so created the Warrandyte Gorge.

Unaware of the other's work, when they met at Bulleen they decided to join forces, but they first had a rest. This is why Bulleen means 'resting place'. Barwool and Yan-Yin continued, and wore out many stone axes before finally cutting the Kew Gorge. All the water from Morang, Moorool and Bulleen then poured out onto the plain called Jillong. The water made a great lake called Narm, now known as Port Phillip Bay.

It is astounding how close this story is to the actual geological processes involved, but it is something by which I am no longer surprised. Many of the Dreamtime stories I have read are compatible with scientific theories such as the Big Bang, geophysics and evolution. All

you have to do is not just dismiss the stories as primitive folk tales and instead look more deeply.

There is only one more story to relate about the history of the Yarra, and that is how it actually got its present-day name. The Woiwurrung name for the river is Birrarung, which means 'River of Mists'. However, the river actually got its present name by courtesy of John Helder Wedge, the surveyor belonging to John Batman's Port Phillip Syndicate.

After meeting with the Woiwurrung in 1835, Batman returned to Tasmania, leaving the rest of his party camped at Indented Head, now Geelong. This included five of the seven Sydney Aboriginal men who had accompanied him as guides and interpreters.

In August 1835 Wedge came from Tasmania to do some survey work and the two Sydney men, Stewart and Bulbalong, returned with him. After completing his survey work at Geelong, Wedge, Stewart and Bulbalong were sailed to Melbourne by the colonist Thompson, and two Wathurong men, Joanjoan and Diabering.

The six men sailed across the bay and up the river to the Queen Street Falls. On approaching the falls, one of the Sydney men exclaimed 'Yarra! Yarra!', meaning 'waterfall' in their language. Wedge however thought they were saying it was the name of the river.

It was only when they were returning to Geelong by foot that Wedge realised his error. On reaching the ford on the Werribee River, his guides again exclaimed 'Yarra'. Wedge duly noted his mistake in his diary, but it was too late. The river's name had now been irrevocably changed from Birrarung to Yarra.

Unfortunately, there are still many official histories of the Yarra that recycle the mistaken belief that the men with Wedge were Woiwurung and that 'Yarra' was therefore a Woiwurung word meaning 'ever flowing'. It was however just our first urban myth, and the Woiwurrung word yarra actually means 'hair' and understandably, yarra-yarra means 'fur'.