

SIMON WONGA - THE ANIMAL WHISPERER



Simon Wonga 1821-1874

Many early settlers were amazed at how accurately Aboriginal people could mimic the calls and movements of animals, and the voices and mannerisms of people, but Simon Wonga was something else.

The son of Billibelleri, famed Woiwurrung Ngurungaeta (Headman, pronounced ung-uh-rung-eye-tuh), Simon Wonga became leader in 1851 at just 29 years of age. Prior to this Wonga had spent three years in the company of the Aboriginal Protector, William Thomas, so he could learn about 'Whitefella ways'. During this time Wonga demonstrated his amazing skills of mimicry. On one occasion in 1840 the pair camped at Bolin-Bolin Billabong in Bulleen, where there were some dozen settlers' huts nearby. Near midnight 19-year-old Wonga said to Thomas, 'You like to hear 'em fowl crow? When Thomas said yes, Wonga crowed twice like a cockerel and gained an immediate response from the other side of the river, but that was not the end of it. 'In less than half an hour Wonga had awoken the whole of the fowls. They were crowing in all directions on both sides of the river to Wonga's great amusement and I may add mine.'

On another occasion while traveling to a station in Yarra Glen, Wonga said to a disbelieving Thomas that he could call all the horses nearby to him. Wonga began neighing and within a few minutes Thomas' party was chaotically surrounded by upward of fifty horses. It was during this time with Thomas and through his friendship with the settler Rev. Clow, that Wonga conceived a plan for his people to learn white agricultural and stock management skills so they could eventually establish an economic base on a station of their own.

After becoming leader by 1851 he started hiring out teams of Aboriginal workers to learn these skills. When a new station opened up east of Warrandyte in the mid-1850's he approached the settler seeking work for his men. The settler then asked Wonga to demonstrate his mustering skills by rounding up a nearby herd of horses and driving them into a corral. Instead of getting on a horse and cracking a whip, Wonga opened the gate, began neighing like a lead stallion, and the horses all put themselves in the corral. Wonga then simply closed the gate, and the owner was so impressed he gave them all jobs and called his station 'Wonga Park'.