

FINDING LANKY MANTON

Growing up, I heard lots of stories about my great-grandfather's lifelong friendships with Aboriginal people, but one person in particular. However no reliable name was ever attached to this individual. All I knew was a number of fairly random facts. He had grown up from childhood with my great-grandfather Tom Chivers, and Tom's brother Willie. Tom was born in 1844 and Willie in 1840, so it seemed that their friend was between them in age. It seemed most likely that he was born between 1841 and 1843.

Another snippet was that their friend and his older brother had been in the group of youths taken to Hanging Rock for an initiation ceremony in November 1851, and that this involved the tribal leader Simon Wonga. Tom and Willie Chivers had attended this ceremony as guests. The impression was that their friend was the youngest in the group and his brother the oldest. This made his birthdate more likely to be 1841.

After disappearing for a while, there were then come stories about their friend going on wild rides between Healesville and Templestowe, on a chestnut horse. Tom's youngest daughter, my grandmother Ruby, remembered her father being visited by an Aboriginal man when she was about five in 1894.

The most detailed account however was in mid-1923 when my Aunty Isobel was aged five. She and her younger brother Harold were staying at their grandparents when an old Aboriginal man visited. He had come to say goodbye because Coranderrk Station was being closed down and that he and his family were being shifted to Lake Tyers. Aunty Isobel said the two men talked under a tree together in Aboriginal language for a few hours while she listened intently, without understanding a word. During the visit 82 year old Uncle Willie, who by then was suffering dementia, slept in a wheelbarrow.

No matter how many enquiries I made with Aboriginal friends, I was never able to determine the identity of Tom's lifelong friend, but then around 2015 I had a breakthrough. I found a document that gave the names and ages of the last six elderly residents at Coranderrk when it closed in 1924. By far the oldest man was a person named Lanky Manton whose age was estimated variously around eighty. Surely this had to be him?

So I began to research Lanky Manton's background. He was said to have come to Coranderrk from Swan Hill about 1870. He had been working there as a drover, when the Bourke and Wills expedition went through in September 1860. However, the year quoted on his birth certificate was 1853, meaning he was an impossible seven years of age working as a drover. I then turned up a photo of Lanky Manton, saying he had died in 1929, which was true. But the problem was that the photo had been taken in 1932. The answer was that here had in fact been two people named Lanky Manton. Both had taken the surname of their employer, but they had been born 12 years apart.

Armed with this information I scoured the diaries of the Aboriginal Protector William Thomas, who had recorded his daily activities for 28 years from 1839 to 1867. Thomas made frequent mention of an Elder named Lanky Murrum who had a son, Ben Lanky, who had been born in June 1841. So I tracked these references to the Lanky family and found an amazing number of coincidences with our family oral history.

Murrum and his wife Mary had lived in the Templestowe area and had another son who was eight years older than Ben. Murrum was also good friends with Simon Wonga and was in the deputation of Elders who met with William Thomas in February 1859, seeking to establish an Aboriginal Station at Acheron in the Upper Goulburn. After this, all reference to Lanky Murrum ceased, so I was forced to the conclusion he had died at Acheron around 1860. This dovetailed nicely into the fact that Ben Lanky had in 1860 at age 18, shifted to Sawn Hill to take up droving. He took the surname of his employer, and become Lanky Manton, with another Lanky Manton being age seven. Ben Lanky then moved to Coranderrk Station in the Yarra Valley about 1870, with the other Lanky Manton staying on in Swan Hill. Their two biographies still remain confused.

At Coranderrk, Lanky Manton married Annie Rees, raised a family and re-established contact with Tom and Willie Chivers at Templestowe. After making his last visit to Templestowe in 1923, he and Annie finally agreed to being shifted to Lake Tyers in East Gippsland in 1927. The now toothless 86 year old Lanky took with him his prize possession, a meat-grinder he referred to as his false teeth. Lanky and Annie were taken to Melbourne for the train trip to Gippsland and for the first time Lanky saw the electric lights of Melbourne. He drily commented that: *'It beats my firestick holler, but not in the bush, because you can't carry lectric wires around.'*

Lanky died at Lake Tyers in 1929 at age 88, as the last initiated man in Victoria.