

THE SPECIAL MONTH OF AUGUST

When I was researching the Aboriginal seasons in Melbourne a few years back I was interested to see that some horticulturalists had identified six Aboriginal seasons in the Yarra Valley. These seasons were labelled as High Summer, Late Summer, Early Winter, Deep Winter, Early Spring and True Spring'.

It was an interesting conceptualisation, but did not account for what Aboriginal people had to do in a particular season. Nor did it account for the lunar calendar which I knew Aboriginal people used. My particular interest at this time however was the 'Early Spring' period as there was an unaccounted ninth lunar month from the third to the thirtieth of August.

The early spring period that horticulturalists had identified was seen to start about the end of July or beginning of August, and was heralded by the blooming of wattle trees at the end of their 'Deep Winter' period. However I could not find any Aboriginal source material to agree or disagree with the 'Early Spring' season.

Fortunately, I happened to bump into Mick Harding whom I had known for a few years. Mick is a Senior Taungerong (Goulburn River) Elder and a fantastic artist and wood carver. He uses traditional Victorian geometric patterns as his inspiration. Mick is also Chairman of the Victorian Aboriginal Heritage Council.

Knowing that Aboriginal seasons were defined by activities as well as weather patterns, I asked Mick what was the name and principal task of this early spring season. Without hesitation, Mick just said 'August is Bark Harvest Season'.

Mick then went on to explain that this was the time of the year when the sap started to rise in the trees and they gave up their bark more easily. After the August period the bark increasingly stuck like glue to the tree. This of course made immediate sense to me and a lot of other bits of information began to click into place in my mind.

Harvesting bark at this time of year also provided new canoes in time for the October floods. Before the Upper Yarra dam was built in 1956 flooding used to occur annually in the Yarra Valley and in my childhood, kids spent a lot of time in winter making rafts. Harvesting bark in August also gave the tree a better chance of healing before the heat of summer.

It had also occurred to me that almost all the scarred canoe trees I had seen, had the scar on the south-east side of the tree. This was no coincidence, because this aspect also gave the tree the best chance of healing. In Victoria the sun is of course in the north, so in the hottest part of the day the sun beats down from the north and north-west. The prevailing winds in Victoria are from the south-west and north-west, so having the scar on the south-east side also protects the tree from the desiccating westerly summer winds.

If you want to see an excellent example of what I am talking about, go and have a look at the 500 year old Red River Gum scarred tree at Heide Museum of Modern Art in Templestowe Road Bulleen. The tree stands in the upper car park. A canoe was cut from the tree a couple of hundred years ago and it epitomises what I have been talking about.

The tree is named 'Yingabeal' which basically means in Woiwurrung 'Songline Marker Tree'. If you are interested to know more, Woiwurrung Elder Bill Nicholson and I did videos which can be accessed simply by Googling 'Yingabeal Culture Victoria'.

Apart from August being 'Bark Harvest Season' this month has also assumed great importance for Woiwurrung people, because since colonial times many of their leaders have died in this month. It started with the Headman Bebejern, who died from the common cold in August 1836. This was only a year after the famed meeting with Batman on the Plenty River at Greensborough in 1835. Bebejern was buried at the Merri Creek and Yarra junction in traditional knees under the chin position and sheeted in bark.

His successor, Billibelleri, died of pneumonia ten years later on 9th August 1846 and was buried in the same ceremonial fashion at the same Merri Creek location. Billibelleri was ultimately succeeded by his son Simon Wonga and whilst Wonga did not die in August, but in December 1874 from tuberculosis, it is interesting to note the progression of symptoms from common cold, to pneumonia to tuberculosis.

William Barak, who succeeded Wonga as Headman, became the most famed of all Woiwurrung leaders. He was also a renowned painter, singer, diplomat and chronicler of his people's history and culture. Barak died at age eighty on 15th August 1903. Finally, Winnie Quogliotti who founded the Wurundjeri Tribe Council in 1985, died three years later on 4th August 1988.