

LET US CELEBRATE WONGA DAY ON MAY 24

Simon Wonga's father, Billibelleri, was paramount leader of the five Kulin tribes in Central Victoria from 1836 until he died in 1846. Wonga was by then twenty-five and had been groomed for leadership. This was not because he was Billibelleri's son, it was solely on merit. Wonga's his innate ability, character and knowledge made him the standout choice.

However Wonga had just got married, was grieving his father's death and also did not feel he was ready. So in 1846 the leadership passed to Berberry, who was Billibelleri's younger brother and the number two man of the Kulin. Four years later in October 1850, the government finally approved Billibelleri's long standing request to establish an Aboriginal Reserve at Pound Bend in Warrandyte. So on hearing this, Wonga decided he was ready for leadership. Berberry willingly stepped aside and Wonga then began activating his plan for the survival of his people.

This was to gain employment for his people in stock mustering, crop growing and building construction, so that they would be able to establish an economic base for themselves as well as preserve their culture. It took another decade but ultimately he secured a government grant of land to establish Coranderrk Station at Healesville in 1863. It was an achievement against all odds that showed his strategic brilliance.

Unfortunately, gold was discovered at Warrandyte in 1851 and this compromised the viability of the Reserve at Pound Bend. A new Reserve was consequently declared at Woori-Yallock, only for gold to be found there as well. However the meagre gold at Warrandyte and Woori Yallock was soon vastly overshadowed by the discoveries at Ballarat and Bendigo.

Curiously, the Ballarat and Bendigo gold discoveries turned out to be an advantage to Wonga's plans. With workers deserting their employment and flooding to the goldfields, it inadvertently drove up Aboriginal work opportunities and wages. Wonga was therefore able to get contract work for Aboriginal people on farms up the Plenty and Yarra valleys. Wonga, in fact, won the contract to build the first public house in Warrandyte. It's a pity his name is not commemorated in some way at the present day Warrandyte pub.

With the disbandment of the Native Police in 1853, Simon Wonga's cousin, William Barak, joined Wonga at Wonga Park. When the Reverend John Green then arrived at Wonga Park in 1858, he proved to be a most valuable ally. All three of them maintained a most fruitful relationship over the next sixteen years.

In February 1859, Wonga received information that a settler in the Upper Goulburn had abandoned his run. Wonga knew it was prime land, so he led a deputation of Elders to see the Aboriginal Protector William Thomas on a Sunday morning on 28th February 1859. The deputation also included my great-great-grandfather's friend, Murrum-Murrum, who was by then, the number two Taungerong man.

Thomas got approval from the Lands Department for them to claim the land at Acheron, so Wonga, Barak and others left Melbourne, to establish Acheron Station in March 1859. They were later joined by Reverend Green and others from Woori Yallock.

Over the next two years, Wonga and the Kulin people made a great success of the venture, but they were ultimately cheated out of the land by neighbouring squatters Hugh Glass and Peter Snodgrass. Glass, a land speculator, was the richest man in Victoria and Snodgrass a Parliamentarian. Even back then, Glass was reputed to be bribing an estimated three hundred parliamentarians and government officials.

After a couple of years at Acheron, the Kulin were forced onto bleak and inhospitable land near Cathedral Mountain. People started dying like flies, so in early 1863, when Wonga got wind of another opportunity, they quit the land. Wonga, Barak and Green led the remnants of their group across the Great Dividing Range, via the Black's Spur Songline, to present day Healesville where they claimed land there.

Wonga had learned his lessons well. The demise of Pound Bend, Woori-Yallock and Acheron had shown him he would get nothing from the parliamentarians. So he went over their heads. On May 24th 1863 which was Queen Victoria's birthday, Wonga led an Aboriginal deputation to Government House. They presented gifts of woven baskets, artefacts and possum skin rugs to Sir Henry Barkley for '*The Good Queen Mother*' and the just married Prince of Wales. Then Wonga presented a petition for the land at Coranderrk.

Immediately afterward, Sir Henry summoned the government leader and told him in no uncertain terms that if the grant of land was not made immediately, '*the Queen would not be happy*'. The result was that a month later, the land grant at Coranderrk was duly approved. Over the next decade, Coranderrk became socially and economically the most successful Mission in Australian history, until Wonga died in 1874.

So May 24 should not be remembered as Empire Day, as it was until 1958, it should be fittingly celebrated as '*Wonga Day*' and mark the start of Reconciliation Week each year in Victoria.