

THE FIRST WARRANDYTE FESTIVAL IN 1852

This year, in March 2022, the Warrandyte Festival will again be celebrated after a two year hiatus due to Covid. It is forty-five years since this modern version of the festival began, but it will in fact be the 170th anniversary of the first ever Warrandyte Festival. This was held in March 1852, and it was the last ever great Gaggip of the Kulin Nation.

In late 1850 the colonial government had finally agreed to establish an Aboriginal Reserve at Pound Bend, so Simon Wonga, who had been living near Dandenong, moved to Warrandyte. He was then at the beginning of 1851, invited to take up the role of supreme leader of the Kulin Federation. In his four years at Dandenong, Wonga had developed a plan for the survival of his people. This was for them to gain employment with local settlers, so they could develop the farming and construction skills necessary to establish an independent economic base.

In order for his people to say goodbye to much of their traditional life, Wonga decided to hold one last Gaggip and play all the traditional games. So toward the end of 1851, Wonga despatched messengers to the tribes around Port Phillip Bay, saying that a Gaggip would take place in March 1852.

On hearing this, Murrum, an Elder who was a close friend of my great-great-grandfather, John Chivers, approached Wonga with a suggestion. He said that since the arrival of white men, a lot of young men had lost their culture. Many had drifted away to the urban fringes and lost themselves in alcohol, violence and degradation.

Murrum had started to go down such a path, but with the death of Wonga's father, Billibelleri, five years before in 1846, he had redirected his life. Murrum had taken his two sons out of the Aboriginal Protector's school at Merri Creek and taken them bush, to teach them to be '*real blackfellahs*'. Murrum then suggested to Wonga that all the young men who had kept their culture should be rewarded with formal initiation, so they could then participate in the Gaggip as adults.

Wonga readily agreed that it was a good idea, but had to be acted on straight away. This was because it was already November, which was the start of the traditional season for the initiation ceremonies for young men. Ngyelong, (ung-eye-uh-long) now known as Hanging Rock, was the most important Kulin initiation site for men, so they would have to leave straight away.

Murrum was grateful for Wonga's agreement as Headman, but told him there was a problem. He had established a close friendship with a local settler, John Chivers, whose wife had died the previous year. So whenever John was away carting goods to other parts of the colony, Murrum and his family looked after John's two sons, Willie and Tom. Both these boys had learnt the language and embraced the culture, but right now Murrum and his wife were caring for Willie and Tom, so he could not leave them behind.

Wonga did not hesitate and told Murrum that the future of their people lay not only with Aboriginal people embracing the economic realities of the white man's world, but with white people embracing the Aboriginal world, just as Willie, Tom and their father had done.

Ultimately, Willie and Tom made the trek to Hanging Rock and to my knowledge are the only white boys ever to attend a male initiation ceremony in Victoria. An old great-uncle in telling me the story that had been told to him by his father Tom, said cryptically '*they sang all the way*'. I only realised many years later this meant they had learnt the 'Song to Hanging Rock' encoding the travel directions along the Songlines they followed.

The half dozen boys, whom Willie nearly 12 and Tom aged 7 had accompanied, returned home as men with Mohawk style hairdos, ritual chest scarring and knowledge of adult dances and body painting. This included Murrum's sons Billy 17 the oldest, and Ben 10 the youngest of the group. They accordingly participated in the 1852 Warrandyte Gaggip as fully fledged adults.

John, and his sons Tom and Willie were invited guests, and along with many other curious settlers they attended and watched the many different events. For the next fourteen days they watched the daily and nightly performances of all the traditional games and dances.

Probably the most exciting of these games the settlers witnessed was the game of Aboriginal football called Marngrook. A hundred or more players were often involved in these matches which lasted about five hours. The most memorable feature of the game was the way in which Aboriginal men launched themselves on the backs of others, to catch the possum-skin ball in flight six feet in the air.

And the AFL still refuses to believe Marngrook was a precursor to Australian Rules football.