

## Billibelleri (c1791-1846) An Astute Leader in Testing Times

Born about 1791, Billibelleri's Home Country was the Moonee Ponds Creek, Merri Creek and Darebin Creek valleys. As a child Billibelleri demonstrated the prodigious memory required to continually learn songs, stories, and ceremonies and so ultimately progress to high status.

This was evident by him becoming Wurundjeri Songman around 1828 after the smallpox plague of 1828. Like the first smallpox plague of 1789 the second plague of 1828 wiped out a whole generation of Elders.

Songman was the second most senior tribal position, and required all tribal council decisions to be coded into songs and ceremonies for transmission and dissemination.

Following the death in 1836 of Woiwurung Headman Bebejern, Billibelleri was invited to fill the role. With British colonisation having begun the year before in 1835, Billibelleri was faced with crisis and change at every level. Having been warned for many years by the escaped convict William Buckley that any resistance would result in wholesale slaughter, Billibelleri decided he had to try and help his people adapt to the new world as best they could.

Over the course of the next ten years as Headman, Billibelleri proved himself to be an adroit diplomat, negotiator and strategist, albeit from a very inferior power base. With the arrival of the well-meaning but sanctimonious and relatively powerless Aboriginal Protector William Thomas in early 1839, Billibelleri fostered a close relationship with him.

When Billibelleri's 18 year old son Wonga badly injured his foot on Mount Dandenong in September 1839 and was nursed back to health by William Thomas and his wife Suzannah, it proved to be a stroke of luck. Although Wonga was back in full health in a couple of months, Billibelleri instructed his son to stay with Thomas and learn all he could of 'whitefella ways'. Wonga accordingly kept company with Thomas in his work for the next four years, and this ultimately shaped the survival of Wurundjeri people into the present day.

Billibelleri and Wonga were often exasperated by the constant sermonising of Thomas about his all-seeing, almighty and vengeful God, as well as his frequent attempts at social climbing with the squattocracy. However whenever an issue arose involving any lower status members of colonial society, Thomas proved to be a powerful ally and advocate for Aboriginal people.

By mid-1840 public concern was mounting over the presence of an Aboriginal camp on the outskirts of Melbourne where the Botanic Gardens are now sited. Thomas was consequently ordered by Governor LaTrobe to *'itinerate with the natives'* and find a site for a reserve away from Melbourne.

Billibelleri led the troop to his first choice, the Bolin-Bolin Billabong near Heidelberg. However this was rejected by Thomas as being *'too close to civilization'*. Billibelleri's second choice was Pound Bend at Warrandyte, but this was also rejected. Billibelleri then left the party in exasperation and told his son Wonga to take over the task.

Wonga then led the troop south from Bolin-Bolin down the Dandenong Creek valley. Wonga then chose a site at Nerre-Nerre Warren, north of Dandenong in September 1840. However no economic base was ever established at the Reserve apart from government handouts, and it was therefore doomed from the start.

In 1842 the Native Police Force was established and it was also located at the Nerre-Nerre Warren Reserve. Billibelleri gave his patronage to the force and was given honorary officer status and a uniform. He also persuaded Bebejern's son, Barak, to join the Native Police. However in late 1843 the Native Police troop was taken on a punitive expedition to Portland, where they were involved in the massacre of 17 Mara people. In response Billibelleri immediately withdrew his support for the Native Police.

By this time in December 1843 the Reserve at Nerre-Nerre Warren had already collapsed. William Thomas subsequently established his residence at the junction of the Merri Creek and Yarra River which was adjacent to an Aboriginal camp already there. In 1845 Thomas established a Baptist school at Merri Creek for the education of the children of the camp.

Billibelleri again threw his support behind the initiative, sending his own children there to learn how to read and write. His son Munnarin proved to be one of the brightest students and was being groomed to follow in the footsteps of his older brother, Wonga. However over the following year Billibelleri began to sicken as the cold he had caught entrenched itself as pneumonia. Billibelleri eventually died on 9<sup>th</sup> August 1846 at age 55 and was buried with Bebejern at the Merri Creek junction with the Yarra.