

SIMON WONGA –A MAN OF DESTINY

Simon Wonga was in my view the single most important figure in the survival of the Kulin people during the colonial period. To show you the esteem in which I hold Simon Wonga, to me he stands alongside Sir John Monash as the two greatest Victorians ever. This is notwithstanding that General Monash virtually won the First World War for the Allies. Big call, but let me tell you something of Wonga's life and achievements in this and three following articles and you can judge for yourself.

Wonga was born at Woori-Yallock in 1821. As indicated previously, he was present as a thirteen year old at the 'Treaty' meeting with Batman on the Plenty River at Greensborough in 1835. Wonga was the son of Billibelleri who had become Headman of the Wurundjeri in 1836.

A quick learner with a prodigious memory, Wonga was marked out for tribal leadership at an early age. It was irrelevant that his father was tribal leader, because Aboriginal leadership is decided only on merit. This includes conditions of knowledge and character. At eighteen years of age in 1839 Wonga was sent on a Walkabout trial to Mount Dandenong, but badly injured his foot. Without food or water for four days Wonga was close to death when his father finally found him. Billibelleri then piggy-backed his son to the station of the settler at Ferntree Gully, Reverend Clow, who contacted the Aboriginal Protector, William Thomas.

Over the next few months Wonga was nursed back to full health by Thomas and his wife, but Billibelleri instructed Wonga to stay with the protector and learn what he could of Whitefellow ways. Over the next four years Wonga helped Thomas establish the Aboriginal Reserve at Nerre-Nerre Warren near where Reverend Clow had his main station in present day Knox. Clow had rather unconventional views for a man of that time. He believed that Aboriginal people should be given control of their own areas of land to establish an economic base like white people, growing crops and managing livestock. It was a view that Wonga quickly adopted.

When Billibelleri died in August 1846, Wonga, at barely twenty-five was asked by the Elders to be Headman of the whole Kulin federation. He then began to put his plan into action by getting teams of Aboriginal men and women to gain employment on the farms of local settlers, so they could learn crop cultivation, building construction and livestock management skills.

At first he was not successful, but with the advent of the gold rush in 1851 many white workers deserted their employers. This drove up the opportunities and wages of Aboriginal workers. As local people are well aware, the gold rush actually began in Warrandyte, but it is not well known that Wonga in fact won the contract with a publican from Richmond, to build the first beer hut in Warrandyte.

After the work was done the publican tried to pay Wonga less than the agreed sum. Aboriginal people had no standing at court and could not give evidence, so the publican thought he was on a safe bet. However, Wonga went to William Thomas who was also a magistrate, and Thomas threatened to personally sue the publican if he didn't pay up.

Ten years before the gold rush began Billibelleri had tried to get Pound Bend declared an Aboriginal Reserve. It was finally gazetted in 1851, only for the gold rush to make it unworkable. Wonga could see that tribal life was finished, so he organised one last great corroboree at Pound Bend in March 1852. At this first ever Warrandyte Festival 165 years ago, Wonga and his people said farewell to their traditional life.

After the corroboree, Wonga continued arranging contract labour whilst negotiating with the government to gain suitable land 'to farm like Whitefellahs'. Ultimately he gained land at Coranderrk and it became economically and socially the most successful Reserve in Australian history. When Wonga died in December 1874 his cousin William Barak succeeded him as Headman.

The only part of the story left to tell is how Wonga Park got its name. When a new station was set up near Warrandyte in the mid 1850's, Wonga sought employment for his men. Asked if they could muster horses, Wonga said yes, so the owner pointed to a herd of horses in the distance, inviting Wonga to round them up and put them in the corral. Expecting Wonga to get on a horse and crack a whip, he was surprised when Wonga instead went to the corral, opened the gate and started neighing like a lead stallion. Within minutes fifty horses had put themselves in the corral and Wonga simply closed the gate.

The owner was so impressed that he gave them all jobs and named his new station Wonga Park.