

THE FIRST WARRANDYTE FESTIVAL IN 1852

In March each year the Warrandyte Festival is celebrated but it is much more than a couple of decades old. In fact the first recorded Warrandyte Festival was held in March 1852, this being the last ever great Gaggip of the Kulin Nation.

As Warrandyte people well know, the great Victorian gold rush began here in April 1851. At that time Simon Wonga was the Headman of the Kulin Federation and only a couple of months before he had finally got agreement of the government to establish a Reserve at Pound Bend. His plan was to gain employment with local settlers for groups of his men and women, so that they could develop the necessary farming skills to succeed economically in this new world. However over the latter half of 1851 the gold rush showed that the livestock station and produce farm that Wonga envisaged, would now not be sustainable at Pound Bend.

Wonga therefore decided to hold one last Gaggip and play all the traditional games so that his people would have an opportunity to say goodbye to their tribal life. 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 to be acted on straight away. November was the traditional time for the adult initiation ceremonies for men, which was now. However, the initiation site on Dandenong Mountain was occupied by settlers, so the ceremony would have to be conducted at Ngeyelong, now known as Hanging Rock.

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 Gaggip as fully fledged adults. John, 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.