

NEWSPAPER ARTICLES

INDIGENOUS HISTORY

1895: A WHITE WAIF

A WHITE WAIF BY M. F. My little story dates back to somewhere in the thirties, on the Little River, or the Kiewa, as it is better known now. There are a few of the old pioneers still living who, talking of early reminiscences make mention of the little white, golden haired waif who wandered with the tribe of almost wild blacks.

While settlement was then only in its infancy, and little intercourse did the blacks wish to have with them, maybe half divining that the intruders who settled in the heart of their hunting grounds were the enemies of their race, though it could scarcely have been foreseen that this great tribe — with their innumerable mia-mia under the shade of their Murrumurangbong, whose kings ruled the vast territory of the Kiewa valley — would, in the short space of four decades, be but a reminiscence.

Amid these wild scenes, and in such strange companionship, was the young white girl found by the settlers. How she came to be with the blacks none knew, though many are the efforts made to discover her origin or history. The blacks were silent when questioned, or when a bribe of rum was offered they would mutter in broken, unintelligible English. They guarded her with jealous care, an old and hideous lubra being specially deputed to this task. Failing to obtain any information from the dusky sons of the soil, the whites sought for this elsewhere, but the few settlers separated by great distances, and the origin of the 'White Waif ' as they called her, remained a mystery.

The story in best favour was the following — A man and wife had, a few years before left the then only settled part of the Upper Murray, taking with them their only child, a girl. They purposed to cross over to the homestead of Bowler, the only white settler then living on the Mitta Mitta. Roads were then unknown, but with the aid of a compass and two horses they started on their fatal journey, intending to strike the head waters of Forest Creek, which feeds Lake Finlay one of the most picturesque lakes of this colony, an which is situated on the table-land of a lofty range. Upon this foundation, with a few shreds of information obtained, from, the blacks, my story rests.

The travellers camped on a tributary of Dry Forest Creek, and the horses having strayed during the night, the man went in search of them. Not returning, the wife, cooeing vainly for her lost husband, perished in the bush as was probably the fate of her partner. Be that as it may, the creek bears today the name of Cooeeing Woman Creek and many are the weird tales told by stockman and boundary rider of a woman's cooe being heard in the still hours of the night.

The horses arrived safely at Mitta Mitta and pieces of saddle were brought in long afterwards by the blacks; but the man and wife were never seen or heard of again.

If the little girl — the ' White Waif,' — was the child of these parents, and survived the night that was so fatal to them, it was only to meet its cruel end in later years. Mr Mitchell, owner of Tangambalanga, whose station of that name is situated on the banks of the Kiewa, was a true friend to the blacks. It was through his efforts that the large track of land set apart by Government as a reserve for them was long kept intact, and it was not till later years, when the Free Selection Act came into force, that it was finally cut up.

It was then no longer needed, as only one of that once mighty tribe was left to mourn for the spirit of his dead chief, "Murrac," and his lost tribe's greatness. And, incidentally, it may be mentioned that Old Neddy Wheeler, from a camp of the Lower Murray, revisits the scene of his childhood's home on a pass annually given by the Government.

Mrs Mitchell was a Christian woman, and her whole mind was centred in rescuing the little white girl, from her questionable position.

Along the river's banks, quite close under the station, willow trees had been planted to prevent the sides from falling in.

This was a favourite place for the blacks to fish, and here the white waif was often to be seen sitting under the shade of the weeping willow, whose branches met overhead and then drooped till their leaves kissed the surface of the stream.

This was her favourite spot, and she would sit here for hours, listening to the sighing of the wind, or watching the unceasing ripple of the water as it flowed onward to the Murray. But this quiet scene was soon to be changed.

The annual corroboree and grand hunting tour that always took place in the verdant months of spring, when the wattles, blooming high up on the mountain side, vied with those on the river bank, and made a scene of peaceful loveliness, in weird contrast to the wild orgies of the blacks.

When this time of savage festivity came round the neighbouring tribes from along the Murray and other places would meet, and when all would assemble, armed with the nulla nulla, the boomerang and the spear, these wild children of the forest, clad with only a piece of blanket round their waists, presented a strange and warlike appearance.

Bromby's Creek, under the shade of old Big Ben, one of the highest peaks of the chain of mountains that stretches away southwards towards Mount Bogong, was the place chosen for the first corroboree. And it was here that Mrs Mitchell, aided by a young Englishman named Evans, determined to make an effort to rescue the white girl.

1895: A WHITE WAIF (continued)

On the afternoon of a bright spring day Will Evans left the station with a led horse taking the valley of Kiewa for his course, and keeping his gaze steadily fixed on the outline of Big Ben, the foot of which was to be his destination. Did some warning of his coming fate flit across his mind, or was it the sweet scent of the wattle borne on the evening wind that brought to him thoughts of the English hawthorn and those he had left behind in the dear old home country. It was just dusk as he came in sight of the camp fires.

He dismounted and tethered the horses, when a wild yell arose, which filled the young man with a temporary fear that he had been discovered. It was, however, only the commencement of the blacks night revelry.

The deep ravines and gullies caught up the sound and rang it out on the still night air; and old Big Ben, as if awakened from a long sleep, gave back the echoes a hundred-fold. The old lubra was a little away from the rest with her charge, uttering at intervals low moanings, while the little girls head was buried in the blanket of the old gin, as if to shut out the discordant noises.

The young man pulled himself together, for, he too, felt the strange weirdness of the scene, made a rush for the little girl, and catching her in his arms, made off.

The old lubra seemed incapable of utterance; but the girl gave a quick sharp cry — the death warrant of herself and her rescuer. The torches used by the savages in their wild dances, attention being attracted by that cry, lighted the flying figure of the white man, and spears and boomerangs hurtled round him in hundreds.

A spear entered the little "White Waif's " heart and she died without a struggle, and Evans was mortally wounded, speared through the neck. He made a great effort to reach the horses, but his strength failing, he turned his face to his enemies, threw up his arms, and fell dead by the side of the girl he had risked his life to save.

The blacks, seeing they had killed their child queen, spent the remainder of the night in lamentation, but, guessing that avengers would soon be on their track, they broke up and dispersed. Next morning Evans and the child were found lying side by side where they had fallen.

They were buried in graves close together under the willows, where the "White Waif" loved to sit, and where the wind, playing upon the leaves, still sings a gentle requiem over her grave.

Neddy Wheeler stories

1850's

Aboriginal people from the Mitta Mitta and Little River districts, to the east of the Ovens goldfield, paid regular visits with possum rugs for sale. 'Neddy Wheeler', an Aboriginal man from the Yackandandah region in the 1850s was widely known to trade extensively in 'valuable' possum skins and lyre bird tails for the millinery industry.

Source: Excerpt from "Black Gold" – Fred Cahir 2012

1908:

The Disappearing Aboriginals;- — The Rutherglen 'Sun' says: — 'Gradually the few remaining descendants of the native owners of Australia are disappearing, death during the last few years having claimed many aboriginals. In this district a few natives have kept to the banks of Lake Moodemere and made it their camping ground. On Good Friday it was reported to Constable Finlay- I eon, of Wahguuyah, that the aboriginal named Neddy Wheeler had died. Neddy was a well-known character, and frequently visited Rutherglen. He was about 68 years of age, and a native of Narragong, Mitta Mitta.

Source: "NOTES ON CURRENT EVENTS."

Albury Banner and Wodonga Express
(NSW : 1896 - 1938) 1 May 1908: 26.

<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article100762868>

1946:

Mr Robert Seaton, of Sandy Creek, introduces me to one of the famous Upper Murray characters of many years ago, Neddy Wheeler, an aborigine. He writes that Neddy was a notable in the Upper Murray, Kiewa, and Corowa districts, and when he was in Corowa almost 40 years ago postcards of Neddy were on sale at the newsagents and stationers shops.

Mr Seaton then tells of an occasion when Neddy walked into a roadside hotel in the Kiewa district carrying a gin bottle half full of water. At his request the landlady filled the bottle with gin. Neddy then declared that he would pay next time. The landlady, however, insisted that he pay cash, and finally, when she was adamant in face of his continued promises, Neddy said: "All right, missus, you take your gin out of my bottle and give me back my water." He won.

Source" "Doncaster's Turf Round." The Argus
(Melbourne, Vic. : 1848 - 1957) 8 Mar 1946: 5.Web.4

<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article22232810>

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INDIGENOUS HISTORY

1866:

Aborigines at Tangambalanga

Mr. Thomas Mitchell has been good enough to give the following information respecting the condition of the aborigines under his care. Of the Tangambalanga tribe there are only eleven persons left; and of the Upper Murray tribe sixteen:

"The condition of the aborigines has considerably improved since the supplies from the Central Board have been regularly distributed to them.

"They get their rations about once every month. The married ones get forty pounds of flour, sixteen pounds of sugar, one pound of tea, three quarters of a pound of tobacco, and a pound and a half of soap, at one time. The single ones do not get them at any stated time; they wander from place to place, and come back when they are in want of food or clothing. They all get their blankets and tomahawks as soon as these are known to have arrived.

"The blacks are almost all fond of intoxicating drinks, but I have never known any of them to dispose of their food or clothing to obtain them. It is hardly possible to prevent them from obtaining drink, as they have as good a right to spend what they earn as a white man. The young men get a pound or two occasionally by cutting bark, tailing cattle, &c. ; this they almost always lay out in drink, and treat all hands at the camp. They are not at all selfish amongst themselves, but they are so as regards the whites.

"The only game they kill is opossums, the skins of which they make into cloaks and dispose of, but I do not think they have made many of late years. They fish as usual. The fish are not so numerous as they used to be, in consequence, I presume, of several parties having made

December 1887:

Kergunyah School Picnic and Neddy Wheeler

GUNDOWRING. (FROM OUR OWN CORRESPONDENT.) On Friday, 9th instant, the good folks of Kergunyah held their proposed picnic and ball. The day was fine, but hot. The children's races came off very well, an ample number of toys having been provided as prizes. A booth was erected at the end of the school, and furnished with a table for the benefit of those desirous of refreshing the inner man (or woman). The proceedings were varied by a somewhat unusual feature at a school picnic, viz., a hurdle-jumping contest for animals of the equine persuasion-prize, a 15a breastplate.

More sport not in the programme was provided by a "coloured gentleman" from Kiewa, belonging to that now rare species of bird, the Australian aboriginal, and rejoicing in the name of Neddy Wheeler. Mounted on an ancient moke of the "crows-meat" variety, Neddy cut various capers in forcing this spirited animal over the lower rail of a broken fence. On one occasion the steeplechaser propped with an equal proportion of its legs on each side of the fence, our sable friend coming over his head, and pulling off the bridle at the same time.

1900: Death of a Pioneer who in the early days had "a great deal of trouble with the blacks"

DEATH OF A PIONEER. It is with much regret that we have to record the death of one of the oldest pioneers of the Yackandandah district, Mr Charles Kinchington, which took place on Wednesday night, 19th inst. This family was the first to explore Yackandandah Creek, and they settled down on an extensive run at Kergunyah, subsequently extending their run to Yackandandah.

About the same time Mr F. Street came over and took up Baranduda, and Mr Barber took up Gundowring. At that time, of course, there was no Victoria, and no gold mining. The Kinchington family had a first a great deal of trouble with the blacks, and both Mrs Charles and Mr George Kinchington have from time to time related interesting stories of the early days.

1848: *The Period of Australian Volcanoes: Bogong moths*

Paying a graceful tribute to the memory of the lamented Robert Ramsay for his efforts to retain the aboriginal nomenclature, he said the only high mountain in Victoria which had preserved its original name was the Cobbores (?).

It appears the original name of the Buffalo was Daw-daw-abonga, the meaning of which is lost, the Horn was called Dudjera Gingba and the Hump, Ned-dy-weela-the Saxon may preserve the last as Neddy Wheeler.

Bogong means a moth, and once a year the natives repaired to the mountains for the express purpose of fattening on these moths, which inhabit our alpine heights in myriads. The whites heard the blackfellows say at their departure, "Me go catchem bogong" and concluded that Bogong must mean "mountain" hence the misnomer of our highest alp.

Yet in one respect the name is justified -there are countless hosts of bogongs on the Bogong. In "Black'r big cairn" about 12ft high, there are millions of them, and we only wanted an aboriginal epicure among us to behold that rare-bit, moth-cake. The gin knead them into a kind of thick paste, sometimes baked in embers, and always delicious as ortolans to the aboriginal palate.

But the moth survives the blackfellow will the blowfly survive the whites?

Source:

"THE PERIOD OF AUSTRALIAN VOLCANOES."

The Argus (Melbourne, Vic. : 1848 - 1957)

14 Apr 1883: 4.

<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article8511328>

1908: "NEDDY WHEELER"

An article on Neddy Wheeler (the aboriginal King, who died recently in the Rutherglen district appears in the "Wagga Advertiser". From this the following interesting extracts are made:- In the homestead at Bringenbrong Station, situated at the confluence of the Indi and the Swampv River which constitute the head of the Murray, may be seen a photograph of Neddy arrayed in his State robes. The picture shows Neddy in the nude with a great possum rug robe across his loins; in his right hand is a club instead of a sceptre, and his expression is one of assumed dignity untainted by the poison of that cheap human vanity which hankers after the poor gew-gaws of civilised life.

Neddy was of average height, with a chest measurement of some 42 inches. As a matter of local history- not mere legend he was 50 years ago an invincible runner; could box skillfully; could ride even the fierce, unhandled "brumbies" which in thousands had their habitat in the country over which "The Man from Snowy river" was wont to make his dazzling rides for the inspiration of Mr A; B. Patterson; and was as much at home in the water as a Murray cod.

In its decadent period the tribe from which Neddy sprang was given a haven on Bringenbrong Station by 'the late' Mr Thomas Mitchell, who, with his brothers (Mr James Mitchell, of Tabletop, and Mr John F. H. Mitchell, of Ravenswood, Vic.), had been intimately associated with them as boys. The Mitchells learned to speak the Woradgery tongue with all the expression of the natives, and were even admitted to the ceremonies connected with some of the most sacred of the tribe's rites and customs. In those days Neddy was a "small boy" too, and the sons of the first white settlers mentioned were wont to spend their time fishing swimming, and hunting with the black boys.

The administration of the "sacrament" of "nurmung" was once witnessed by one of the Mitchells from under cover of the possum cloak of the then head of the tribe King George.

Later when, as the result of the flocking of the diggers to the Ovens district, measles, aggravated by rum, carried off the blacks like flies, the remnant of the tribe was given a home on Bringenbrong by the late Mr Thomas Mitchell. Here they gradually died out, and Neddy, in demonstration of the principle of the survival of the fittest, saw the last of his family and race. Afterwards in a spirit of restlessness he drifted off to fresh climes and pastures near? Lower? down the Murray River.

SOURCE: "NEDDY" WHEELER. (1908, May 8).

Wodonga and Towong Sentinel (Vic. : 1885 - 1954), p. 4.

<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article69550764>