

MYRNONG HARVEST AND MEN'S BUSINESS SEASON

The Australian native parsnip is so named because it looks like a small parsnip and tastes rather like one. Its Aboriginal name is myrnong and it grew in profusion all over eastern Australia in valleys and open plains. It could be dug up and eaten at any time of the year, but tasted the sweetest and best when its yellow, daisy like flower bloomed in late spring and early summer.

Myrnong was either eaten raw, roasted in baskets or cooked in pits with meat or fish. It was a staple part of Kulin diet all year, but particularly in late in the year.

The chief period for myrnong harvest followed directly on from the Women's Business Season in September-October. So once all the births and female initiations had occurred, it was back to the grindstone doing the yam harvesting in November-December. Any newborn babies comfortably coped with the warming late spring weather whilst being carried by their mothers.

The introduction and over-grazing of sheep virtually eliminated myrnong within three years of colonisation. The massive scale of the 'sheep invasion' in the early colonial period is shown by the fact that within three years, that is by 1838 there were 3,512 settlers and 311,000 sheep in the Port Phillip District.

The late spring myrnong harvest was also the season for Men's Business. The men, now freed from the domestic duties shouldered during the Women's Business Season, could focus on the business of initiating into adulthood the boys who had already been selected and groomed. Initiation was therefore not just a single event, but a process that began in late winter. Boys about age twelve were subject to the preparatory ceremony of 'Tibbut' and spent a late winter and early spring of relative deprivation.

The boys were given Mohawk style hairdos, had to fend for themselves outside the camp and had to shun the presence of others. Each boy carried a basket of mud and chanted 'Tibbobobobut' to warn all men to keep out of his way. If they didn't he splattered them with mud, but at the same time he avoided contact with women. By the end of Women's Business Season the hair of the boys had grown back and they were now ready for their initiation pilgrimage.

Other men not involved in initiation ceremonies also often undertook pilgrimages to places like Bunjil's Cave at Gariwerd (the Grampians) or to the High Plains for the Bogong Moth Harvest. Meanwhile, groups of perhaps half a dozen young boys were escorted by Elders to initiation sites such as Ngeyelong in the Macedon Ranges, now known as Hanging Rock. Before setting out, the faces of the initiates would be painted with red ochre and charcoal, so as to announce their ceremonial intention.

The last known Tibbut at Hanging Rock was in November 1851 and I only know this through my own family history. My great-grandfather Tom Chivers was seven at the time and his older brother Willie was almost twelve. They were being cared for on a daily basis by the local Wurundjeri after their mother had died and when their father was away carting goods.

Wonga the Kulin Headman had announced that a corroboree would be held at Pound Bend in March 1852 to farewell their tribal life. A fellow Elder, Simon Murrum, suggested that all eligible boys should be initiated so they could take part in the corroboree as adults. Wonga agreed, and also agreed that the two white boys could come too. The group that undertook the pilgrimage to Hanging Rock probably consisted of three or four adults, half a dozen Aboriginal boys aged between 10 and 17, plus Willie and Tom.

No details were ever passed down about the actual initiation ceremonies at Hanging Rock, but tooth evulsion and subincision had not been practiced in southeast Australia since the smallpox plague. However the Kulin still practiced keloid scarring to the chest and back in the early colonial period.

The cuts were made with a flint knife and a mixture of ash and animal fat was then rubbed into the wounds, so that as the cuts healed they became raised, white scars. Willie and Tom were no doubt grateful they were exempt.

Now they were men, the initiates learned the adult dances that had previously been closed to them. So over the next few days as their wounds healed, the boys learned, rehearsed and performed the dances they would participate in as adults at Warrantdyte.. They also for the first time wore the ochre daubings associated with the proper ritual performance of these dances.

Tom and Willie Chivers finally arrived home about two weeks after setting off on their Walkabout to the Macedon Ranges, so we can assume that the initiation events at Hanging Rock took place over the period of about one week in November 1851.