

Lanky (Ben) Manton (1841-1929) -The Last Initiated Man in Victoria

Lanky Manton was born at the Nerre-Nerre Warren Aboriginal Station north of Dandenong on 9th June 1841. His parents were Lanky Murrum aged 38 and Mary Lanky who was probably a decade younger. They were a Taungerong couple, but as Lanky was born on Ngaruk Clan Country, he was according to traditional law defined as a Woiwuring man.

Murrum and Mary had come from the Upper Goulburn to Melbourne in February 1841 with their eight year old son Billy. They established a strong ongoing relationship both with Simon Wonga and the Aboriginal Protector William Thomas. Through these relationships Murrum later adopted a Christian name of Simon and his younger son Lanky was given the Christian name of Benjamin.

Murrum and his family soon left the Nerre-Nerre Warren Reserve and settled in the Bulleen-Templestowe area where he also established a strong ongoing relationship with the settler John Chivers and his family. John's two sons Willie and Tom grew up with Murrum's two sons Billy Lanky and Ben Lanky and maintained a lifelong relationship with Ben. Murrum sent his sons to the Merri Creek Baptist School to learn to read and write, but after the death of Billibelleri in 1846 he withdrew them and took them bush so that they could be educated 'as real blackfellahs'.

In late 1851 Simon Wonga announced that a last great Kulin Federation corroboree was to be held at Pound Bend in Warrandyte in March 1852. Murrum approached Wonga and suggested that all the boys who had kept their culture and not drifted away to the urban fringes and become seduced into a lifestyle of alcohol and degradation, should be rewarded with formal initiation. They would then be able to participate in the Gaggip as adults. Wonga readily agreed and that this should be done straight away at the traditional initiation site Ngeyelong, now known as Hanging Rock.

Murrum then indicated a slight problem. Since the death of the wife of his friend John Chivers, Murrum and Mary had been regularly looking after his friend's two sons, Willie and Tom, when John was away carting goods. Because Willie and Tom had like their father learnt the language and embraced the culture, Wonga immediately agreed to the two settler children being part of the group. Some half-dozen Aboriginal boys, plus 11 year old Willie and 7 year old Tom Chivers, were accompanied by Wonga and Murrum plus a couple of other adults on the trek to Hanging Rock. The oldest of the group was Billy at 17 and the youngest Ben age 10. It was the last known group of boys subject to a traditional initiation ceremony in Victoria. They returned two weeks later as men and participated fully in the Gaggip of March 1852 at Warrandyte.

It is likely that Lanky's father Simon Murrum died around 1860 and this may have been a reason for Ben Lanky at age 19 heading to the Swan Hill area to take up droving. Being only five feet tall as a fully grown adult he was only jockey-size, but like so many Aboriginal people, he was also a gifted horseman. The oral history passed down his family clearly locates Lanky at Swan Hill in September 1860 when the ill-fated Burke and Wills expedition passed through there. It seems that Lanky obtained work with a local pastoralist named Manton and as was common traditional practice, adopted his employer's surname, to now become Lanky Manton.

With the establishment of Coranderrk in 1863, Lanky returned after working for some ten years at Swan Hill. However a second person named Lanky Manton, who was twelve years younger, continued living in the Swan Hill area until the 1930's and their biographies later became confused. At Coranderrk, Lanky was able to renew his family's relationship with Simon Wonga, who

ultimately died of tuberculosis at age 53 in December 1874. Wonga was then succeeded as Headman by his cousin, William Barak.

Lanky also renewed his relationship with Tom and Willie Chivers, and was famed in the region for taking wild unauthorised rides on a chestnut horse to see his mates at Templestowe.

Some ten years after arriving at Coranderrk the now 39 year old Lanky married the 32 year old widow Annie Rees in February 1881. It is not clear how many children Lanky and Annie had, only that their youngest surviving child, Violet, was born in 1894. By the time of Violet's birth Annie was 46 and Lanky 53 and he had become an influential figure in the area. His sparkling wit, knowledge of cultural practices and engaging manner meant that he was extremely popular and respected by all, both at Coranderrk and in the wider community.

With the passing of William Barak in 1903 Lanky became a Senior Elder at Coranderrk. He was the virtual centrepiece of the tourist industry to the area, often giving fire lighting, artefact making and boomerang throwing exhibitions. However his public demonstrations were never free and he always obliged onlookers to show their appreciation in a tangible way.

Like Wonga and Barak before him, Lanky fought against the government moves to close Coranderrk and took any opportunity to address visiting dignitaries on the issue. However by 1923 the closure process had begun and among those relocated to Lake Tyers was Violet, the daughter of Lanky and Annie, along with her husband Alick Mullett, and their children. It was about this time in mid-1923 that Lanky made his last visit to Willie and Tom Chivers. His chestnut horse was by now long gone, so Lanky walked all the way from Coranderrk to Templestowe to say goodbye. He was by that time just turned 82 with Willie 83 and Tom 79.

Lanky and Annie were the oldest of the six elders who refused to move from Coranderrk and were given permission to stay on. However the pull of family became too much and toward the end of 1927 they agreed to relocate to Lake Tyers. Annie and Lanky were duly escorted by a female police officer on the lengthy train trip from Melbourne to Nowa-Nowa in East Gippsland, then by car to Lake Tyers. The policewoman was kept highly amused the whole way by Lanky's antics and witty observations and the repartee between Annie and Lanky.

The now toothless Lanky took a few possessions with him on the trip, one of which was a meat-mincing machine that he gleefully referred to as his 'false teeth'. The first part of the journey was the train trip from Healesville to Melbourne and they arrived in the evening. On seeing the electric lights of Melbourne, Lanky announced that they *'beat my firestick holler, but not in the bush, because you can't carry lectrie wires around'*

On the subsequent train trip out of Melbourne to Gippsland, Lanky insisted on being told the name of every railway station that they passed. Annie or he then often made comments to the great amusement of other travellers. For instance on passing the Longwarry station, Annie wryly noted about her husband: *'Like him, worry, worry, always worry.'* To which Lanky replied *'Never mind, all die bye and bye, so no long-worry.'*

After this memorable train trip then a car trip from Nowa-Nowa to Lake Tyers, the elderly couple were at last joyfully reunited with their children and grandchildren. Lanky lived there another 18 months and was most certainly by that time the oldest Aboriginal man in Victoria and the last initiated man. Lanky died on 26th May 1929 at the age of just on 88, with Annie surviving until August 1934, when she died at the age of 86. Lanky and Annie's memory and legacy still lives on through their Manton and Mullett family descendants.