

STRANGE OLD UNCLE WILLIE

Willie Chivers was the older brother to my great-grandfather Tom Chivers. Willie never married and from 1913 at age 73, lived with Tom and great-grandma Emily. He was good with horses and other animals, and although he hardly spoke, my mother and her siblings were all fascinated by him.

When they visited their grandparents, Willie was usually pottering around the stables or sheds. On saying '*Hello Uncle Willie*' they would usually get a grunt in reply. If lucky they might even get a grudging '*Hello*' muttered back.

To mark these visits by her grandchildren, Emily often put on a special morning or afternoon tea of bread and jam, with Uncle Willie always joining them. Conversation at the dinner table by children was forbidden, so this silence suited Uncle Willie fine.

Mum said that Uncle Willie only ever spoke once on these occasions. He had dropped a few breadcrumbs on the tablecloth and Grandma Emily asked him to clean them up. So Uncle Willie licked his finger and one by one put the crumbs in his mouth, saying '*Bugger one, bugger two, bugger three...*' and so on until he finished. All the children thought it was hilarious and giggled behind their hands, but Grandma Emily was not at all amused.

Mum said that they only once ever heard a whole sentence from Uncle Willie. He and Grandpa Tom were harnessing a horse together, with each working on different sides of the horse. Tom finished first and announced the fact to Willie, who responded, '*So you should be finished first, you're an infant compared to me.*'

Willie was in fact only four years older than Tom. He was born in January 1840 in England and was only eight months old when his parents John and Mary Anne Chivers arrived in Australia in September 1840. John settled in Templestowe and immediately established close relationships with the local Aboriginal people. John was one of only two settlers I know of who learnt the local Woiwurrung language.

In his earliest years Willie therefore only ever had Aboriginal playmates. So by the time he was a toddler, Willie was as fluent in Woiwurrung as he was in English. Tom was born in 1844, so by the time Tom was himself a toddler Willie would piggy-back him around on adventures with his Aboriginal friends.

Many stories of their childhood adventures have been passed down the family and they maintained one particular lifelong friend, whose name I finally discovered was Lanky Manton. In the 1870's and 1880's Lanky often used to take wild rides on a chestnut horse from Coranderrk Aboriginal Station in Healesville, to visit Tom and Willie in Templestowe.

Other family members often commented that those walkabout days seemed to have left an even more indelible impression on Willie than on Tom. Relatives often remarked that Willie had '*gone native*' as a result of his early experiences with Aboriginal people.

For instance in keeping with Aboriginal practice, Willie considered it entirely inappropriate to continue working once the sun had reached midday. Mornings were for hunting, but afternoons were spent in artistic, recreational or instructional activities. So Willie would just fiddle around or retire to a shady spot. By 1920 he was age 80 and would often just lie in a wheelbarrow for the rest of the afternoon.

Willie's reluctance to talk was epitomised by a story kept very hush-hush within the family. Tom and Emily had a visit one day from an old friend in the city who had ridden out to Templestowe to see them. After dinner and a long chat, their friend became very tired and did not feel up to riding home. So when he was offered the option of sharing Willie's double bed, he gratefully retired for the night.

In the morning Willie woke up and found the family friend dead and cold in bed next to him. This did not cause Willie any great consternation. He just wandered out to the kitchen, sat down and Emily served up his breakfast. When asked how his roommate had slept, Willie casually said '*He's dead*' and continued eating. Tom and Emily immediately knew it was no joke and rushed off to check.

By 1923 Willie was aged 83 and clearly suffering dementia. It was at this time that Lanky Manton paid his final visit to tell them that Coranderrk was being closed the next year, and that Lanky's family had already been relocated to Lake Tyers. Two grandchildren listened in fascination while Tom and Lanky talked in language under a tree for hours, and Willie slept nearby in a barrow.

Willie lived for another six years after that and died in 1929 at age 89. Coincidentally, Lanky Manton also died that year at Lake Tyers, aged 88. He was then by far the oldest Aboriginal man in Victoria.