

The Wathaurung lived on a beautiful and bountiful land

King Billy: the last

of a proud people

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AT the side of the lagoon near the site of Geelong's Market Square a child was born.

It was 1836.

This place is on the land of the Wathaurung Bulluk, the Geelong clan of the Wathaurung whose land extends from the Bellarine Peninsula, to Werribee, to north of Ballarat and back to the coast near Anglesea.

The tribal way of life was practised over all this area. The child born near the lagoon was destined to be the last of the tribal Wathaurung in the Geelong area.

On the day of the birth, the boy's father saw a bunyip while hunting at Waurm Ponds. He named his new son Willem Baa Ni ip, meaning "home bunyip".

Willem Baa Ni ip's grandfather, Waa Waa, was present when Matthew Flinders' party climbed the You Yangs in 1802. This was the first contact between the Wathaurung and Europeans.

Other whites visited the district. William Buckley, an escaped convict, lived with the Wathaurung for 32 years before Willem Baa Ni ip was born, but permanent settlement did not start until 1835 when John Batman sailed from Van Diemens Land and set up a camp at Beangala, now called St Leonards.

He supposedly signed a treaty with the Wathaurung but this was not valid because the elders would never knowingly sell the land of their ancestors. The treaty was not recognised by Governor Bourke either, however, the invasion of the Geelong district by squatters was soon under way.

Buckley reported seeing about 700 Wathaurung gathered together on special occasions during the time he lived with them.

When Foster Fyans was appointed Geelong's Police Magistrate in 1837, he instructed William Buckley to assemble all the Wathaurung from a radius of about 20 miles from Geelong — 297 were counted. This was less than in earlier times, probably because white man's diseases, such as smallpox,



CULTURE CLASH: Willem Baa Ni ip (King Billy), the last of the tribal Wathaurung.

had reached the district before the Europeans themselves.

For 2000 generations before the white man, the Wathaurung lived a good life. They were not poor. They lived on a beautiful and bountiful land.

The land, rivers and seas provided them with ample food. They ate wallaby, kangaroo, possum, pigeon, duck, swan, snakes and lizards. There was plenty of fish; flathead, whiting,

salmon, shellfish and eels. Many plants were suitable for food and medicines. The myrnong or daisy yam was an important staple. Their diet was very healthy.

Animal skins, particularly possum skins, were used to make beautiful cloaks. Every man, woman and child owned a cloak for warm winter clothing and for warmth at night. If it was



A memorial marks the final resting place of Willem Baa Ni ip.

raining it would be worn fur side out to shed water.

The Wathaurung built solid dwellings of stone and branches and mud or bark. There was a summer village at Breamlea which could house up to 300 people.

Another count of the local Aborigines was taken in 1842 at Bukar Bulok, now called Fyansford. It was carried out by Mrs Davenport, the daughter of C. W. Siewwright, who had been the Assistant Protector of Aborigines for the district. Willem Baa Ni ip was six years old at the time and was listed in this census as 'Wormebaneep'.

There were only 118 of his people left — 179 fewer than only five years before. What had become of them? And of the 118 who were counted in 1842, only nine women, seven men and one child remained in 1853. A total 101 people disappeared in only 11 years.

Willem Baa Ni ip was 17 at this time and counted as a man. For many years, he may have lived inconspicuously at the edges of the white settlements. He may have lived off the land. In the early years of his life he would have learnt to gather plant food, seafood, small mammals and reptiles.

These skills were taught to children of both sexes by the women of the clan. However, before he reached adulthood his tribal life had gone, along with most of the people who had lived it for tens of thousands of years.

The main staple of the Wathaurung diet, the myrnong, had been destroyed by sheep after only a few years of grazing. Much of the game and many of the fish traps and dwellings had also been destroyed.

The traditional winter camp of the Wathaurung was in the rain shadow of Mount Duneed. The Wathaurung called it Toolim Beal, which means the place of river red gums and wiry grass.

John Armstrong squatted on the land this camp was on. Later, when the big stations were divided up and sold, John Armstrong kept part of his station by right of pre-emptive purchase. The land to the south of him was bought by John Stewart.

A few acres of land along the banks of Armstrong Creek was of no practical value to John Stewart and it was used as a refuge by the remnants, about 10, of the Wathaurung people.

By 1861 there were seven indigenous

people left in the area. There were no children. They were now called the Barrabool tribe. They were moved from Stewarts Reserve to live on one acre of land on the Ghazeeport Road which was declared the Duneed Aboriginal Land Reserve. It had a wooden hut for shelter.

The Geelong Advertiser reported that there was "plenty of wood and water" but they could not sustain themselves with this meagre resource and had to walk into Geelong each day to trade or beg. They were not allowed to stay in the town after sunset.

Willem Baa Ni ip taught a young boy from the Armstrong family how to throw the boomerang. The boy was a pupil at the Flinders National School and in the 1860s he wrote: "The Barwon tribe came to town every morning, approaching over open plain."

Dick died in 1862, Ellen in 1864, Jemmy Nelson and Timboo in 1866 and Harry Gore in 1868. Only Dan Dan Nook and Willem Baa Ni ip were left. They had hunting skills and they made and traded boomerangs.

Alexander Webb's painting of Yarra Street in 1872 shows two Aboriginal men. One seems to be selling boomerangs to a man on horseback. Could the two be Willem Baa Ni ip and his last companion Dan Dan Nook?

At about this time the two men were seen eating a magpie, a bird which wasn't usually regarded as food. They must have been nearly starving to eat it. The white people at the "Help-me-through-the-World Tavern" nearby on the coach road to Portarlington had refused them food.

These were hard times but Willem Baa Ni ip and Dan Dan Nook resisted attempts to move them to the Aboriginal Reserve at Coranderrk. They were determined to live out their lives on Wathaurung country.

The young Armstrong boy's quote continues: "Jerry (Dan Dan Nook) was King and after he died in 1870, Billy was proud of being styled King."

All alone, Willem Baa Ni ip camped at Skepper's Well near the corner of Asbury Street West and Wallington Road, Ocean Grove.

This was near the home of the fisherman Thomas Blackwell who had been an Aboriginal warden issuing rations of flour, sugar, tea and tobacco. He also camped regularly near Edwards Point on the shores of Swan Bay at a spot which now bears his name.

In 1877, Blackwell and Willem Baa Ni ip had an argument which was reported in the Geelong Advertiser.

He was camped on Blackwell's land, which he looked on as his own country, and he refused to leave. Blackwell chased him out with a soldering iron. King Billy (Willem Baa Ni ip) charged Blackwell with assault but was laughed out of the Geelong Police Court. After this Willem Baa Ni ip moved to Portarlington.

Willem Baa Ni ip died in Geelong Hospital on November 11, 1885. He was 49 years old.

He was buried at the Western Cemetery where others of the Wathaurung had been previously laid to rest. The memorial stone was laid over the collective grave soon afterwards by the former mayor of Geelong, Robert De Bruce Johnstone. The railing was provided by Mr Shirra of Commun a Feinne.



Alexander Webb's painting of Yarra Street in 1872 shows two Aboriginal men — one seems to be selling boomerangs to a man on horseback (below left). Could the two be Willem Baa Ni ip (King Billy) and his last companion, Dan Dan Nook?

Courtesy: GEELONG ART GALLERY COLLECTION