

Camperdown Chronicle, 25 September 1930

Aborigines at Old Timboon

With only an occasional blackfellow to be now seen about our streets, it seems difficult to believe that as recently as 1857 there were, including gins and piccaninnies, about 100 aborigines encamped at Old Timboon, which, as most people know, is on the outskirts of Camperdown. Yet we have it on the authority of Mr. Charles. Grayland, of Cobden, that such is the case, and the information is all the more reliable from the fact that it is handed down to him by his father who took a considerable interest in the doings of the natives and recorded every item of note he learnt regarding them.

Camperdown in 1857 was a very different place from what it is today the swamps around the township attracting an abundance of wild fowl which kept the blackfellows and their families well supplied. Then there were kangaroos, wallabies, opossums and native bears, although the aborigines did not take very kindly to the latter. The creeks all bounded in fish and eels, so to a class of people who did not believe in too much work, Camperdown in those days was, so to speak, a land flowing with milk and honey. Lake Bullen Merri and Old Timboon Creek were full of minnows which the natives caught with bits of green sticks and rushes. They rolled the minnows in hot ashes, and devoured them greedily. The bigger game, such as kangaroos and wallabies, they rounded up with boomerangs, spears, murrwirries and nullies. The latter studded with nails etc., being a particularly effective weapon. The natives gradually closed in on their prey in large numbers and put in the finishing touches with the nullies. Their implements and weapons were of the crudest, but they spent hours on making them; with flint or other sharp substances.

With such a number to provide for, food occasionally became a bit short, and when that happened the natives broke up into different tribes and set out in different directions, one lot going out to Darlington, another to Corangamite, a third encamping at the foot of Mount Leura, a fourth making out for Purrumbete and another settling down round Lake Bullen Merri. The old warriors and their gins, who were quite friendly with the white people of the town, never left Old Timboon however. A special favourite with the people of Camperdown at that time was "King Bobbie." They made him a breast plate out of a piece of brass constructed in half moon shape, and fixing it up with chains which went over his head, they proclaimed him King of Timboon in the year of 1857. King Bobbie was very proud of his decoration and the gins danced about him like turkeys in a frenzy of delight. Those associated in that episode were Sam Woods, John Brock and Charlie Grayland, sen. Other prominent blacks at that time were, Headwood. who was a fine all round athlete, wrestler and boxer; Blutchter, who used to go in for bullock driving when he felt like doing a bit of work; Long Bill, whose chief characteristic was a disinclination to work of any kind, and Timbo, who also believed in taking things easy. Then there was Bubbly Jock who was a bit of a horseman and rode well, and Jimmie, who was the finest runner of his day in the district.

There were no local spoils meetings then, the nearest being at Geelong, and Sam Cussins Charlie Henry, Goordie Ardin, and a few others conceived the idea of taking Jimmie to Geelong and backing him for a fair stake. Motor cars were unknown in those days, and the journey had to be done in a spring cart Jimmie had never been out of the district and not much, in the company of whites. Accordingly, he was very timorous. When they got near Mount Hesse they came across a tribe of blacks and it was with the greatest difficulty that the company of sportsmen got Jimmie to proceed any further. Eventually they hid him in the bottom of the cart, and passed the camp without incident. Arriving in Geelong, they proceeded to a hotel, but try as they liked they could not persuade Jimmie to spend the night in a room. Pointing to an old shed he said "That do me," and letting Jimmie have his way they left him there for the night. During the night, however, Jimmie did not feel safe in his new surroundings and remembering the hostile camp which he had passed earlier in the day decided that the best plan was to get back home again. Slipping out quietly and running all the way it was not long before he was at Mount Hesse. Approaching it warily, he saw what he afterwards described as a "piccaninny fire" which told him that all the inmates were asleep and sneaking past quietly, he ran as hard as he could go, until he was again in friendly territory. The annoyance of his backers next morning when they discovered that Jimmie had let them down can be better imagined than described, especially as Jimmie was regarded as a certainly for two, at least, of the races. Needless to say, Jimmie kept well out of their way, for some time after the Geelong races. Another good runner in those days was Pompey Austin, but Pompey was not too dependable, having the reputation of "running stiff for a hob." Other prominent aborigines were Jim Crow, Wattle, the Prince, and Camperdown Goordie, who was among the youngest of the native boys at that time.

THE BATTLE OF THE HOPKINS. Most of the feuds between neighbouring tribes was caused by one of them encroaching on the territory of the other. In this connection the most serious clash was in 1858 when the Hopkins tribe came up to within a paddock's length of Boorcan. In that encounter the Old Timboon tribe lost six warriors and the Hopkins tribe lost 14, while a large number of them got such a doing that they were, not worth very much afterwards. One of them was King Bobbie the leader of the Old Timboon forces. The whites were aware that something unusual was on foot by the war-like preparations that were being made. The natives got pipe clay from Gnotuk, and mixing it with kangaroo blood, they smeared their faces with the paint, which gave them a very ferocious appearance. The gins were also very busy preparing bright garments. Without any parleying the Old Timboon tribe advanced on the Hopkins tribe and the fiercest of the fighting took place in the vicinity of Gnotuk, where the cemetery is now situated. There was no plan of action, the only difference between the leadership of the opposing forces being that whereas King Bobbie advanced at the head of his men, Bull Binder, the leader of the Hopkins tribe, preferred to direct operations from the rear, and when his forces were routed, he was one of the first to turn tail. For this cowardice in the field he was disgraced and until his death in a rough and tumble brawl some time later, he lived alone at Gnotuk. He tried to make up to the Old Timboon tribe, but they would have none of him.

The battle, as the casualties show, was willing enough, but there was no strategy on either side, the forces belabouring each other with their waddies and nullies, as many as three or four men being on to one man at a time. At last, the Timboon men got the Hopkins lot on the run, and kept chasing them back beyond Boorcan, any laggards by the way being promptly despatched. Reference has already been made to Bull Binder, the head of, the Hopkins tribe, and to his fall from favor after the battle of the Hopkins. Bull Binder was a very dishonest fellow, and was much disliked by the white womenfolk. George Avery, a boundary rider to Mr. Ware, of Koort Koortnong, lived on the Darlington Road, and once every week he left the station for rations. While he was away, Bull Binder called at his house and demanded food. This was given him. He then asked for pair of trousers. Now Binder was a big fellow, whereas Avery was on the short side, and when lie tried on a pair of trousers which Mrs. Avery throw out to him, he became very angry. He threw them back and tried to force his way into the house. Mrs. Avery, however, stood at the door with a waddy in her hand. She also had a loaded gun and as Binder knew she could and probably would use it, he did not force his attentions on, her further, but stood about in a threatening attitude. At last, losing patience, Mrs. Avery said "'Here's white coolie coming." at which Bull Binder looked round very scared and bolted into the scrub. When Avery came home, his wife told him of the incident, and Avery immediately picked up his gun and went in search of Binder, but luckily, he did not come across him. When Binder met his death in a squabble some time later there were few regrets, everybody agreeing that it was a good riddance.

On the whole the aborigines were a very peaceable people. Their habits were of the simplest, and their habitations were little better than erections of bark and leaves, which they shifted round according to the wind. At times of rejoicing, they danced round the fires in the dark, disappearing into the bush and reappearing again and again. A curious marriage custom which obtained among the blacks was that on the night before the wedding the bride went away in one direction and camped by herself overnight, while the bridegroom went in the opposite direction, each returning at dawn. If this custom was not complied with, death was the penalty. When a black was going away, he put up his fingers to indicate the length of his absence, two fingers meaning two moons and so forth. And their word could always be depended on. The aborigines buried their dead close to their camps, and their graves were of a very primitive character. Mr. Grayland attributes the dying out of the black race to the fact that they lay about in the clothes which the government gave them, and never made any attempt to dry them, still as remarked at the beginning of this article, it seems difficult to believe that as recently a s 1857 there were, including gins and piccaninnies, about 100 aborigines encamped at Old Timboon.