



## NEWSLETTER #37, March 2009

**Saving Coranderrk** (reported in the Koori Mail, 25 February, 2009)

The historic homestead on Coranderrk Station was saved from the Healesville bushfires. Doreen Garvey-Wandin received word that the station was on fire. Her sons, Tony and George with her brother Allan Wandin (who care-takes the property), and with help from the CFA, brought the fires under control.

**Our sympathy and thoughts go out to Elizabeth Kooroonya Savage, whose husband Graeme died in the Kinglake fires.**

**A wonderfully creative couple, Elizabeth and Graeme are known and loved by many in their wide circle of friends.**

**Elizabeth has been cultural advisor to the**

**Nilumbik Reconciliation Group since its inception in 1998.**

**Our logo is her design. Members of the Nilumbik Reconciliation Group extend their love and support to Elizabeth and family.**

**Jan Pierce and her family are members of the Nilumbik Reconciliation Group. Jan lost her husband Rob in the fires and required hospitalisation herself for hypoxia.**

**Our condolences to Jan and her family in their loss.**

**We extend our love and support for Jan as she recovers from the devastating effect of these fires.**

“If the guys weren’t there the fire would’ve burnt out the heritage buildings and that would have been such a loss for the community.”

Coranderrk is a living icon of Wurundjeri history. We appreciate its importance to the Wandin family; we value its preservation and acknowledge that it has a significant meaning for the whole community.

## WINDAMARA ABORIGINAL CORPORATION, HEYWOOD

In early February a group of walkers from the MU Alumni Bushwalking Club stayed for 7 days at Cape Bridgewater.

I organised for Damien Bell, manager of the Lake Condah Sustainable Development Project and chairman of the Windamara Aboriginal Corporation, to talk to us at the Centre. After the introductory talk Damien and Jason escorted us to their land near Tyrendarra, where we saw a sophisticated system of eel traps and stone houses built centuries ago by the Gunditjmarra people. The Budj Bim National Heritage landscape is home to the remains of Australia’s oldest and largest aquaculture system – approximately 8000 years old. It was included in the National Heritage list in 2004.

The story of the Gunditjmarra people of western Victoria is intimately related to the volcanic eruption of Mount Eccles around 30,000 years ago. The lava flow changed the drainage pattern in the area, creating large wetlands.

Beginning thousands of years ago the Gunditjmarra people developed this landscape through the construction of an ingenious system of channels, fishtraps and weirs. They provided ideal conditions for growing and harvesting eels, which the Gunditjmarra used as their currency

when trading with neighbouring Aboriginal people. This provided an economic basis for the development of a settled society, and they built hundreds of circular stone huts clustered into villages.

Following European settlement in the areas in the 1830s they fought for their land for more than 20 years during the Eumerella wars. After finally being displaced from their land the government set up a mission station at Lake Condah. These mission lands were returned in 1987. Unfortunately the wetlands had been drained in 1954 to make way for soldier settler farms available only to returning white soldiers – Reg Saunders, who came back with a VC, was denied land as were many other Aboriginal soldiers from the area.

Plans are currently in place to restore the wetlands to their original state. A tender to do this has been advertised to fill 600-700 acres of wetlands with water from the Darlots Creek. (Darlots means “always flowing”). This will bring back the eels and associated cultural activity.

Damien also took us to a recently erected dry stone sculpture which is a wonderful representation of an eel trap.

This project was initiated by Regional Arts Victorian in partnership with Lake Condah Sustainability Project, a part of Winda Mara Aboriginal Corporation. Kay Pitts



Remains of buildings at Lake Condah Mission, 2004  
Photo: Jim Berg (Koorie Heritage Trust collection)



Michael Bell at the remains of stone houses, Lake Condah  
Photo: Jim Berg (Koorie Heritage Trust collection)

## WHAT'S ON

**Sunday 15 March:** GAWA Trail clean-up, 10am till Noon. Rakes, weeders, bags useful.

**Sunday 22 March:** The Mullum Mullum Festival Indigenous Day, Yarran Dheran Reserve, Mitcham Mel 49 B6  
[http://home.vicnet.net.au/~mulfest/mmf2009\\_program.htm](http://home.vicnet.net.au/~mulfest/mmf2009_program.htm)

**Sunday May 26:** National Sorry Day followed by Reconciliation Week. Events TBA.

**Friday and Saturday, May 29-30:** The Past Matters Festival: Indigenous Writers and Writing. An exciting and stimulating line-up of books and authors; a celebration of Reconciliation. Programmes out soon.

## CLOSE THE GAP?

**What is happening for Aboriginal people in Victoria?**

**Friday March 20: 7.30pm Living and Learning Centre**

Aboriginal leader, Vicki Clark (Catholic Aboriginal Ministry) and Tom Schauble, (Oxfam Victorian Campaigns Co-ordinator) will speak about Indigenous programmes closer to home. This meeting is a partnership of NRG, Oxfam and Micah Social Justice Group. Bring yourselves, your friends, your curiosity and your questions.

We are delighted that these two significant leaders in Indigenous programs have accepted our invitation, a most valuable opportunity to hear them in Eltham. Oxfam initially coined the title 'Close the Gap' for their campaign to improve Indigenous health outcomes. It is now used by the Federal Government to refer to efforts to improve health, welfare, housing and employment for Indigenous people.

After a cuppa, this part of the meeting will end by 9.30pm. Oxfam members will remain for their business meeting.

And when you have found out what is being done and what is needed, you will have an opportunity to meet with Jenny Macklin, Minister for Indigenous Affairs, in April if she is available – to be confirmed. At that meeting we also hope to raise issues surrounding the NT Intervention.

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## WANGARATTA

A plaque in the main street near the public park:

*In memory of the Pangerang Aborigines who once owned this beautiful valley before the coming of white settlers. Mary Milewa, the last of her tribe died 6 November 1888.  
"She walked in her world all alone."*

*This memorial erected by W.S.G. and donated by the Dowling Family, Pangerang descendants.*

I read this and choked up – we can be so affected by the history of the Aboriginal people of this country! The story told on this plaque of remembrance is so poignant – the whole history of Indigenous Australia is there: their demise from slaughter, disease and lost hope in their future, the utter aloneness of the last one left.

But here is the remembering and honouring which the survivors give to their Elder and Ancestor. And the place it has in the town is important too. It is there, central to the business of the town, passed and read by its citizens. Once reviled and ostracised, Mary Milewa has a plaque of her own and a town with her name. And we have given an Apology, and more will follow. Reconciliation is slow work but something of essential importance is slowly unfolding in us. Jan Aitken

## WHAT WAS ON IN JANUARY AND FEBRUARY



### The Liz Cavanagh Quintet at the Eltham Jazz & Blues Festival, Sunday 25<sup>th</sup> January, 2009

In our efforts to try something different to bring the Reconciliation message to a wider and different group in the community, we approached the Eltham Jazz and Blues

Festival organizers with a proposal to have an Indigenous group represented at the festival, which NRG would sponsor. They accepted the idea with enthusiasm, and so did Liz and her group of musicians. For two hours on Sunday afternoon her voice wafted out from the Town Square to a captivated audience. Liz sings in a variety of styles, not all jazz or blues. Her vivacious manner captured hearts, and between numbers she put across her own reconciliation message.

And while Liz sang we manned a stall in the space near the fountain that the organizers had allocated, selling tapes, bush foods, cards and other bits and pieces, as well as handing out information about reconciliation and our group. For the whole festival our large banner hung behind the performance stage, as well as the Aboriginal and Australian flags, so no one could deny our presence.

Thanks to all the volunteers who manned the stall and made Liz and her group feel so welcome. I have seen Liz since and she said that they would love to do it again. Her group had all agreed it was one of the best festivals they had performed at, and their first jazz festival. The festival organisers have also indicated that they would like to make an Indigenous group a permanent feature of the festival. Thank you Liz and your quintet – you have inspired us!

Don Brown

### Mythology and Reality: Contemporary Aboriginal Art from the Gabrielle Pizzi Collection

In 1978 Gabrielle Pizzi began to collect Aboriginal art from locations in the Northern Territory, Arnhem Land and Bathurst Island. When she died the collection comprised 130 paintings and 60 sculptures.

Approximately half of this treasure has been on display at the TarraWarra Museum of Art since November. The entire gallery space radiates with the colour and energy of artists who not only find inspiration in their ancient land, but spiritually become their country as they sing their paintings into existence.

From Maningrida come the slender, watchful Mimih and Yawkyaw spirit beings, towering over the gathering of timber sculptures that accompany the pictorial travels and ceremonies hanging on the walls.

These canvases pulsate with passion, with movement and mystery. We walk among them and wonder at expressions of personal cultural experience that can make forces and emotions visible with the stroke of a brush. In all the blaze of colour organic shapes recede and approach, forms connect and disperse, geology reveals itself, astronomy arranges images, biology glows in minute shapes; all is joined in the web of creativity.

There is too much to absorb in one sighting. There is a strong desire to see more, again and again. Gabrielle Pizzi was known for her integrity and keen social conscience. She encouraged indigenous artists, she protected their interests. They provided her with outstanding work. We all benefit from such reciprocity. Joan Pickard

## NOTES AND COMMENTS

(Compiled by Jan & Sasha)

### Mick Dodson, National Press Club, 17<sup>th</sup> February.

Mick declared that it's time to end division between practical and symbolic reconciliation.. He called it a nonsense. "It never made sense but nonetheless provided an easy way of dividing people who are essentially working for the same end result."

He said that love, understanding and encouragement were just as important along with dignity and self-belief. Feeling valued and respected has a lot to do with how you face problems.

"Symbolic gestures, apology, acknowledgement of country and recognition of the First Australians in the constitution preambles are all practical ways that change the way we think, feel and act."

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Mick's words echo those used by **Pearl Gibbs**, in 1941, towards the end of the first broadcast made by an Aboriginal woman on behalf of her people: "My friends, I am asking for friendship. We Aborigines need help and encouragement, the same as you white people. We need to be cheered and encouraged to the ideals of citizenship. We ask for help, education, encouragement from your white government .... [not] the stone of officialdom .... Will my appeal for practical humanity be in vain? I leave the answer to each and every one of you."



**Pearl Mary Gibbs (Gambanyi) (1901-1983)** was an astute and dedicated campaigner for Aboriginal rights and a persuasive public speaker who sought to inform and influence the opinion of white Australia. Her early education occurred in a segregated classroom at the Mount Carmel convent in Yass, and she was later denied entry to government schools in rural New South Wales. From 1910 Gibbs's family worked on a pastoral station near Bourke and at sixteen she entered domestic service in Sydney. During the 1920s Gibbs began agitating on behalf of indentured Aboriginal women workers. A casualty of the Depression, she lived for a period at the Unemployed Workers' Camp at La Perouse before pea-picking at Nowra, where she sought to improve conditions for agricultural labourers. Gibbs's politicisation was influenced by her observations at Wallaga Lake Aboriginal Station. In 1937 she joined the Aborigines' Progressive Association and a year later she was prominent in the Australia Day protest. She participated in parliamentary and ministerial delegations, wrote for the press and spoke to the wider community.

More on Pearl Gibbs:  
<http://www.kooriweb.org/foley/heroes/gibbs2.html>

### Echo of the Intervention?

In that first broadcast Pearl Gibbs described many aspects of the plight of her people. One group were the girls who were sent to work as domestic servants. They often came home with white babies. "I do not know of one case where the Aborigines Welfare Board has taken steps to compel the white father to support his child. The child has to grow up as an unwanted member of an apparently unwanted race. "Women living on stations do not handle endowment money but the managers write out orders ..... payable to one store in the nearest town – in most cases a mixed drapery and grocery store. The mother cannot buy extra meat, fruit or vegetables. When rations of blankets are issued to the children, the value is taken from the endowment money." Not much has changed .....

The **Aboriginal Rights Coalition** had this to say about the quarantining of Centrelink payments:

"Many women from 'prescribed communities' speak of the intense shame they feel and the difficulty people have had queuing with hundreds of others for hours for ration cards with many then missing out. Aboriginal community members must spend the exact amount of quarantined money which can only be spent at a limited range of stores, Woolworths, Kmart or Coles, with any unspent store voucher money returning to the Government."



NRG committee member Pam Pedersen receives a Jagajaga Community Australia Day Award from Jenny Macklin, 26th January 2009. The award recognises Pam's volunteer efforts in the community.

## ABORIGINAL IDENTITY

In 1998, an Aboriginal Identity Case came before Justice Merkel.

The very fact that Aboriginal people had to make a legal challenge affirms the fact of national racial exclusion and division. Why does Aboriginal identity require the law of the invader for its definition?

Australia has wanted to eradicate the separate identity of Indigenous people by asserting our complete sovereignty and control. They haven't succeeded. But in order to give the minority the benefits needed to make them equal they have to be identified. What has emerged is self identification and group acknowledgement. We make things difficult because sometimes we demand evidence of community while supporting and encouraging mobility and individualisation. The urge in NT for people to work in mainstream jobs means that mobility is essential.

Justice Deane: *By Aboriginal Australian, I mean a person of Aboriginal descent, albeit mixed, who identifies himself as such and who is recognised by Aboriginal community as Aboriginal.* This became important in the voting for ATSIC.

Mick Dodson has written of the need for improvements in Indigenous education. And that must be prefaced on developing the student's sense of self as an Aboriginal person, the essential respect for the Aboriginal community.

But neither lawyers nor historians can resolve identity disputes. The question has to be recast in the context of political engagement that both recognises the destructive effects of colonisation in the past and appreciates the possibilities for Indigenous people, both as individuals and in communities, in the future.

Jan Aitken

Reference: Ann Curthoys, Ann Genovese and Alexander Reilly: *Rights and Redemption*, UNSW Press 2008