

# Seeking Mulga Fred

Richard Broome

At 7.45 am on 3 November 1948, Alfred Hirst, a railway repairer, discovered the body of an elderly Aboriginal man on the line at Horsham Station. Dr Basil Jones soon identified the body as that of Mulga Fred. The Adelaide Express had severed both legs of the deceased just above the ankles, and there were lacerations to the head and forearms. Death resulted from a fractured skull and shock from multiple injuries. First Constable John Slater reported that the deceased had no known relatives, no fixed address, and no property on his body, but readily identified him as Mulga Fred. His age was put at 74. Leonard Duffas, a railway assistant, saw the man known to him as Mulga Fred, alight from a Swan Hill train the previous evening. Mulga Fred inquired about the next train to Dimboola, and then headed for a meal. An hour later, Duffas saw Fred's swag on the waiting room floor with a half bottle of wine standing beside it. The assumption was that he had fallen from the platform while under the influence. Duffas reported that Fred smelt of liquor, although 'his walk was quite steady'. A half-eaten lolly was found near him and two more in his pocket.<sup>1</sup>

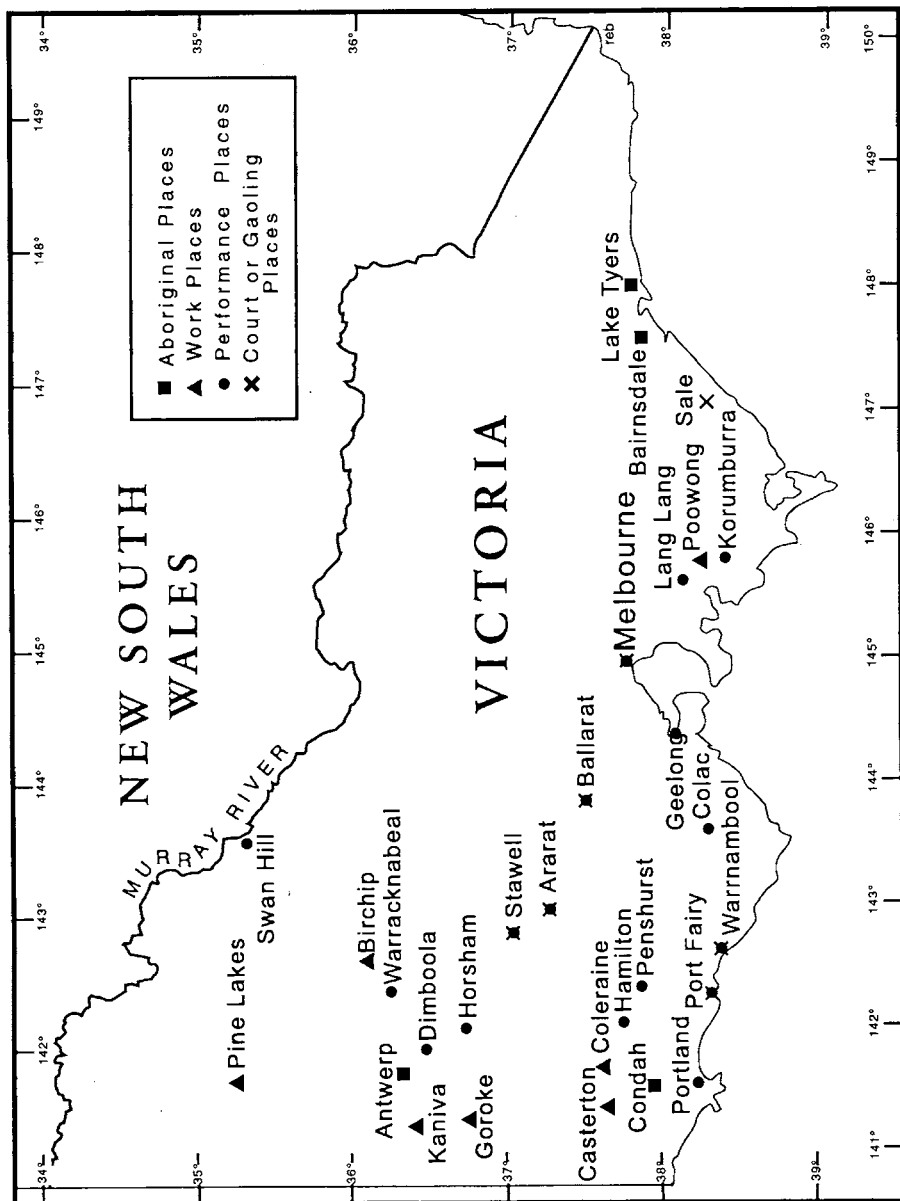
How was it that a Horsham doctor, police officer and railway assistant, instantly knew the identity of this Aboriginal itinerant who journeyed from Swan Hill and was bound for Dimboola? And why did the press throughout the region, two Melbourne dailies—the *Argus* and the *Sun*—and the *West Australian* in Perth, report his death, and with much regret, when few Aboriginal individuals were given press attention? The *Horsham Times* for instance, devoted two-thirds of a metre of column space to this news, under the title 'Old Mulga Passes On'.<sup>2</sup>

Who was Mulga Fred, what roles and identities did he hold, what meanings did his life have, then and now, and how can we know? The answers will illuminate how an Aboriginal man negotiated his way along the cultural divide in western Victoria in the first half of this century. I will argue that through a series of adaptations and appropriations of European roles and forms, Mulga Fred forged an identity and found a niche in western Victoria's folklore. He generated some official notice, considerable newspaper interest, and many memories for us to interrogate. Two other valuable sources exist. The first is an address to the Coleraine Historical Society in 1960, by E.R. Trangmar, a Coleraine storekeeper who knew Mulga Fred very well over two decades. The second is

---

<sup>1</sup> Inquest on Mulga Fred at Victorian Public Records Office, VPRS 24, box 1605, no. 1704.

<sup>2</sup> See the *Swan Hill Guardian*, 5 November 1948; *Horsham Times*, 5 November 1948; *Argus*, 4 November 1948; *Sun*, 4 November 1948; and *West Australian*, 4 November 1948.



Map 1 Mulga Fred Wilson's beat, 1910c-1948.

an interview I conducted in 1996 in Horsham with a farmer, Don McCabe and a rural worker, Norman Flack, both of whom knew Mulga Fred for 15 years. McCabe has since developed a strong interest in Mulga Fred and has assisted me greatly.<sup>3</sup>

### A stockman and his Aboriginal heritage

There are no official records of Mulga Fred's origins, which is typical for Aboriginal people born in frontier areas. Trangmar, who in the 1930s prepared Mulga Fred's case for the old age pension, stated that Fred was born in 1874 at Alec and John Edgar's De Grey Station on the river of the same name, outside Port Hedland in Western Australia. However, police and other records give estimates that place his birth up to ten years earlier than the date Trangmar stated. He was originally named Fred Wilson, and was the son of Aboriginal parents, who worked on the property. Wilson was the name that later appeared in police records, but Fred also told Don McCabe that his name was Fred Clarke. When McCabe recently visited Port Hedland, his inquiries revealed both Wilsons and Clarks among the Aboriginal people still at De Grey. Mulga Fred's Aboriginal name is unknown, and his European name is contentious, but most evidence suggests it was Wilson.

It is certain that Fred Wilson was tutored in the traditions of his people and probably initiated, but no evidence of these remains. His father, a boss stockman, grew him in cattle work. Young Fred learned to ride with skill, to plait, to wield a stock whip, and to work with horses and tame them. Cattle work for him was a mixture of pleasure and pain as it was for many Aboriginal people.<sup>4</sup> Fred Wilson told Norman Flack of his job as a boy bringing in the saddle horses from a 25 hectare paddock 'sometimes I couldn't get them on foot, and they'd belt hell out of me. Take me into the saddle yard and get a trace and they'd belt hell out of me, then send me out again to bring those bloody horses in'. Wilson also told McCabe that in the off season, the stockmen used to collect pearl shell off the beach near Port Hedland.

The beach at Port Hedland became Fred Wilson's window to a wider world. Although some claim Wilson journeyed east from Perth by mule train, or overlanded from Port Hedland, it is more likely he left home by boat.<sup>5</sup> There was a regular cattle trade by boat out of Port Hedland to southern regions. Wilson told McCabe that as the tide dropped, the stranded boats were propped with sticks to keep them upright and the cattle driven onto them from temporary yards on the beach. He informed both Trangmar and McCabe that he left the west in this manner, droving some De Grey cattle to Sidney Kidman's property in South Australia, where he remained for some years. In 1906, after droving cattle to Adelaide, he ceased to be a stockman and soon wedded his life to Victoria. His beat within Victoria over a generation (see Map 1) stretched east-west from Lakes Entrance to the South Australian border and north-south from Swan Hill to Warrnambool. Three contexts shaped these movements, namely: the country

3. Trangmar 1960. Author's interview with Norman Flack, Horsham, 16 April 1996 and with Don McCabe, Horsham, 16 April 1996 and subsequent correspondence. Transcript in the author's possession. Further reference to these three views will not be accompanied by a footnote.

4. See McGrath 1987, pp. 49-94.

5. Ted Brown, *Wimmera Mail Times*, 8 December 1976.

rodeo and show circuit where he performed, his European workplaces, and his relations with Aboriginal people and places.

### Rodeo performer and his sense of masculine pride

Wilson opened a new era in his manhood when he entered Bronco George's Buckjumping Show in Adelaide. He rode 'King', the wildest horse of George's herd, to a standstill and won £5 (equivalent to about \$1,000 today). Bronco George immediately hired Wilson, who toured with the troupe in southern Australia. In 1908 the Mulder Brothers' poached Wilson and christened him 'Mulga Fred'. About 1911, Wilson joined Billy Kinnear's Buckjump Show as their star rider, bringing the name 'Mulga Fred' with him.

From that time, Wilson assumed the persona and identity of Mulga Fred, buckjump rider. One persistent story about Wilson is that he won the 1911 Melbourne Coronation Buckjumping Carnival, staged to celebrate King George V's ascension to the throne. The Carnival, which lasted 15 nights, was held under canvas at the Melbourne Hippodrome. It offered 30 of the wildest bucking horses each night, including 'Dynamite', 'Splinterwood' and 'Kyneton Kate', as well as bucking bullocks. Prizes ranged from £10 to £25, that is up to ten weeks' of a working man's wage. Unfortunately, none of the Melbourne papers, either daily or sporting, reported the nightly events.<sup>6</sup> However, there were daily advertisements in the *Argus* for the coming night's performance. For 13 nights the best rodeo men in the state tried and failed to ride one particular horse, 'Kyneton Kate'. On the fifth night the advertisement teased: 'Coronation Buckjump. Hippodrome. Tonight, Tonight. Kyneton Kate stills throws them all. Will she get rid of Mulga Fred tonight?'<sup>7</sup> Four nights later, an advertisement trumpeted 'Kyneton Kate still champion! Will Mulga Fred, the Aboriginal champion, win tonight?'<sup>8</sup> Mulga Fred twice failed to ride Kate, but no one else succeeded either.

The city press rarely reported rough riding. Indeed, these reports were advertising copy and not news items, and thus no information exists about the overall winner. The current historian of the Australian Rough Riders' Association formed in 1942, has no knowledge of the event.<sup>9</sup> However, *The Age* did contain one report of the first night's rough riding at the Hippodrome. The promoters had combed the state for the wildest horses and the best riders, and 'amongst the best of the riders was an aboriginal, who stuck like a plaster to the worst buckjumper and evoked tremendous applause by his fine riding'.<sup>10</sup> Was this Mulga Fred? There is no mention of any other Aboriginal rider at the carnival, so it is highly likely that this praise was being extended to Mulga Fred Wilson. The fact that he was the only rider who was given two attempts at 'Kyneton Kate', indicated his superior horsemanship.

Mulga Fred Wilson toured until the 1930s (see Plate 1). Billy Kinnear once wrote of his star rodeo rider that 'he was a wonderful horseman and could ride in any gear with

6. I checked the files of the following newspapers: *Age*, *Argus*, *Weekly Times*, *Leader*, *Sport*, *Sporting Judge*, *Australasian* and *Referee*, with no success. The Australian Rough Riders' Association journal, *Hoofs and Horns*, published from 1942, did not have an obituary of Mulga Fred Wilson.

7. *Argus*, 29 June 1911.

8. *Argus*, 4 July 1911.

9. Peter Poole, interview, 15 July 1997.

10. *Age*, 23 June 1911.

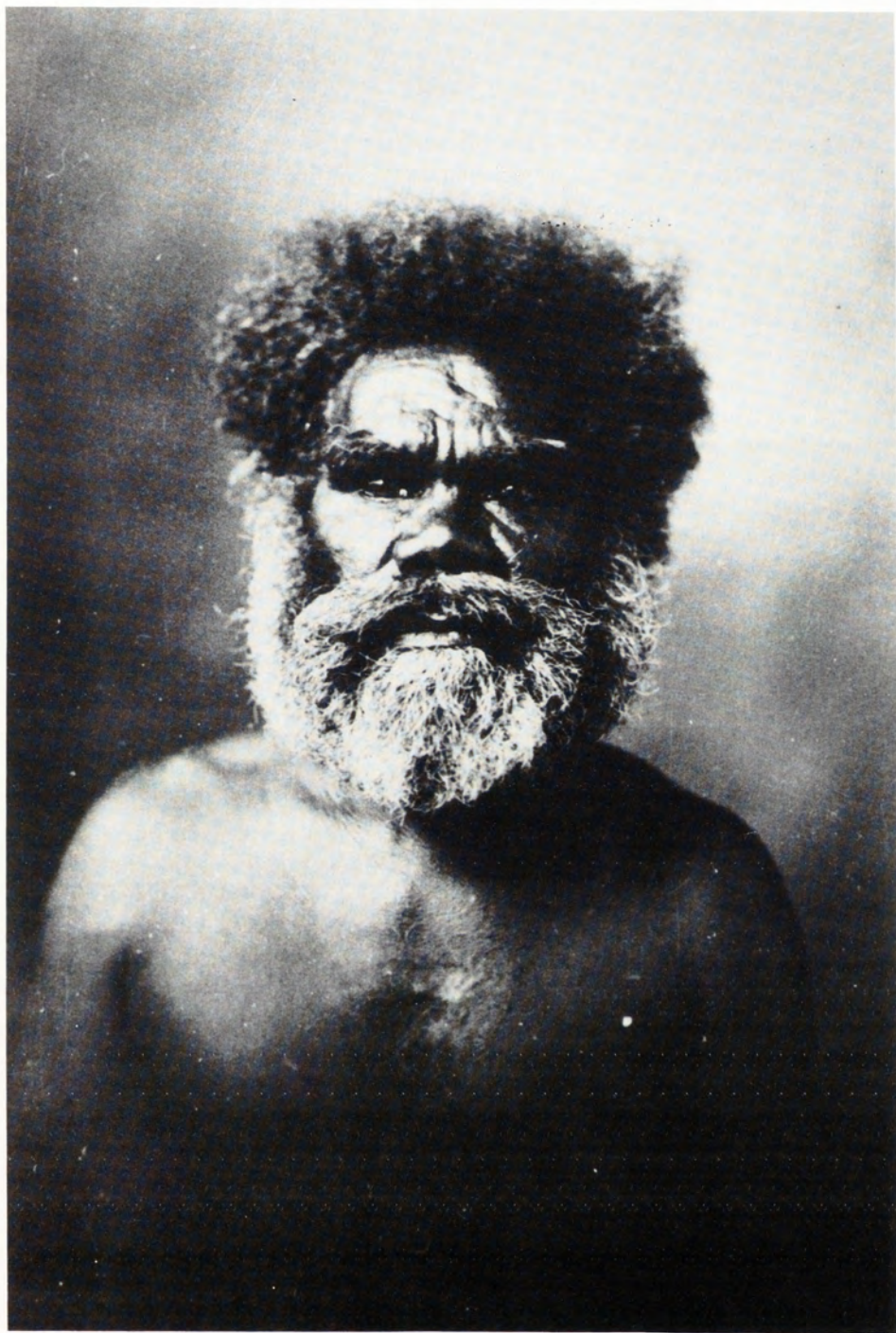


Plate 1 Mulga Fred Wilson in the 1930s, photographed by James McColl (Warracknabeal Historical Society).

or without assistance. He could vault on to a horse when it was in action, and ride it from head to tail'.<sup>11</sup> Thorpe McConville, of McConville's Wild West Show, told McCabe that Mulga Fred was his top rider along with Leo Lloyd. Wilson believed that riding a bucking bronco was just like playing music. Once the rhythm of the bucking was discerned you just went with it. Don McCabe claimed that Wilson gained the highest tally of points one rodeo season, but he missed a trip to North America because he was an Aborigine. Alan McPhee was sent instead. Another report claimed he was the Victorian state buckjumping champion in 1936, being thrown only twice in 36 rides.<sup>12</sup> As he was then about sixty, it is a claim that deserves close scrutiny, but no records have been located.

Wilson's identity was shaped by the masculinity of a rodeo rider: a man who could face seething horseflesh without flinching and often triumph by beating the bell. He rode buckjumpers at local rodeos after retiring from rodeo troupes. Norm Flack recalled that when the rodeo came to town, Mulga Fred would always have a ride. Surviving photographic images of Mulga Fred in newspaper files, local historical society archives and the Museum of Victoria depict his rodeo-styled masculinity.<sup>13</sup> One is of Wilson riding a buckjumper at John Mitchell's property 'Karnak' at Goroke, his balance sure as he leaves the seat after another lunge by the horse.<sup>14</sup> Others are full-length street images revealing a smiling and proud man in rodeo gear of boots, moleskins, jacket, shirt and kerchief around the neck. Several are more essentialised, bare-chested Aboriginal portraits. The best of these, reproduced here (Plate 1), was taken by James McColl in the 1930s at his Warracknabeal photography studio. It was displayed in his studio window for thirty years reinforcing Mulga Fred's mythology. In these images, his face is lined and his beard is ample. McCabe and Flack recalled he limped from a bad knee, a proud legacy from his rough riding.

As a buckjump rider Wilson was irrepresible. In the early 1940s, Don McCabe saw an inebriated Mulga Fred pestering his old boss McConville for a ride in a rodeo show at Casterton. Fred was climbing through the ropes saying 'me ride him, me ride him boss'. McConville finally relented and put Wilson on a horse that could spin and the horse went one way and Fred the other. He exclaimed as he picked himself up, 'bloody tricky horse, I'll come back tomorrow, and I'll ride them all'. Mulga Fred last rode in public at the Swan Hill Show in October 1948, a month before his death, aged about 74 years. Trangmar stated that he rode an exhibition on a horse called 'Tops Up', not only for the stipulated ten seconds, but right out. 'He so impressed the crowd with his horsemanship and courage that when a tarpaulin was taken round the grounds £150 was collected'. This is an enormous amount of money. Even if Trangmar exaggerated, and it was £15, it was still three week's basic wage, about \$1,000 in today's money. However, the *Swan Hill Guardian* gave another version of the day, merely recording that he gave an unscheduled whip cracking demonstration.

11. From *Hoofs and Horns*, reprinted in the *Horsham Times*, 5 November 1948.

12. Coleraine Albion, 27 January 1960. I have been unable to verify this due to the absence of press reports or rough riding association records.

13. See images in *Wimmera Mail Times*, 15 November 1976, 4 February 1994, and early 1997; *Coleraine Albion*, 6 February 1978; Warracknabeal and also Hamilton Historical societies; and images 223.04017-19, Victorian Aboriginal Photographic Collection, Museum of Victoria.

14. See *Wimmera Mail Times*, 4 February 1994.

Only traces of his skill were left—age had taken its toll, and added to this, his judgement was marred by a little too much drinking. Not to the credit of the crowd, they ‘enjoyed’ watching his pitiable efforts and when he had finished a man threw him some silver. The rest walked off satisfied with their fun at the expense of a very old man.<sup>15</sup>

Fred Wilson’s performances continued throughout his life. He fought occasionally in travelling boxing tents at agricultural shows—a further display of country manhood. However, he relied increasingly on his whip and boomerang. Trangmar claimed Wilson was an expert at plaiting, although Norman Flack disagreed. Certainly he made his own whip handles, several of which are displayed at the shire offices in Casterton. Wilson performed at major football matches, rodeos and country shows throughout Western Victoria. Don McCabe recalled him busking at the Casterton Show in the 1930s and 1940s. ‘He’d have a big circle of people around, and he’d put the hat down and of course everybody that walked past would throw sixpence in or a shilling or two bob. He’d finish up with enough money to keep himself’. He cracked cigarettes out of people’s mouths and hands. The *Horsham Times* reported that ‘every boy on the showgrounds...battled for the honor of having the cigarette paper struck from their fingers by the lash’.<sup>16</sup> Wilson lashed paper from hands while blindfolded, and cut paper from his own hand while lying down. There are many accounts of Wilson staging impromptu whip cracking exhibitions in the streets of Western District towns, with his hat down expecting a return. He also performed at Melbourne carnival and football fixtures. At the Melbourne Centenary Rodeo in 1935 he found himself destitute and in court for drunkenness and begging when, as he claimed, the show went broke and left him hungry. Yet he was picked up in Burwood Road with some food in his swag and a few copper and silver coins in his pocket. He had earned £4/15/0 whip cracking at a VFL match, but claimed ‘another blackfellow he rookem me for it’.<sup>17</sup>

Mulga Fred’s performances sometimes subverted the authorities. One story places him in Melbourne on 13 August 1921, the day of Archbishop Daniel Mannix’s triumphant return from overseas. Mulga Fred was busking in Bourke Street when he joined a crowd on its way to Spencer Street Railway Station to welcome Mannix. En route he accepted a dare to remove a police officer’s hat from six metres with his whip. His success landed him in court where he allegedly pleaded with some exaggeration: ‘I’m a native of Australia. I’m a fair dinkum Irishman, a Roman Catholic and a cobbler of Dr Mannix. I was on me way to the station to meet my old mate but this ‘ere bloke [indicating the police officer] couldn’t take a joke’.<sup>18</sup> Mulga Fred also subverted the Centenary festivities at Portland in November 1934. A grazier, John Mitchell of ‘Karnak’, Goroke, dressed him up for the Portland celebrations, held in the presence of the Duke of Gloucester (King George V’s third son). Flack recalled that Wilson ‘had a nice silk jacket on him, and white trousers, and those bloody long boots. He [Mitchell] had him done up perfectly’. Mulga Fred rode well and stayed on, very creditable for one who was then 60 years old. However, Wilson had ‘a few grogs’ and rain followed. He then

15. *Swan Hill Guardian*, 5 November 1948.

16. *Horsham Times*, 5 November 1948.

17. *Herald*, 3 July 1935. See also *Herald*, 7 June 1935.

18. *Australasian Post*, 25 February 1960. No reports of this incident were found despite a check for August 1921 of the *Age*, *Argus*, *Herald*, *Leader*, and the *Melbourne Truth*.

pestered the organisers for another ride. As Flack recalled, 'so they put him on and he goes out and the horse threw him off, threw him fair in this big pool of water. He looked up and the King's (sic) there and he's laughing'. No corroborative evidence for this story has been found in the Portland papers.<sup>19</sup> However, the Secretary of the Victorian Board for the Protection of Aborigines, in March 1935 lamented that 'this Board has been very severely criticised on account of the conduct of this man during the Centenary celebrations'.<sup>20</sup> Fred had clearly subverted the occasion, yet the Board was powerless, as he was a native of Western Australia.

### **A horse tamer and his sense of worth**

Mulga Fred Wilson tamed horses throughout western Victoria and sometimes in Gippsland. He moved between John Mitchell's 'Karnak' property at Gorokey; Fred Heenan's place at Clover Flat, Coleraine; Harry and Ellen Goode's property near Casterton; Nancy and Keith Edgar's place, 'Cuyuac' near Nareen; and Percy Williams' property at Kaniva. Horse taming was a patient business. Wilson remained for months on properties, breaking neighbours' horses as well. Such work reinforced his identity and status as a horseman and rural worker. Both Flack and McCabe watched Mulga Fred tame horses, not break them. They insisted his methods were the opposite of those who thrashed horses with wood or bags to break their spirit. His methods were intuitive about the right moment to act and how a horse would react.

Norm Flack recalled an incident when he was living near the Heenans of Clover Flats outside Coleraine. Some of the Heenans were champion riders themselves, and on this occasion the two Heenan boys were trying to break a spirited four-year-old untamed horse. Mulga watched their efforts for a while. 'The horse was going round and round and snorting and kicking. They couldn't get near him'. Mulga asked to be given a turn. He stood just over a metre from the rail and each time the horse circled, Fred moved in a few centimetres until the horse could not pass him. It stood before him, its head hanging. 'Mulga put his hand on him see. The horse would bolt round again and he'd come back again and within about half an hour he'd have the bloody halter on'. The Heenans told Flack, who was not there, about this incident with considerable admiration. It was a story which with each retelling, enhanced Mulga Fred's status as a horseman. Flack recalled their words to him: 'the old black bugger! We couldn't put the halter on that bloody horse if we'd stopped there for a week'.

Don McCabe saw Mulga Fred tame a future racehorse named 'Heather Doon' in 1946 at his uncle's (Harry Goode's) property, when Mulga was about 72 years old. McCabe watched as Mulga led the horse around by a lead with a bit in its mouth, this way and that, then in later sessions he put a bag on its back. The horse would flinch and rear. Each day McCabe asked Mulga Fred when he would ride 'Heather Doon'. Each time Fred would reply, 'tomorrow maybe'. Finally 'tomorrow' came. Fred tightened the saddle's girth, by placing the strap in his mouth and leaning against the horse's belly with his body and head, and wrenching it tight with a push and a movement with his head. 'Gee you could just about hear the aaah. He got it really tight ... he must have

<sup>19</sup> See the *Portland Guardian* and the *Portland Observer* for November 1934.

<sup>20</sup> Secretary to M.T. McLean, Chief Protector of Aborigines, South Australia, 18 March 1935. Personal file on 'Mulga Fred', Australian Archives (Victorian Branch), AA series B337, item 551.



known she was going to buck'. Mulga then led 'Heather Doon' to a patch of sand. Young McCabe thought this was to ensure a soft landing if Mulga was thrown, but he later learned it was to provide a less firm footing to mitigate the horse's bucking. 'She bucked good enough to throw a lot of fellows, she had a bit of go in her. But he just rocked backwards and forwards like that you know. Just like it was a rocking chair. He was very loose in all his movements. He'd sort of go with the horse'. Fred Heenan recalled that 'at one Coleraine Show Fred rode a horse which had thrown five local riders. He rode the horse easily'.<sup>21</sup>

Fred Wilson was also a rouseabout and wool presser, and he cut posts and fenced, stripped wattle bark, carted hay, and did most other rural labouring work. Norm Flack recalled he 'was a very good worker' and had great stamina. Mulga Fred knew his own worth here, as he did with horse work, and was confident enough to turn stereotypes back onto his white workmates. Flack remembered threshing in a heat wave. 'He was on the stack with me, there were five of us on it, finished up there were three of us, the other fellows gave up, the heat beat them. Fred said 'come on you white buggers, help, get in. You say I don't work'. Flack claimed Wilson had good relations with his fellow workers. He had the prestige of being a good teller of bush yarns. 'It might take him a bloody half hour, but his was a good story, just a made up story, or something he'd heard, something the shearers had told him. We'd all laugh and he'd have a good old laugh. Oh yes he could talk.'

Some claimed other skills for him. One story asserts Mulga Fred was a Victoria Police black tracker, but Don McCabe recalled that Wilson once told him he could not track. There is no evidence that he worked for Victoria Police, although the archives would not reveal any casual horse breaking.<sup>22</sup> Perhaps it is an apocryphal story like the claims that he served in the Light Horse during World War I. This claim proved very unlikely after investigation with the Australian War Memorial. Ten Frederick Wilsons served in the First AIF, but none in the Light Horse. Also, as Mulga Fred Wilson was at least forty years old at the time of the outbreak of war and possibly more, and an Aboriginal man of full descent, it is unlikely that he would have been accepted.<sup>23</sup>

Fred Wilson had close paternal-dependent relations with his white employers, for instance with the Mitchells, who dressed him for the Centenary rodeo at Portland. These relations were close and enduring. Wilson returned yearly to certain properties for work, claiming them as part of his world. Don McCabe recalled that his uncle and aunt, Harry and Ellen Goode of Dunrobin near Casterton, provided Wilson with food, a hut, an outfit of new clothes and money when he went roving, but McCabe doubts he was paid formal wages. He added that Fred 'used to have meals with us', and believed the Mitchells probably treated him the same. At the Goode's he entertained guests with his stories. McCabe recalled that his Uncle Harry 'would be sitting up one end of the

<sup>21</sup> *Hamilton Spectator*, 11 August 1987.

<sup>22</sup> Gary Presland, the former archivist of the Victoria Police Archives, has compiled a list of black trackers in the Victorian force. In a telephone conversation with me on 15 February 1996 he confirmed that neither Mulga Fred nor Fred Wilson are on that list. He indicated that police records would not reveal casual employment.

<sup>23</sup> Research on War Memorial records by Darryl Bennet, research editor of the Australian Dictionary of Biography project. Bennet to Broome, letter, 15 March 1996.

table and Fred down the other. Now to entertain you old Uncle would say, "Fred, remember so and so?" "Oh yes, good rider. Sit on a horse pretty good boss". "Ever ride against him Fred?" "Oh yes". "How did you go?" "Oh, me win". Longer and funnier yarns were also related in true bush tradition.

Florence Grinham and Fred Heenan of Clover Flat, who also offered Fred a hut, recalled that he walked to Coleraine for the day and returned by tea, bringing chocolate frogs for Grinham's children. Grinham recalled 'they would climb up on his knees and sit there eating their frogs'. Wilson often joined the Grinham's for a meal, but 'he would never put his hands or elbows on the table, and also waited for someone to serve up his meals before he ate. He would not take the food off the centre plate himself'.<sup>24</sup>

McCabe best illustrates the relationship Fred Wilson had with property owners on his beat—a mixture of white paternalism and Aboriginal kin dependence—when he recalled Wilson's periodic home-coming to the Goode's property.

When Fred would come home from a walkabout he would get to Casterton on the train and head for the police station to get proper food and go in for the night and the policeman would ring up Auntie that night. Oh it depended what hour of the night he came but he'd ring up. He'd ring up and say 'Oh Mrs Goode', he'd say. 'Our old friend's back. Oh yes, we've got him here', he'd say. 'Will I bring him out?' She would say, 'oh yes, bring him out'. It might be about two or three chain from the road up to the house, up the gravel drive. The house had a verandah all round and for some reason or other Fred would never let the policeman drive him to the house. He'd always get him to let him out at the road. Fred would walk half way up the drive and there was this little patch of lawn there. He'd sit there and he'd wait for his invitation to come any further. That was a part of it. So Auntie would say 'there he is', and she'd be peeping out of the kitchen window see, let him be for a while. He'd be there and nothing happened you see and after a while, he used to call her. 'Missus, hey Missus', you'd hear him yell out, 'Missus'. She wouldn't say anything for a while, she'd let him go for a while. 'Missus, I've been a naughty boy. Your boy's come home. I've been naughty'. He'd be singing this out to her. So she accidentally sees him and acts a big surprise. She'd have to walk out the back. 'Oh Fred, where did you come from?' 'Oh Missus, I have been a naughty boy'. 'What did you do naughty Fred?' 'Oh I got boozed', he said. 'I got boozed. I've been very naughty'. 'Oh well Fred go on over to the hut. I'll have something for you in a minute. He'd be a hell of a mess you know. His clothes would be hanging off him. He went away all done up a few months before. He would go up and she'd have a big pot of soup on ready for him and I'd take that over and Fred would get into that, probably the first decent feed he'd had for a week. He'd come good again. Oh God, he'd want to do everything around the place, he'd chop hell out of the wood. He'd got to make up for it. 'Oh, I've been bad' he would say'.

Both parties were performing and structuring this ritualised meeting. Mrs Goode maintained a studied indifference to Fred's arrival to increase his guilt, while Fred's cautious approach and contrite behaviour echoed Aboriginal meeting ritual and deference to powerful kin. Both were bound in a reciprocal relationship of mutual need and respect.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>24</sup> *Hamilton Spectator*, 11 August 1987.

<sup>25</sup> See Hamilton 1972, pp. 34–48 and Hallam 1983, pp. 134–6.

### Aboriginal man and his Aboriginality

The third force in the shaping of Fred Wilson's beat, his world, and his identity, was his Aboriginal friends. Little is currently known of this beyond glimpses in the European record.<sup>26</sup> However, Aboriginal people always seem present if not dominant in Wilson's life. Trangmar claimed that Wilson visited Condah Mission after working at Edgars and 'with his cheque he would buy a sackful of supplies and gifts for the people at the Mission. When he arrived there he was hailed as a black Santa Claus for it was always about Christmas time that he would appear there'. He believed that Wilson had a strong friendship with Hannah Lovett, an Aboriginal elder at the mission. Alick Jackomos stated that Mulga Fred stayed at Condah Mission 'for many years' and recalled him being at Mrs Lovett's funeral in 1946.<sup>27</sup> Official correspondence also recorded that Wilson was staying with 'a half-caste, Jack Harrison' of Antwerp in 1935.<sup>28</sup> When Fred Wilson made his last appearance at the Swan Hill Show in 1948, the month before he died, he did so in the company of Jackie Lovett, the Heywood footballer.<sup>29</sup>

Wilson also binged with Aboriginal friends in Victoria where Aboriginal people had freer access to alcohol. In March 1935 he and William Bull received 14 days' gaol for being drunk and disorderly in Bairnsdale. Ronald Glen, the manager of Lake Tyers Aboriginal Mission, wrote to the Board that they worked a stockwhip exhibition together, 'and are real nuisances in the district'.<sup>30</sup> When Glen forbade Bull from visiting town to obtain liquor, he replied that Glen had no power to stop him unless he made Lake Tyers as Bull's prescribed place of residence. And if he did that, 'he would not do a tap of work, and clear out if he wished'.<sup>31</sup> Wilson was again in court in Warrnambool in January 1938 charged with local Koorie, Chris Austin, for being drunk and disorderly. They were fined £2, in default 14 days imprisonment.<sup>32</sup> Wilson did not drink only with Aboriginal friends. He drank with independent-minded whites as well. After the 1933 Horsham Show, the local publican who ran the beer tent, forgot to collect one of his kegs from the showgrounds. Some sideshow operators (who were themselves marginal men) took it to the riverbank, inviting passers-by to join them, including 'Mulga Fred, whose gameness riding furious steers earlier in the day had attracted attention'.<sup>33</sup>

Wilson's drinking led to his being gaoled at least 15 times between 1927 and 1940, for periods ranging from one to 28 days, mostly for being drunk and disorderly. He was incarcerated predominantly in Warrnambool lock-up, but also in Geelong, Ballarat, Ararat, and Sale gaols.<sup>34</sup> He was not convicted after 1940. By then, police who knew

26. The records of the Koorie Oral History Project held at the Department of Aboriginal Affairs (Victoria) contain no mention of Mulga Fred. Telephone conversation with Christina Bourke, librarian.

27. Jackomos 1979, p. 12. Alick Jackomos, Kew, interview, 5 June 1997.

28. P. R. Biggin, Clerk of Courts, Nhill, to Secretary, APB, 6 May 1935 in personal file on 'Mulga Fred', Australian Archives (Victorian Branch), AA series B337, item 551.

29. *Coleraine Albion*, 11 February 1960.

30. Ronald Glen to APB, 6 March 1935 in 1935 in personal file on 'Mulga Fred', Australian Archives (Victorian Branch), AA series B337, item 551.

31. *Ibid.* See also Anderson 1995, pp. 22–37.

32. *Warrnambool Standard*, 4 January 1938.

33. Un-named press cutting dated 17 October 1933 held by the Horsham and District Historical Society.

Wilson as Mulga Fred, rider and whip cracker, gave him a bed when he was drunk and sent him on his way. The story of his ritual returns home to the Goode's property, reveals this approach. Indeed, evidence from the 1930s revealed similar treatment from the authorities. On one occasion Fred Wilson journeyed from Horsham, cast out of town by magistrate, E. Omant, to avoid a gaol sentence for drunkenness. He proceeded to Casterton and then to Dimboola to see some Aboriginal friends, where he soon found himself in the lock-up. The police in Stawell, Ararat, and Hamilton moved him on, and then the Apex Gymkhana lured him back to Horsham. Despite being dressed in boots, riding pants and a loud tie, he never arrived at the rodeo. A bottle of wine or two on Saturday night diverted him to Omant's Court, and then to Ballarat Gaol for two weeks.<sup>35</sup>

Fred Wilson was devoid of any 'chip on his shoulder' and was usually a genial drinker. Norman Flack recalled that when Mulga Fred was once at the Casterton Hotel a busload of people pulled up outside. He sprang to his feet, pulled off his hat, and soon after returned with a hat full of money and shouted all the white fellows in the bar. Wilson gave some fine performances on horseback or with a whip while inebriated. In August 1931 he was drunk in charge of a horse in Liebig Street, Warrnambool, at 11.15 pm on a Saturday night. 'He was singing out in a loud voice, and had attracted a crowd'.<sup>36</sup> Sometimes alcohol plunged him into the horrors and occasionally he became violent. He told one story against himself at the Goode's dinner table, about how while drunk, he burnt down the cook's tent on an irrigation channel construction job, in anger at the cook's disapproving wife. Norman Flack recalled a unique occasion when Wilson attacked him and his wife while he was drunk, because they had no cigarettes to give him. However, Flack added: 'he might work for three or four months and not have a drink'.

What lay behind these drinking bouts? It might have been an addiction, but the long periods of sobriety suggest otherwise. It was likely that Mulga Fred was following the bushman's tradition of work and burst, as Beckett has observed of other Aboriginal rural workers.<sup>37</sup> Perhaps his street performances, which disrupted respectability, formed an 'oppositional' culture, as detected by Beckett and later Gillian Cowlishaw.<sup>38</sup> Brian Hernon, a Horsham farmer who wrote to me, recounted that 'many years ago, Fred who liked an ale or two, went into a pub in our City of Horsham and ordered a pot of beer which then cost sixpence. He downed the beer, and the barman said 'that'll cost sixpence Fred', who smartly replied, 'you pinched our land so that's on the House', which reply was met with a loud laugh by all present. He was a likeable fellow by all accounts'.<sup>39</sup> The incident reveals a more overt political act by Wilson, while the yarn about it perhaps released unconscious tensions over land ownership among the white usurpers.

The Victorian Board for the Protection of the Aborigines held a jaundiced view of Fred Wilson. He was born a Western Australian, and thus the Board had no jurisdiction

<sup>34</sup>. *Victorian Police Gazette*, 1920-1948.

<sup>35</sup>. Undated clipping in the files of the Horsham and District Historical Society. See also his two court appearances in Melbourne in 1935, in which he was shown leniency and moved on, *Herald*, 7 June and 3 July 1935.

<sup>36</sup>. *Warrnambool Standard*, 4 January 1938.

<sup>37</sup>. Beckett 1964, p. 42. See also Ward 1958, pp. 71-111.

<sup>38</sup>. See Beckett 1964, pp. 32-47; Beckett 1958, p. 42; and Cowlishaw 1988, pp. 232-47.

<sup>39</sup>. Brian Hernon to Richard Broome, letter, 4 June 1996.

over him, which it readily acknowledged. Wilson's file under the name 'Mulga Fred', is thus a slim document. It only relates to his effort in 1936 to gain the old age pension, and two attempts to help him home to the West in 1935 and 1947— incidents worthy of scrutiny.

In May 1936, P.R. Biggin, the Clerk of Courts at Nhill wrote to the Protection Board as Mulga Fred had requested the old age pension. Biggin's version of Mulga Fred's life, claimed he left his people at Diamondina at the age of ten, bound for Perth. Mulga Fred arrived in Victoria in 1910, where he earned a living as a buckjumper and whip cracker at shows until recently. Biggin added:

I might say that this old fellow is well known and popular throughout Victoria. He is a fairly good type, as aborigines go. He occasionally allows himself to become the worse for drink, but he is never offensive. After the free, open life he has led, he does not want to go into a mission station. I do not think that he has very many more years before him, and in my opinion his case is one that merits favorable (sic) consideration.<sup>40</sup>

The Board replied that it had no power to assist Mulga Fred as he did not come under the *Aborigines Act 1928*, being born in Western Australia. In 1960, E. Trangmar explained to the Horsham and District Historical Society that 'I tried for three years to get him the pension'. After supplying all the details of his birthplace, age, parentage, life and character, it was granted 'on the condition that I would administer it for him. I still have his record book with his "markman's" cross, for Mulga could neither read nor write'. A minute by the Chief Secretary's Department in 1947 confirmed that Wilson was receiving the old age pension which was paid at the rate of 65/- per fortnight to Trangmar, 'who does it out to him'.<sup>41</sup> This payment was unusual at the time, but Wilson was in an unusual situation. He was a man of full descent who was not living in an Aboriginal institution, or in his home state, so the usual paternal carers were not relevant. He also had a strong advocate in Trangmar.

The Victorian authorities tried to repatriate Wilson. Ronald Glen, the Manager at Lake Tyers, initiated this in February 1935 after Wilson's drunken spree with William Bull. R.V. Cox, in charge of the Sale Gaol where the two were lodged, wrote to the Board giving yet another version of Wilson's age, origins, and history. The most significant fact was that Mulga Fred claimed he was from South Australia, and of the same tribe that killed Constable McColl in the Northern Territory. Cox added: 'Mulga Fred is a very low type of aborigine. He cannot read or write and is of low drunken habits'.<sup>42</sup> The Victorian Board wrote to its counterpart in South Australia, hoping to offload Fred, pleading that 'this Board has been very severely criticised on account of the conduct of this man during the centenary celebrations'. M.T. McLean, the Chief Protector in South Australia, said he had no knowledge of this man, had no place for him, and stated 'he would be just as difficult a character in South Australia as in Victoria'.<sup>43</sup>

40. P.R. Biggin, to the Secretary, APB, 6 May 1936 in personal file on 'Mulga Fred', Australian Archives (Victorian Branch), AA series B337, item 551.

41. Chief Secretary's Department, 15 March 1947 in personal file on 'Mulga Fred', Australian Archives (Victorian Branch), AA series B337, item 551.

42. R.V. Cox to the APB, 14 March 1935 in personal file on 'Mulga Fred', Australian Archives (Victorian Branch), AA series B337, item 551.

The issue of repatriation was raised again in 1946 and seems to have come from Wilson himself. The Melbourne *Sun* in October 1946 reported that he was considering returning to the West, as did the Melbourne *Herald* two months later.<sup>44</sup> The authorities in Victoria and Western Australia exchanged correspondence on the matter, the officials in the West indicating a willingness to assist. Rev G.L. Graham of the Hamilton Aborigines Uplift Society, sought Victorian help with passage money, which would be a 'humane act' as Mulga Fred is 'now an old man'.<sup>45</sup>

Why did Wilson raise this issue at this time? Constable J. Barry of Hamilton, who was asked for advice by the Victoria Aborigines Protection Board, replied that he did not think Mulga Fred would go to a benevolent home or to the West.

On the last occasion that Mulga Fred was detained in the Hamilton lock-up he stated that he intended to return to Western Australia but the sincerity of this expression cannot be verified. Personally, I am of the opinion that Mulga Fred originated the story of his return to Western Australia in order to gain public sympathy, which is readily forthcoming in this district. I do not think that he has any intention of returning to his native State.<sup>46</sup>

Wilson it seems, cleverly manipulated the public, stirring action in two Melbourne dailies and two state administrations.

Mulga Fred's influence in the Western District and in Victoria is really quite remarkable. However, his agency might have assumed far greater proportions than this escapade. When 'Sundowner', a columnist in the Melbourne *Sun*, announced Mulga Fred's imminent departure, he gave a resume of his skills with horse and whip and described him as 'one of the best known full-blooded aborigines in the country'. 'Sundowner' added: 'Most adult Australians have seen a representation of Mulga Fred. He is reputed to be the original of the proud black man in the shirt advertisement saying 'Mine Tinkit They Fit'.<sup>47</sup>

### Advertising icon and the politics of representation and appropriation

In 1906 Messrs James Pearson and James Law began to manufacture shirts in Melbourne. In 1911 and again in 1917, they transformed their business into a Melbourne-based company, named from their surnames, PEARSON & LAW Co, or Pelaco. The company adopted for its 'Made in Australia' campaign, an Aboriginal image, taken from a drawing by A.T. Mockridge of a robust and proud Aboriginal man striding along wearing nothing but a white shirt. The image, drawn in 1906 according to a partially obscured plaque on the wooden frame, is currently stored at the company's Maidstone offices for historical research purposes only (Plate 2).<sup>48</sup> The company adopted the slogan: 'Mine Tinkit They Fit', to accompany 'Pelaco Bill', as their icon came to be known. His image assumed dozens of variations over 40 years. No records exist about Mock-

43. McLean, to Secretary, Victorian APB, 28 March 1935 in personal file on 'Mulga Fred', Australian Archives (Victorian Branch), AA series B337, item 551.

44. *Sun*, 3 October 1946 and *Herald*, 7 December 1946.

45. See correspondence in personal file on 'Mulga Fred', Australian Archives (Victorian Branch), AA series B337, item 551.

46. J. Barry, 1st Constable, Hamilton, to Secretary, APB, 15 March 1947 in personal file on 'Mulga Fred', Australian Archives (Victorian Branch), AA series B337, item 551.

47. 'Sundowner', *Sun*, 3 October 1946.



Plate 2 'Pelaco Bill' by A.T. Mockridge 1906 (Pelaco Pty Ltd.).

ridge to illuminate the origins of the painting, the campaign, or any association with Mulga Fred Wilson. The only interesting coincidence is that Pelaco was reconstituted in 1911, the year Mulga Fred Wilson reputedly won the Coronation Rodeo in Melbourne.

Pelaco's own scanty records date 'Pelaco Bill' from at least 1922.<sup>49</sup> This image quickly captured the public's imagination. At the company's annual meeting in 1926, a shareholder, J.L. Warren, reportedly congratulated the board on a successful year. He also expressed appreciation for the 'national character of the company's advertising, and stated that during his travels around Australia, almost the first thing that greeted him in every town was a Pelaco advertisement'.<sup>50</sup> In March 1927, Pelaco initiated an aggressive advertising regime, for 'Pelaco Billy', advertising in newspapers, window displays and hoardings up to 7 x 3 metres in size. Railway display windows were favoured because 94,000 people passed Spencer Street Station every day.<sup>51</sup> By the 1940s, Pelaco was the leading Australian shirt manufacturer with 1,000 workers at five factories in Melbourne, and at factories in Sydney and Brisbane.

Images of 'Pelaco Bill' were progressively transformed from Mockridge's simple sketch of a half-dressed, striding Aborigine. These images became moments of dominance as they made humorous but serious play on difference, blackness as opposed to whiteness, and on tropes of Aboriginal Otherness and primitivism. However, in the 1930s more sophisticated and ambivalent images emerged, including connections to the Anzac legend, with Pelaco Bill's face appearing on a war service medal pinned on a Pelaco shirt. In the pages of the 1930 annual report, the most racist version appeared, with 'Bill' striding along in a white shirt and tie with a straw boater and holding a cane, yet appearing ridiculous in bare feet and legs. An admiring Aboriginal woman in a stereotypical sack cloth dress looked on (see Plates 3 and 4). In the 1932 annual report, issued in March 1933, 'Bill' was pictured atop the new Pelaco building launching a boomerang, this time in white shirt, tie, and trousers. He was a very stylish 'Bill', except for possible primitivist echoes of the King Kong movie released in 1933. In 1935, 'Bill' was at his most sophisticated, being dressed in white shirt, tie, monocle, and holding a cigar in one hand and a top hat in the other, except, that is, for the bare legs. The slogan had become: 'Mine Tink It Plenty Quality'. Again the play is upon difference: black man-white shirt, primitive man-civilized performance. However, in 1936 the most positive and ambivalent image was created. 'Bill' was dressed in white shirt, tie and trousers standing before the flag, with the slogan: 'Mine Tink It Something To Be Proud Of'. The English was still incorrect, the play was still about white on black, but there was an assertiveness and pride about 'Bill': an Australian man, in an Australian shirt, before an Australian flag! 'Bill' was no longer a primitive, but assimilated to Australian life and at the centre of national identity.<sup>52</sup> And this was a year before the 1937 Native Conference opted for an assimilation policy. The company reported in 1938 that the new 'blackfel-

48. I inspected this image at the company's offices on 18 July 1997. My thanks go to the management of Pelaco, especially Margaret Martin and Mark Dumbrell, for allowing me to view the image and other written materials such as the staff news, *Pelacograms*. *Pelacogram* was the staff monthly magazine. Pelaco Archives, Maidstone.

49. *Pelacogram*, January 1922, Pelaco Archives, Maidstone.

50. *Argus*, 8 March 1926.

51. *Pelaco Annual Report*, 1926, p. 4 University of Melbourne Archives, Stock Exchange records, box 880.



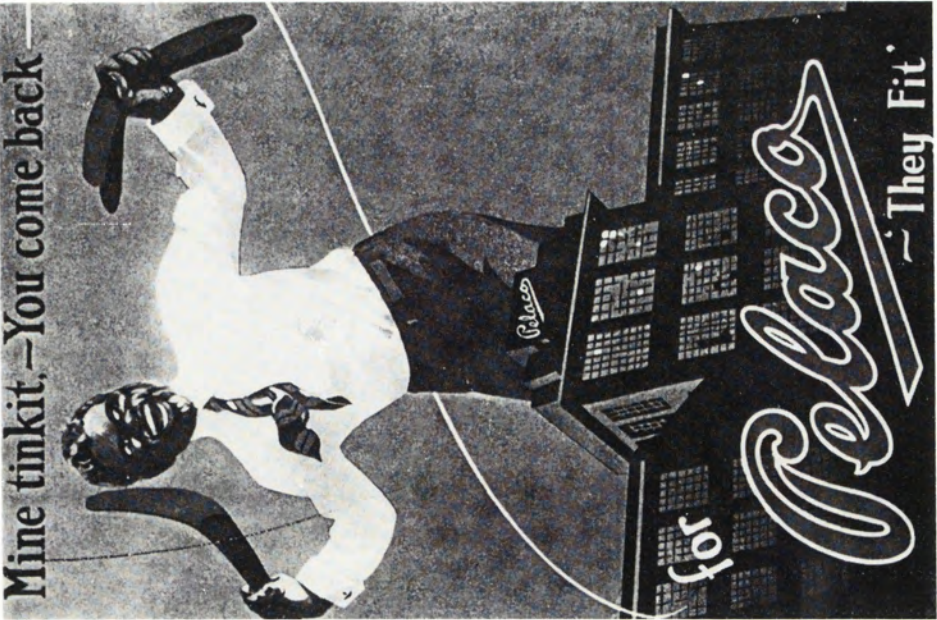


Plate 3 Advertising images of 'Pelaco Bill', 1930 and 1933 (Pelaco Pty Ltd., Annual Reports, 1930-36)





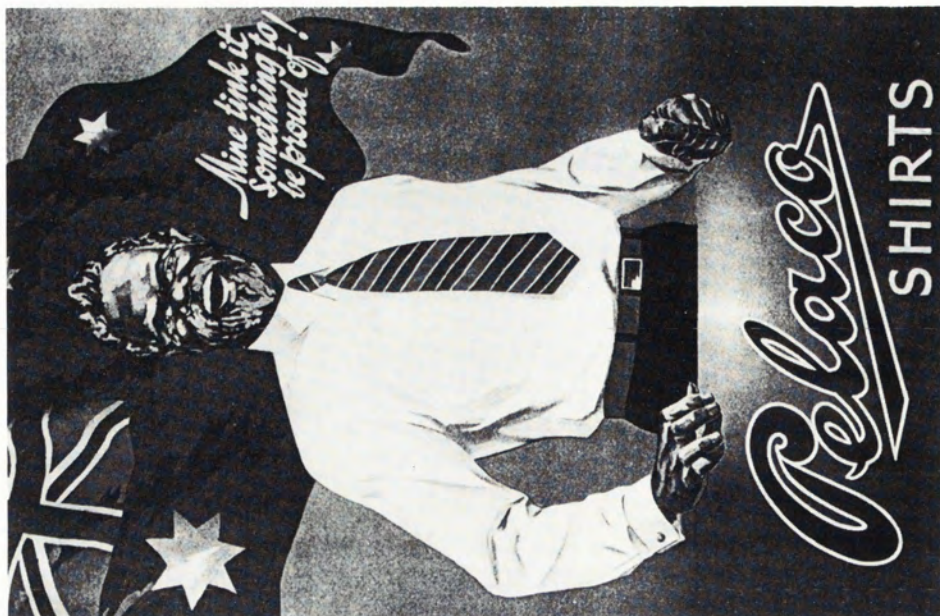


Plate 4 Advertising  
images of 'Pelaco Bill',  
1935 and 1936 (Pelaco  
Pty Ltd., Annual  
Reports, 1930-36)



low counter stands' (probably a celluloid head and hands holding a shirt) were very popular with retailers.<sup>53</sup> It is unclear exactly when 'Bill' in his many manifestations ceased as Pelaco's trademark. In 1940 the publicity department announced a new advertisement to 'replace the present blackfellow', but informants recall the advertisement being used until the end of the 1940s.<sup>54</sup> A fashion model, Bambi Smith, took over in 1950 with the slogan: 'It Is Indeed a Lovely Shirt Sir'.

The 'Pelaco Bill' advertising campaign was highly successful. 'Bill' was always depicted with a 'feel good' broad smile and there was much humour about the campaign. Some of it derived from the sense of difference discussed above. Other humour was situational. One image showed 'Bill' dangling from a cliff being saved by an Aboriginal friend who was holding his white shirt-tail. The slogan read: 'Mine Tink It Pelaco Never Let Me Down'. These images still have a strong recognition factor with those over 70 years old. Sid Swift recalled (not quite accurately) that it was unique at that time to see an Aboriginal person in advertising, while Reg Harvey remembered it was 'very Australian'. Doug Miller recalled that 'the very white shirt on a very black body certainly caught the eye'. Esme Donnan found the slogan most memorable and it became 'a phrase often used in our family in fun, to describe the appearance of a new piece of clothing ... I still quite often use the saying'.

All those questioned, recalled nothing 'derogatory' about its meanings, as David Donnan put it. Bernard Jacques who was born in 1910 and grew up in Perth, remembered the advertisement on railway hoardings, and recalled the report about 'the model's' death in the *West Australian*. Jacques added, 'I would strongly resist any suggestion today that it should now be claimed that any racial demeaning of Aborigines can be read into the "Mine Tinkit They Fit" slogan'.<sup>55</sup> Certainly it was less strident than some other interwar advertising, including Nulla Nulla, 'Australia's White Hope, The Best Household Soap', which 'knocks dirt on the head'. The advertisement featured an Aboriginal bust with brass plate, inscribed with the word 'dirt', being hit with a wooden spoon.<sup>56</sup> However, Gordon Treweek, who worked in the cutting room at Pelaco from 1940, said that the 'Pelaco Bill' campaign was discontinued because of sensitivity about race.<sup>57</sup> Susan Bailey, daughter of the then General Manager, K.S. Elliott, confirmed the company's growing concern over the advertisement.<sup>58</sup> Arthur Ramsey, who rose from delivery boy to Sales Manager between 1932 and 1974, recalled the advertisement was ended because Paton's advertising agency convinced the Pelaco

<sup>52</sup> *Pelaco Annual Reports, 1917-1958*, University of Melbourne Archives, Stock Exchange records, box 880. For other images of 'Pelaco Bill' see Cozzolino & Rutherford 1987, p. 129 and colour plate L.

<sup>53</sup> *Pelacograms*, 25 March 1938, Pelaco Archives, Maidstone. These counter stands can be seen in Cozzolino & Rutherford 1987, colour plate L.

<sup>54</sup> *Pelacograms*, 25 May 1940, Pelaco Archives, Maidstone.

<sup>55</sup> All the respondents were in their seventies. They were shown six Pelaco images in August 1996, and asked which, if any, did they recall, where did they see them, and what did they feel about these images at the time. The respondents were Sidney Swift, Camp Hill; David and Esme Donnan, Camp Hill; Douglas Miller, Camp Hill; Reginald and Florence Harvey, Camp Hill; Joyce Mackay, Camp Hill; and Bernard Jaques, Perth.

<sup>56</sup> Cozzolino Rutherford 1987, p. 47.

<sup>57</sup> Gordon Treweek, Cheltenham, telephone interview, 5 June 1997. Notes in author's possession.

<sup>58</sup> Susan Bailey, Beaumaris, telephone interview, 25 June 1997. Notes in author's possession.

board, in the face of opposition from co-founder James Law, that the image was dated.<sup>59</sup> Did they mean by 'dated', not 'politically correct' in the emerging post-colonial world of the late 1940s, complete with a United Nations Declaration of Human Rights?

Was Mulga Fred Wilson the model for 'Pelaco Bill'? Many Victorians and especially those in the Western District, believed then and now, that he was. His obituary in the *Horsham Times* stated that 'his sturdy bewhiskered figure inspired one of Australia's most famous advertisements—the Pelaco advt.—"Mine Tinkit They Fit", and this was always a source of pride to him'.<sup>60</sup> 'Sundowner' told *Sun* readers he was reputed to be the model and Major Wilson, editor of the *Outdoor Showman* claimed that he was.<sup>61</sup> Judy Botterill, a researcher for the Hamilton History Centre informed me that 'I think there was no doubt that he was the man in the Pelaco ads. There are people in Hamilton who remember him meeting the goods train to collect a parcel of clothes from Pelaco—I believe that they kept him in clothes for the rest of his life'.<sup>62</sup> Nancy Edgar remembered in the late 1970s that Mulga Fred claimed he was the model for 'Pelaco Bill'.<sup>63</sup> Dorothy Brown of Dimboola recalled Mulga's 'lovely white shirts. But the rest of his dress included a patchwork coat, and a rope, which hitched 'em up above the worn sandals'.<sup>64</sup>

My chief informants, Don McCabe and Norm Flack, were unsure of the connection, Flack commenting, '[I knew] only what we read about it. But Fred never told us, never told me about that. But it was pretty common knowledge. It says in that book [a local history] I gave you Donny, that Pelaco did do it'. In 1976, Ted Brown who rodeoed with Fred, claimed Wilson spoke correctly, not like the slogan's broken English, a view McCabe and Flack also held. However, Brown claimed that 'the Pelaco Company photographed him [Wilson] for their shirt advertisements while he was working for Jack Briggs's Carnival as a whip cracker. He was paid 100 pounds and four shirts a year'.<sup>65</sup> This sounds plausible, but it attributes the campaign to a photograph and not Mockridge's drawing of 1906 (although the drawing could have easily been done from a photograph of Mulga Fred, not life). There is no evidence that Fred Wilson was cracking whips in rodeos before the First World War, but it was possible.

Pelaco has both affirmed and doubted the connection over the years. In 1978 the company expressed reservations about whether Wilson was the model for Mockridge's drawing.<sup>66</sup> Among some unsourced material sent to me by Pelaco in 1994, was an article apparently from a company publication. It claimed there never was a model for the campaign as the image was the creation of a Melbourne showman, 'Storky' Adams, now living in Hollywood. 'The idea came to him many years ago when he was travelling on a cable car from St. Kilda to the City, [he] noticed some outdoor advertising for

59. Arthur Ramsey, Surfers Paradise, telephone interview, 8 June 1997. Notes in author's possession.

60. *Horsham Times*, 5 November 1948.

61. *Sun*, 3 October 1948; *Outdoor Showman*, November 1948.

62. Judy Botterill to Richard Broome, letter, 4 October 1994.

63. *Coleraine Albion*, 6 February 1978.

64. *Ibid.*

65. *Wimmera Mail Times*, 8 December 1976.

66. See clipping possibly from the *Coleraine Albion*(?) 6 February 1978 in the Horsham and District Historical Society's files.

Pelaco. One of the founders of Pelaco was a friend of Storky Adams and as a gesture of goodwill he presented the idea of the friendly aboriginal wearing nothing but a white shirt to the owners of Pelaco, and they in turn added the caption "Mine Tinkit They Fit".<sup>67</sup>

However, on Mulga Fred Wilson's death in November 1948, Mr K.S.Elliott, the company's General Manager since 1924, told the *Sun* that his firm had always regarded Mulga Fred as the model for the advertisement. The image added a touch of humour to the 'Made in Australia' label, which in the early days was often avoided by the buying public. Elliott remarked 'we were always happy to see his happy countenance. Perhaps in his way he did much for secondary industry in boosting the local product. We hadn't seen him for 18 months, but kept in touch through a local retailer'.<sup>68</sup> In 1976 Pelaco donated \$400 towards the restoration of Fred Wilson's grave in Horsham and in 1987 sponsored the inaugural Mulga Fred whip cracking competition at Hamilton during Wool Week.<sup>69</sup> Myth and reality became hopelessly entwined once Pelaco's own files contained Western District press cuttings alleging the Pelaco-Mulga Fred connection. In 1986, on its seventy-fifth anniversary, Pelaco's own version of its past stated that the company, around 1920, 'began advertising their shirts using an Aboriginal, Mulga Fred, wearing one of their gleaming white shirts, with the slogan 'Mine Tinkit They Fit'.<sup>70</sup>

The retailer to whom Elliott referred above, was probably E. Trangmar. In 1960 Trangmar stated:

On one occasion Mulga came to me and told me that he was to get a shirt every year from the Pelaco Company. He asked me to write and ask them for a shirt for him. The first letter, addressed to the company, brought forth nothing except a denial of all knowledge of any such arrangement. I then wrote to the manager, Mr. R.(sic) S. Elliott, personally. He knew of Mulga and the deal; he sent up two shirts, a cleaned smart suit and a pair of socks. He looked fine in his new clothes; he went off to Melbourne, to Fitzroy, where his fellow countrymen stripped him of his fine feathers; when he returned he was wearing their cast-offs.

Was the connection between Mulga Fred and 'Pelaco Bill' real, or was it convenient for both Pelaco and Mulga Fred to claim it was? Susan Bailey, Elliott's daughter, thought her father did not know who was the model for the advertisement, contradicting Elliott's view to the press in 1948 stated above. Bailey added that occasionally an Aboriginal man would come to the Goodwin Street factory of Pelaco in Richmond, claiming to be the model. James Law, the Company's founder, used to give him money.<sup>71</sup> Edna Scambler aged 89, who was Elliott's personal assistant for much of her working life at Pelaco from 1924 to 1967, vaguely recalled James Law saying that a man was used as the model for 'Pelaco Bill'. And she remembered several visits in the 1930s by a man, or different bearded Aboriginal men, who claimed to be the model for 'Pelaco

67. Sue Ryan, assistant to the Managing Director of Pelaco, to Richard Broome, letter, 26 August 1994, including a print of Mockridge's drawing and some photocopies.

68. *Sun*, 4 November 1948.

69. On the grave restoration see *Wimmera Mail Times*, 11 August and 15 November 1976. On the competition see *Wimmera Mail Times*, 7 August 1987.

70. 'Pelaco Shirts. Seventy-Five Years of Excellence, 1911-1986. The Pelaco Story', Pelaco Archives, Maidstone.

71. Susan Bailey, Beaumaris, telephone interview, 25 June 1997. Notes in author's possession.

Bill'. Edna Scambler said Law offered them tea but she knew nothing about money or clothing being given. She also recalled Law saying 'that's the third one who has claimed to be Pelaco Bill'.<sup>72</sup> Arthur Ramsey who was in Pelaco's administration from 1932 to 1974, believed that Mulga Fred was not the model, and that the advertising images were taken from Mockridge's original drawing. This of course begs the question, what inspired Mockridge: Wilson, his photograph, or something else? Ramsey claimed 'Storky' Adams, gave James Law the slogan (not the image as stated in the version above) to explain Pelaco's revolutionary move to standard sizes. He confirmed that Law, a tight-fisted Scot, gave Mulga Fred clothing and money when he visited the Richmond factory '£5, but in two lots, half now, half in a week's time so he wouldn't drink it too quickly'. Ramsey did not know if shirts were posted to Mulga Fred. He added that Pelaco paid for Mulga Fred's funeral to save him from a pauper's grave.<sup>73</sup>

We can perhaps never know whether Fred Wilson was the subject of this advertising campaign. In the end the 'truth' is less important than the reality that many thought that it was true, and still do. Whatever the 'truth', both Wilson and the company gained if Mulga Fred and 'Pelaco Bill' were identified as one, so both appropriated the other. Pelaco was content to associate its image with a great rodeo rider and Victorian public character, and Mulga Fred was happy to appropriate 'Pelaco Bill' as himself, gain more fame, the odd shirt and a £5 note. Mulga Fred Wilson was empowered and Pelaco went to the top in shirt sales.

### Mulga Fred and Western District memory

Since his death under a train in 1948, people, press and this historian have constructed Mulga Fred Wilson. Memories flow about him as people yarn about his riding and whip cracking. Fred Brown, a former fellow rough rider, described him as 'one of Australia's greatest rough riders and whip crackers', adding 'he was a fair dinkum Australian'.<sup>74</sup> The Western District press has published dozens of articles about Mulga Fred, and most historical societies in this region have files on him. A racehorse was named 'Mulga Fred' in the 1930s, several poems about him were published before his death, and a whip cracking competition was named in his honour.<sup>75</sup> Few other Aboriginal people attained such local praise prior to recent times. But then, few performed like Mulga Fred with horse, whip and on a billboard.

Mulga Fred Wilson was part of the landscape in many Western District towns, symbol of white dominance and white paternal care, and also to us, of Aboriginal agency. Recently John Clode, a poet from the region, published a poem about Mulga Fred extolling his horse and whip skills and his Pelaco connection.<sup>76</sup> Edna Smith of Kaniva, who when a child knew Fred, promotes him ardently, sending material on him to regional historical societies. She recently posted me a new poem, which began: 'Mulga Fred was a hero at the local show'.<sup>77</sup>

<sup>72</sup> Edna Scambler, Camberwell, telephone interview, 14 July 1997. Notes in author's possession.

<sup>73</sup> Arthur Ramsey, Surfers Paradise, telephone interview, 8 June 1997. Notes in author's possession.

<sup>74</sup> *Wimmera Mail Times*, 8 December 1976.

<sup>75</sup> *Warrnambool Standard*, 3 January 1938; *Wimmera Mail Times*, 8 December 1976.

<sup>76</sup> *Wimmera Mail Times*, January 1997.

<sup>77</sup> Edna Smith, Kaniva, to Richard Broome, letter, 22 January 1997.

Mulga Fred Wilson was his own man, living independently, moving when he chose, negotiating his way through country shows, pastoral properties, Aboriginal camps and missions, court-rooms and police lock-ups. He gained the pension when few in his circumstances did so. He engaged in multiple performances as rodeo champion, street busker, genial tippler and horse tamer, and appropriated the position and benefits of an advertising icon. His rodeo career, work skills and the Pelaco connection, empowered him. These roles, together with his adopted Victorian kin, forged his identity as 'Mulga Fred', Aboriginal man. Without his own land and ancestral kin he remained Aboriginal. In 1976 the Horsham and Coleraine Apex clubs remodeled Mulga Fred Wilson's grave after an attack by vandals.<sup>78</sup> The simple inscription,

Mulga Fred  
2-11-1948  
R. I. P.

was encircled—as was the original headstone—with an engraving of stockwhip and boomerang. These were the symbols of his two cultures: the European and the Aboriginal worlds, which he successfully negotiated.

*Richard Broome Associate Professor in History at La Trobe University. He is currently writing a history of the Koori people in Victoria.*

## References

- Anderson, Hugh 1995, 'Lost in the streets. A gumleaf requiem for Bill Bull', *Journal of Australian Studies*, no. 44, March 1995, pp. 22–37.
- Beckett, Jeremy 1958, 'Aborigines make music', *Quadrant*, Spring, pp. 32–42. .
- 1964, 'Aborigines, Alcohol and Assimilation' in *Aborigines Now*, ed. Marie Reay, Sydney, pp. 32–47.
- Cowlshaw, Gillian 1988, *Black, White and Brindle. Race in Rural Australia*, Cambridge.
- Cozzolino, Mimmo & Rutherford, Fysh eds. 1987, *Symbols of Australia*, Melbourne, 2nd edition.
- Hallam, Sylvia 1983, 'A View from the Other Side of the Western Frontier: or "I Met a Man Who Wasn't There"', *Aboriginal History*, vol. 7, no. 2, pp. 134–157.
- Hamilton, Annette 1972, 'Blacks and Whites: the relationship of change', *Arena*, no. 30, pp. 34–48.
- Jackomos, Alick 1979, 'Mrs Hannah Lovett, of Greenvale, Victoria', *Identity*, January 1979, p. 12.
- McGrath, Anne 1987, 'Born in the Cattle'. *Aborigines in Cattle Country*, Sydney. Trangmar, E.R. 1960, 'Stories of the Past. Mulga Fred' reprinted in the *Coleraine Albion*, 4 and 11 February 1960.
- Trangamar, E.R. 1960, 'Stories of the past. Mulga Fred', reprinted in *Coleraine Albion*, 4 & 11 February.
- Ward, Russel 1958, *The Australian Legend*, Melbourne.

<sup>78</sup>. *Wimmera Mail Times*, 11 August 1976 and 15 November 1976. An article in the *Australasian Post*, 25 February 1960, confirmed that the original grave had a stockwhip and boomerang engraved on it.