



The Serpentine fish mungah, which Billy Dower fought to save in 1897

Billy Dower

c.1848 – 1904

Billy Dower was a leader of the Murray Aboriginals, or Bindjareb Noongars.

Born around 1848, he may have been a son of Winjan, the Murray tribe's leader at the time of the Pinjarra Massacre, said to have lived to 126 before dying in 1884. Winjan's son Yaburgurt, also known as George Winjan, worked as a mediator between the Aboriginals and the white settlers, and was also a leader. Daisy Bates's pedigree of Winjan shows that he had two sons by his wife Deewar, and Yaburgurt by another wife. Yaburgurt later inherited a wife, and wives were inherited from deceased brothers. This lady was named Kooragup, and had been married three times previously; to a Dootun or "Tommy", a Dower and a Yoong-gup. Could this "Dower" be our Billy Dower? Later in life, the Aborigines Department believed that Billy was also known as Winjin or Winjan. Billy was said to have been a junior leader under Yaburgurt, who was some twenty-five years his senior.



Billy Dower cont'd

This brother Tommy apparently became “King of the Aborigines”. A member of Sir John Forrest’s 1860 and 1882 survey expedition teams and Alexander Forrest’s 1879 Kimberley expedition team, Tommy was proud of his friendship with the Forrests and could rely on them for provision of blankets and flour. He was known as King Tommy, signing himself in an 1893 petition to Sir John as “Honourable Tommy Dower, King of West Australia”. Towards the end of his life he became well-known in Perth for his fondness of alcohol, before dying after a sudden illness in 1895. He left no sons to succeed him as king, and it appears that his brother Billy became King Billy at this point. Several years earlier, Billy had written to the editor of the West Australian, signing himself as “Brother to King Tommy Dower and Heir Presumptive. Pinjarrah, Miah”.

In his letter, he mentioned his famous brother to establish who he was, before complaining that the local magistrate would not give him a blanket. Billy believed that the Aboriginals should be given blankets, regardless of whether they were seen as industrious or non-working, because they were no longer able to make rugs from kangaroo skins. As the white people were responsible for hunting the local kangaroos, they should be responsible for providing substitute blankets to the Aboriginals.

The Barragup Mungah

This was not the only time that Billy went up against the invasive practices of the white settlers. There was an incident in 1897 over the mungah, or fish trap, at Barragup. Sited at a narrow part of the Serpentine River near where the river meets Pinjarra Road, the mungah was a large and well-made weir built of “A wicker fence” as far back as the 1860s, according to Jessie Hammond. A small gap in the fence was left open for mullet to swim through, where they would be caught by hand each year on their journey from the rivers to the sea. The fish-catching was a big event, where hundreds of people from various tribes would come together for weeks or even months to catch and eat the fish. Even white settlers were involved in later years, as the sheer quantity of fish was too large for the tribes to eat. They sold the excess to settlers for fertiliser or for smoking and salting. There were other indigenous mungahs in the region, but the Barragup one was large and hardy, being designed for long-term use.

A dispute broke out when the fisheries inspector, Lindsay Thompson, ordered that the mungah be destroyed. Invasive fishing by white settlers saw Thompson establish boat licences and stop net fishing in order to prevent over-fishing, and he saw the mungah as a similar threat, although the aboriginals had used such traps for centuries. Although apparently the aboriginals “had some kind of prescriptive right to maintain” their mungah, Thompson recommended it be removed.



Billy Dower cont'd

When the white fishermen tore the mungah down, Billy Dower petitioned the Governor, Sir Gerard Smith. The petition was presented by Billy, Yaburgurt and another man, who joined the crowds at Mandurah to cheer on Sir Gerard when he arrived with a large party to visit the Pinjarra district in October 1897. The party was taken on tours of the local fish canneries, and when the Governor addressed the crowd at Mandurah, Billy Dower and his two supporters stepped forward. "In excellent English and in lucid phrase", he argued that the mungah needed to be protected. He had to keep leaving his work to repair the mungah, which had been pulled down twice, and this was robbing him of the chance to earn wages. The Aborigines had lost their hunting ground to white pastures, and asked that their fishing not be similarly destroyed. When they caught fish, by this time instead of selling the excess to settlers to salt, they were selling them to canneries for the same price which fishermen were paid. The loss of the mungah meant the loss of this profit, as the previous year Charles Tuckey had secured ten thousand tins of fish through this means in just six weeks.

The Governor said that he could not authorise protection of the mungah himself, but said that the men "had his sympathy, and that their petition would be carried to the proper authority for consideration." At this promise, along with a further one of a gift of "tobacco, tea, sugar and flour", the men cheered loudly. The Governor's party later that day visited the site of the mungah, where Sir Gerard praised the "ingenuity and labour" which had developed the fish trap.

After this, the mungah was allowed to remain, but a concession was made that it would have gaps placed in it, to allow some fish to pass through. The mungah was still standing at the start of the twentieth century, by this time with a gap in the middle for boats to pass through, which was covered up by the aborigines with woven nets. It was only in 1937 that the mungah was finally destroyed, as part of a public relief work snagging the Murray and Serpentine rivers during the depression.



Billy Dower cont'd

Billy's Work and Later Life

Billy worked for various settler families over the years, and so was able to learn English and earn money, but still kept up with his culture and responsibilities towards his people. In 1866 he was engaged to work for the Sutton family for three months at 10s per month minding dairy cows. He probably also worked for the Tuckey's at some point, as Charles Tuckey later supplied rations to him. Billy seems to have been well-thought of, as Mrs Paterson later wrote that he was "a real good fellow – no one has a bad word to say against him", and "a good useful man when in health & such a cheerful grateful fellow".

In 1902 the Resident Medical Officer of the Murray district wrote of "An old native of name Winjin" in Pinjarra suffering from "chronic rheumatism" with no one to care for him. This may have been Billy. Between October 1903 and February 1904 he was supplied with rations by Charles Tuckey, but his rheumatism became worse. With no one else to take him in, the Paterson family of Pinjarra looked after Billy from early 1904. He stayed in one of their out-houses and they made him meals and more clothes. Although he had not previously worked for the Patersons, they were one of the old Pinjarra families who had grown up knowing the local Aboriginals and were "kindly disposed" towards them.

Mrs Nellie Paterson wrote to the Protector of Aborigines on 30 March, telling him about Billy and asking what could be done. She said that he was "a good useful man when in health & such a cheerful grateful fellow – it makes one sad to see him in such a state". He was not that old, only in his fifties, but was crippled with rheumatism which meant that "he can only walk a few yards at a time". Billy believed that medicine was best for his condition, despite Mrs Paterson's doubts on its usefulness, but the local doctor was unwilling to help Billy by supplying it. Mrs Paterson asked if Billy could be placed on the reserve near Perth, where he could get medicines and rations, and "be among his own kind".

This reserve was developed in 1899 at Welshpool for local Noongar people and expanded in 1903 by the Chief Protector of Aborigines, Henry Prinsep, into a ration depot. Prinsep worked to remove the Noongar people in the metropolitan area to the reserve, despite their protests. However, many soon left, and by 1908 the Welshpool reserve had become deserted and was closed.

Billy was sent up to the reserve by train on Saturday 16 April 1904, where he was presumably met and helped to the reserve, as he was unable to walk very far unassisted. However, far from his people and his land, Billy died later that year in the Perth Public Hospital on 3 September, from his rheumatism, bronchitis and cardiac failure, after an illness of fourteen days. His "untold agonies" of illness and rheumatism were over. Billy was buried in the Church of England section of Karrakatta Cemetery.



Billy Dower cont'd

The Billy Dower Youth Centre

The Billy Dower Youth Centre in Mandurah was named after Billy Dower. Opening in 2000, it was built in the former Police and Citizens Youth Centre building on Dower Street, also named for Billy Dower. The PCYC had been running in Mandurah since 1955, and had later built the Dower Street hall near Rushton Park. The Billy Dower Youth Centre was opened there on 3 December 2000, after a competition run by the Mandurah Youth Advisory Council to name it. Robyn Powell suggested 'Youth A Peel' and Frank Nannup 'Billy Dower', and the two suggestions were combined.

In 2004 the Centre was recognised in the Premier's Awards and won a Local Government Best Practice award, for its innovative design in bringing together several youth services under the one roof

The Centre was refurbished three years later, with new rooms for training and meetings in addition to a kitchen. In April the following year Lotterywest granted \$26,694 to buy furniture and equipment. In December 2008 the Centre received an early Christmas present in the form of another grant from Lotterywest, this time of \$143,000, along with \$105,000 from the City of Mandurah. These funds were used for a wheelchair lift, a 12-seater van and additional film production equipment.

Currently (2017), the Billy Dower Youth Centre is home to the City of Mandurah Youth Development Team, Peel Youth Medical Service, Department of Education Participation Coordinators, Ed-Connect, a Psychologist, StreetNet Youth Services, Key Assets, Challenger Institute of Technology and Youth Focus.



The Billy Dower Youth Centre (City of Mandurah)



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