THE BLOOD AND SWEATDRENCHED CANVAS:
A social history of the Survival of Aboriginal Tent Fighters
During the Depression and PostWar Era in Western Victoria

School of Education College of Design and Social Context
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Declaration

Title: The Blood and Sweat Drenched Canvas: A Social history of the Survival of Aboriginal Tent Fighters during the Depression and Post War Years

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Date submitted: April 2010

Declaration by the candidate

I certify that: This thesis is entirely my own work, and due acknowledgments have been made where appropriate. The work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award. The content of the thesis is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program. Any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party has been acknowledged.

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ABSTRACT

Tent fighting—touring troupes of boxers and wrestlers who toured across country Victoria and Australia—saw its development in the 1920s and its growth despite the Great Depression and World War II. It is a phenomenon that until now has gone at least partially unexplored and, as a result, poorly understood. Although seen as primarily a form of entertainment by the larger Australian society, to its Aboriginal participants—and their home communities—it involved deep and interwoven personal, community and cultural factors—factors which have gone unrecognised by the mainstream society.

In this exploration I build on interviews conducted with former tent fighters and family members. Their themes form the basis for the exploration of tent fighting, and this exploration shapes the nature of the video presentation which looks to communicate not only the images and sounds of tent fighting, but the essence of the experience as related by their own words, in their own voices.

This exegesis and accompanying video presentation relate the importance of tent fighting to the participants, including the motives for those who became tent fighters and the importance and implications of tent fighting to the Aboriginal fighters and to their home communities. It also shows how entertainment became reality—and reality became entertainment—and how the racial tensions from outside tent fighting both bled into the tent fighting arena and were transcended in the ring. It looks, further, at the legacies of tent fighting, the expected and unexpected ways in which it continues to influence life in Australia.

In examining the content of the interviews, we also look at how the interviews themselves become a link in the chain of understanding the past and influencing the future, so that tent fighting does not pass into oblivion with the passing of the last of those who were a part of it.
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This story is a tribute to my father—who passed away 17 months ago—and to the other Framlingham mission men, who under extreme adversity, became the fearless heroes of the tent fighting phenomenon that stretched across Victoria and the corners of Australia.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Boxing. The sweet science. The Marquess of Queensberry. Lightweight, middleweight, heavyweight. Commonwealth Champions. All terms that refer to organised, sanctioned boxing contests across Europe and the British Empire/Commonwealth—including Australia—that date back to the mid-1800s. There is another term that refers to the same sport—tent fighting. The same sport, but one held in very different settings and with very different contexts and implications, one with more than just sporting outcomes, one which shaped and defined entire communities across generations and across cultures.

Through this exegesis and the accompanying video I will share the remarkable social phenomenon of tent fighting in Victoria, an historical view in a period of time that was very important to the remarkable people from the Aboriginal mission of Framlingham in western Victoria, just as it was to Indigenous Australians across Australia who engaged in tent fighting. It is a story that draws from the accounts of its participants—Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal alike. It is a story that has never been told, and one which might be in danger of slipping into the silence of forgotten history with the passing of the last of those who experienced it. Generally, it is the story of Aboriginal people in Australia. More specifically, it is the story of the Gunditjmara people in western Victoria. Most pointedly, it is the experience of my father—himself a tent fighter.

What, exactly, makes tent fighting in Victoria a worthy topic of examination? What is the rationale for this effort? Just as the implications of tent fighting extend across people, communities and cultures, so, too, do the reasons why this examination is not only due, but overdue.

As mentioned above, this research is particularly timely since it is a phenomenon that is presently under-recorded and might soon be lost to history. Within a very few years the last of those who were a part of tent fighting will move on—their voices forever stilled. This, alone, gives a sense of
urgency to its assembly and telling.

But as importantly, it is a story that once might not have been considered worthy of the telling. Within the dominant academic and social contexts of the 1930s through the 1960s when tent fighting flourished such accounts would have been relegated to the realm of cultural curiosity—of anthropological ‘case study’. Within that then-prevailing ‘colonial’ view of dominant and subaltern cultures, it would have almost certainly been a story—at best—assembled, presented and interpreted through the efforts and perspective of a ‘mainstream’ academic studying the ‘Other’. That Other would have been viewed, interpreted and related through the social construction of that dominant culture (Smith, 1999).

What would almost certainly have been overlooked, ignored, or misunderstood by non-Indigenous academics of the time was that tent fighting reveals a great deal about the social, cultural and political context of Aboriginal people—particularly and specifically those families who lived on the mission in rural Victoria. It was not simply a hobby or something that was done in their spare time—as is sometimes viewed by non-Indigenous Australians. More than that, it was a cultural force that became central to an entire way of life for many rural Aboriginal Victorians.

As will be seen in this exegesis and the video production that accompanies it, the overarching aim of this research project is to give voice to those who were a part of tent fighting so that the different Indigenous and non-Indigenous meanings—and different implications—can be understood. To do this we first look at the initial considerations of what, exactly, the video should entail, should involve, should attempt. Then the historical context of tent fighting is discussed. More than a simple timeline, this discussion also makes use of a postcolonial perspective to examine the shifting social contexts—the changing relationships of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples in Victoria—and how those understandings and views would have once made this effort impossible.
In the following Chapter, we discuss the features of the video itself, including the particular significance of each aspect and how each relates to—and keeps faith with—the historical understandings discussed earlier. This exegesis then moves to a discussion of how this effort has extended the realm of understanding of this unique social phenomenon—a phenomenon that not only played out in western Victoria for four decades, but which continues to exert its influence on Victoria and Australia of today.

But next, we look at what was seen as the real purpose, the real function of the video. We look at the factors that shaped and influenced its creation and form.
CHAPTER 2

CONSIDERING THE VIDEO AND EXEGESIS

NOTHING FROM NOTHING?

Any number of social theorists argue that no research undertaking is entirely separate from the researcher—that a person’s experiences inevitably and unavoidably shape what we consider doing and how we consider doing it (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Gandhi, 1998; Smith, 1999). In short, nothing comes out of nothing. In looking at how I have gone about considering this video, I must be very open in acknowledging that much of the idea of this research about tent fighting, along with some of the details of how to share it, can be traced back to my childhood.

The genesis of this research starts at the kitchen table of my childhood home in Creswick in Victoria. This is where the stories of boxing and football were shared and where I was first inspired by my father. He was born at the Framlingham Aboriginal Mission and was a tent fighter himself. He came from a family of fighters and if he had not there would not be the story that is told here.

The kitchen table stories not only told of the fighting, itself, but they also told of how much fighting meant and how much was really involved. The stories told of an entire family of fighters—men who fought not for entertainment, but for survival for themselves and their families. The stories also told of the tremendous conflicts faced within the families.

One example is that of my own family. My father was a keen student of tent fighting, to where he became—by all accounts—a very good fighter who was recognised and respected among the fighters and followers of the time. By just after World War II he stood at the verge of turning professional. My mother, however, had much different ideas.

His turning professional would mean being away from family for weeks and
months at a time. If they had lived in the city it might have been different, but living in the country meant even more isolation and difficulties. She warned him that she would move back with her people in South Australia if he did decide to take up boxing full time. He decided not to. But in years and decades to come he would always talk about what his chances might have been as a professional. Sometimes, I think he regretted not doing it.

So the impact—the full range of what fighting meant to families and communities—was something I came to know from an early age. But how do you share all that with others? How do you get across the full breadth of meaning and the full depth of the experience? Tent fighting was, because of the nature of what it was—bright, noisy, smelly, dark, painful, confusing, frustrating and rewarding, all at once. It was visceral. It was basic. It was noble. It was animalistic. It was social drama. It was pure entertainment. It was all of these and more.

A collection of old news clippings and photographs might show the sights, but not the lived meanings. Besides, presentations such as that had been done for decades—even if they were the works of non-Aboriginal authors talking about ‘those Aboriginals’. The same could even be said for creating paintings or sculptures. They would certainly give me the opportunity of expression, and in that way give some feeling of connection with the tent fighters—even if only through my family’s recollections—but they would still be limited in trying to communicate an entire dynamic experience through a static ‘thing’. Also, any such painting or sculpture—no matter how well intended—would be my interpretation of others’ experiences, others’ meanings.

No, tent fighting was about an entire experience, so whatever would be done would have to try to recapture that entire experience—more than just the images, even more than the sights and sounds. It was the texture of the
experience and the anticipation the person felt approaching it. Any attempt to communicate it would have to blur the line between observing and experiencing, just as tent fighting did for the fighters and the audience members of that day.

And even more, it shouldn’t have to rely on ‘someone else’ describing it. What about the former fighters who were still around? Could the video somehow recreate that ‘stories across the kitchen table’ feel that I remembered from my childhood? The participants’ stories, in their own words, heard as they came from their lips, would create something that had never been done before.

But there was still another point. Thinking about the video, I was very aware of where I was working, what I was doing and the education I had received—and how all of this was beyond the imagination of my father or the other tent fighters. Here I was, a Gunditjmara man, working for RMIT University, taking on a Masters Degree. None of this would have been considered even remotely possible by them. This pointed out to me the very different social and cultural settings and expectations from then to now.

Not only that, but I was considering telling of an Indigenous social phenomenon, from an Indigenous point of view. To do this properly would mean incorporating how the historically shifting social views have shaped the number (or lack of numbers) and characteristics of reports of tent fighting. The challenge would be to combine all these factors and considerations in creating, discussing and presenting the story.

INTENT SHAPING APPROACH SHAPING CONTENT

Drawing from the reflections described above, the priorities in bringing this about became clear: my intent, first and foremost, was to keep faith with the story of tent fighting—as experienced by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants and observers—and to do that in a way that incorporated their own words, their own meaning. All of this would be
viewed through a lens that acknowledged the changes in social views that would have once made this telling impossible, but that now made it imperative.

Keeping faith with the experience of tent fighting means not only using an approach that supports the telling, but also presenting it in a way that communicates the richness of the story, the experience. To do this, the project relies on a multimedia video. Not simply a static presentation, but a virtual video recreation of the historical context combining the images of the times with the first-hand accounts of the participants. A video representation that suspends the disbelief of the audience sufficiently that it communicates the entire tent fighting experience.

Accomplishing this means using methodologies and methods that support, rather than strip away, the richness of the intended video. This entire effort is based on the use of a post-colonial perspective, a view that recognises that the true ‘voice’ of the subaltern is most often co-opted or silenced by the broader mainstream understanding or interpretation (Guha, Spivak & Said, 1988).

A key underlying concept of postcolonialism is its recognition of the depth and breadth of the intellectual, cultural, social and psychological impacts of the colonial dynamics which so fundamentally shaped the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians—as they did in numerous other countries around the globe—from the time of first European explorations to the 20th century. Because of this, a postcolonial approach supports the destabilizing of the traditional Western ways of thinking which, in turn, creates space for the marginalized groups, the subaltern, to speak and be heard as they produce alternatives to the dominant Western discourse (McLeod, 2000).

By recognizing the inherent validity and value of the voice of such people as Aboriginal tent fighting participants—together with their struggles related to history, identity and relationships to the non-Indigenous majority—their stories
are not restricted to the realm of novelty or pathology. Instead, they can be understood from a position of equal social and cultural standing and worthiness, one that not only situates tent fighting as a valid and valued social phenomenon, but one that also furthers the discussion of the relationship of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australian societies from that time to the present (Gandhi, 1998; Smith, 1999;)

Within this post-colonial perspective, the stories of the last remaining tent boxers will be examined through a method of narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly 1999; Cavarero 2000). Narrative inquiry uses the form of stories to explore human experience. As Clandinin and Connelly 1999 contend; “One of the best ways to study human beings is to come to grips with the storied quality of human experience” (p81).

For my purposes in this video, narrative enquiry allows for the true story of the participant—including the words, content, themes and dynamics—to shape the creation of the presentation, rather than the other way around.
CHAPTER 3
TENT FIGHTING:
CONTEXT, DEVELOPMENT, MEANING AND LEGACY

Any attempt to accurately record and capture the events and meanings associated with tent fighting in Victoria and Australia must be grounded, firstly, within an understanding of how the Victoria of then compared to the Victoria of today, particularly concerning the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal worlds and how they related to each other. Since tent fighting was a social phenomenon that crossed Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal worlds, it is important to place it in an accurate, comprehensive and relatable context, one which can be understood from a number of perspectives. How was that time different to today? In what ways was it similar? What were social assumptions and expectations?

To explore these factors we first look at the cultural, social, economic and legal contexts in Victoria and Australia. The Great Depression and World War II affected everyone in Australia—Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal alike. But how they were affected is revealed in how tent fighting developed and was understood.

The next question to be explored is how, exactly, tent fighting developed and grew to such a national phenomenon. What were the factors that came together to allow for tent fighting to flourish? It is the story of the confluence of legal, technological and political factors.

The heart of this chapter—and the heart of this effort—is bringing to light the experiences and understandings of those who were are part of tent fighting. To ensure these accounts are given full and accurate weight and ‘voice’, interviews were conducted with ten surviving participants in tent fighting from that time.

As was described earlier, the conceptualising of this effort was informed by a
post-colonial perspective, one which emphasises and supports the understanding of the ways in which non-Western experiences and way of knowing have been marginalised and, in many cases, silenced by the dominant, non-Indigenous culture. Then, using a method of narrative inquiry—one in which the accounts of the participant shape, rather than are shaped, the focus and themes that emerge—the interviews were analysed to identify underlying or recurring themes. From personal motives to what went on ‘behind the scenes’ and from race relations of the time to what life on the road was like the interview words give a deeper understanding of the meaning and implications of tent fighting.

Finally, the chapter concludes with an exploration of the reasons tent fighting slipped from existence. Why did it end? What were the social conditions that spelt the end of tent fighting? This leads to the final exploration: what of the legacies of tent fighting. Was it something that was engaged in only by forgotten ‘knockabouts’? Aside from the memories of the last survivors and their relatives, are there any by broader legacies?

This, then, is the exploration of tent fighting in western Victoria. It starts in the uncertain depths of the Great Depression in Victoria.

THE HISTORICAL SETTING:
SAME PLANET, DIFFERENT WORLDS

Consider Australia in the early 1930s. Only thirty years before the colony had become a Federation, a nation. Its European-descended government leaders conceived of it as a new star in the heavenly constellation of nations, one made even more real by the new national flag. Certain of its European roots and traditions, yet looking to expand and develop in ways that were not possible in the Old World. A new sense of national self was emerging.

Its constitution had codified its legitimacy and standing among its sibling nations. The European-tradition institutions, rules and roles of governance were established and the rights of its citizens under the law were laid out. Moving beyond rule by brute force, Australia was truly a first-order nation of
laws that had built upon the best of its European roots. A young, brash and confident nation with a growing sense of itself, of what it meant to be ‘Australian’. The ‘Lucky Country’ for all its citizens. Except that all of its inhabitants were not, legally, citizens. For those that were not, it was a very different story.

The original Australian constitution, same document that raised Australia to the status of ‘nation’ from that of ‘colony’ and that set out the rights and protections of its citizens also specifically positioned an entire segment of its population, the First Peoples. That document contained the only two clauses that mentioned a specific race or culture, Sections 51 and 127 (Attwood & Markus, 1997:2). The first, in Section 51, stated:

*The Parliament shall subject to this Constitution, have power to make laws for the peace, order, and good government of the Commonwealth with respect to:*

*..The people of any race, other than the Aboriginal race in any State, for whom it is deemed necessary to make special laws.*

The second reference, in Section 127, included a clause to the effect that:

*In reckoning the number of the people of the Commonwealth, or of a State or other part of the Commonwealth, aboriginal natives shall not be counted.*

A national tradition of only thirty years clashed with a cultural tradition a thousand (or two thousand) times longer, and with two sentences that entire ancient cultural worldview was set outside—and beneath—the new European-based nation. The colonial European construction of Aboriginal as less-than-human persisted.

Buttressed by notions of Spencerian ‘social Darwinism’ (Dickins, 2000), the colonial practises of annihilation and dislocation of the non-European descended Aboriginal Australians were justified and the future roles of the Protectors (or Guardians) of Aborigines were codified and
expanded across Australia (National Archives of Australia, 2009). Literally, from cradle to grave the lives of Aboriginal Australians were controlled and directed by the European-based laws and the European-derived social structure. Citizenship for Aboriginal Australians would be denied for another 66 years and the system of Aboriginal Missions and Reserves—over 200 across Australia and 34 in Victoria—would continue to direct the everyday lives of their residents through much of that time.

Giving a glimpse into how this impacted people at the local level, Victorian Aboriginal Elder, Aunty Joan Vickery relates the words of Aunty Melva Johnson, in recalling growing up near Echuca on the Murray River:

I come off Cummeragunja Mission and I suppose my earliest remembering things was when I seen a lot of our people come in on the back of the old mission truck to the doctors in Echuca ...

I had my first two children in Narrandera and I had them in the normal wards, the same as everyone else, But then we come back to Echuca and two of my kids were born on the veranda at Echuca hospital. Now, that was a very common cause in those days and I believe all our people had their children out on verandas in Echuca ...

The nice white ladies were with their children, but we weren’t up there. We were on the verandas and we used to have to walk up there to feed our babies.

(Vickery et al, 2005: 106)

This was the historical backdrop to Australia in the 1930s. The new nation encompassed two worlds—Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal—that differed in ways that were not allowed to be expressed by the one, and that went unheard and unheeded by the other. But both of these social worlds would find themselves within the embrace of an unprecedented economic meltdown—the Great Depression.

As in other developed countries around the world in the grips of the Great Depression, the economy in Australia is suffering. Unemployment and homeless rates—particularly in the cities—hit new highs and the outlook is uncertain, if not bleak. Then, as now, there were stark differences in health indicators and health outcomes between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians. Except the differences were much worse then (Anderson &
Whyte, 2007). Then, as now, there were telling disparities across the two worlds in educational involvement and outcomes. Except the disparities were much worse then (Harms, Clarke & Whyte, 2008).

For Aboriginal Australians of the time, jobs and money—always in short supply—grew even more scarce. In a time before pensions or unemployment benefits—or even credit with which to buy food—money became more precious. In a time when Aboriginal Australians were specifically excluded from governmental health care services, survival itself grew more precarious.

**TENT FIGHTING:**
**A UNIQUELY AUSTRALIAN PHENOMENON**

It was in the midst of that time of national (and international) economic hardship, in a newly formed country, that tent fighting flourished. The reasons as to how and why are complex and interwoven. At least part of the answer can be found in the development and confluence of three contributing factors forces: mobility, entertainment and economics.

Australia posed some particular challenges in transportation and mobility compared to those conditions in the countries-of-origin of European-Australians. The simple scale of distances, for one, was much greater than in Europe. Traveling from Sydney to Melbourne was not like traveling from London to Manchester. It was more like traveling from London to Hamburg. And the distance between Sydney to Perth is twice that from London to St Petersburg. As in Europe, the furthering of railway lines helped to connect, but these were primarily between major cities. Smaller cities and towns remained the realm of carriages and dirt roads.

The development that began to change the nature of mobility in Australia was the petrol-powered, privately-owned lorry/automobile as a significant form of transportation. Just as the development of the rail system had shrunk time and distances between major city hubs, the development of this secondary transportation network shrank the time between smaller cities and
towns. What might have been a day’s ride by horse and wagon between small towns was reduced to mere hours by lorry or automobile. What might have been days or even weeks between major cities and smaller towns by horse and wagon was reduced to next-day access.

By the second and third decades of the 20th century the offerings of Ford and Austin, of Western Star and former ‘Liberty Trucks’ connected smaller cities and towns. Particularly relevant to this exegesis, some of these trucks would become iconic as the rolling billboards of travelling tent fighting troupes.

The second contributing factor was that of ‘entertainment’. In a time before TV or even movie theatres, ‘mass media’ was a term limited to newspapers, a handful of radio stations and any public gathering. Even with the first beginnings of ‘real time’ media coverage of sporting and theatrical events (with tens of thousands of listeners hanging on the coverage of the Cricket, for example) entertainment remained largely a local family- or village-level affair.

But (Sharman’s) big attraction was...a big drum...one of those great big drums. Boom, boom, boom, boom. And when they found somebody to fight the other bloke they would ring the bell. Norman Taylor

The third factor, as described earlier, was the economic press of the Great Depression. With jobs and money scarce, any way to earn an extra quid was welcome—even if it did involve taking a beating.

Together, these factors contributed to the development of what would become a uniquely Australian combination of the European circuses, carnivals and fairs. They became the travelling shows that toured the country towns of Victoria and Australia, providing a respite and entertainment for the locals—and sometimes offering the chance to line their pockets.
Tent fighting, as it came to be recognised in Australia, was started in Australia by the well-known showmen, Mr Jimmy Sharman Snr in 1911 at Wagga Wagga, New South Wales. His troupe toured the shows and country towns of New South Wales, Queensland and Victoria for over 60 years.

But Jimmy Sharman was not alone. Other showmen, like Harry Johns, Roy Bell and Fred Brophy all had their own touring troupes. These continued through the Depression and after World War II. It was only when Jimmy Sharman died in 1965 that tent fighting came to an end in Victoria (although it continued in New South Wales until 1971. Although not as widespread as in their heyday, tent fighting shows continue to the present through such showmen as Fred Brophy, who still tours in Queensland.

Whether it was Sharman’s, Johns’, Bell’s or even Brophy’s later troupes, tent fighting became an anticipated participatory spectacle: one that was anticipated beforehand and boldly announced on the day.

Often part boxing, part wrestling, part circus and part carnival, the traveling troupe that was tent fighting became more than just a traveling show. As examined next, in addition to being a site of entertainment for non-Aboriginals, it was a means of social connection among and between the otherwise isolated Aboriginal Missions, including the focus of this examination, the Mission at Framlingham. It was also a means of validation, of coming of age, of proving oneself. And in a time of economic press, it was a source of much needed income.

...the drums are going, the speakers are going, and they would go and stir up the crowd and 'I'll have that mug over there, I'll have you over here', and they would have their own speakers to gee up, and this bloke Laws is standing along the board and all I can remember is there is a dozen of us, a big majority were Aboriginal, plus white—all the knockabouts if you like... Ted Lovett

...when you went in Jimmy Sharman[‘s show] just had a bit of canvas on the floor, couple fellas standing either side of it. No ring ropes, not when I went... and Sharman would referee the bouts himself. Billy Leeche, he had a ring... he always used to be at Maryborough for New Year’s Day... they stopped it in 1963. The last I saw it would have been 1962. Norman Taylor
With this overview of some of the historical factors surrounding the development of tent fighting, the next exploration is to reveal the deeper aspects of tent fighting—as experienced by those who once stood in the ring. To do this, we look next at the stories they shared and the meanings they imparted to tent fighting. Drawing from the themes that emerged from their stories, the first to be explored is, perhaps, the most basic. Why? What were the motives for and meanings of being involved in such a traveling troupe?

MOTIVES AND MEANING: MONEY FOR JAM, MONEY TO SURVIVE

Why become involved in tent fighting? What was it about tent fighting that attracted Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal participants and audience members alike? As has been discussed, tent fighting flourished during the Great Depression, continued through World War II, and managed to continue through to the present. Each of these eras were marked by different economic and cultural factors, yet through each of these some basic themes emerge, themes common to both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal fighters alike: money and pride.

Deeper than entertainment as the ‘obvious’ draw of country fairs and tent fighting, these two drives certainly played out differently, Indigenous to non-Indigenous, but as verified by the interviews, they were basic driving motives.

Sharman always said of the Aboriginal men, “It’s in their blood to fight”. Eric Clarke Snr

To understand the ways that these two motives could play out so differently, depending on whether one was Aboriginal or not, it is necessary to remember that the two cultural traditions viewed each other across a chasm that was even greater, wider and more explicitly enforced than the gap of today. As examples, Aboriginal Australians were still not considered citizens, were specifically
excluded from legal protections and considerations extended to all other Australians, were still subject to being told where they could or could not live and were still excluded from certain types of work. They still fell under the influence of a legacy of legalised apartheid that developed long before the Afrikaan term that would describe it came into being. In a persisting colonial understanding of the world, race mattered—to the individual, to the family, to the community and to the culture. It mattered in what a person could do to survive economic hardship and it mattered in how members of each cultural tradition viewed the other. Implicit in that, it mattered how they viewed themselves in relation to the other.

If we build on the common motives of money and pride described by the tent fighters interviewed as part of this research, it is no stretch of the imagination that for a non-Aboriginal, getting a chance to have a go in the ring—and possibly earning a quid or two—would definitely be a strong motive.

For someone accustomed to hard labour, a few rounds in the ring (even if it meant taking a few punches) might well be worth it. And the worth of it might not be only money. Pride and a sense of self plays out in a number of ways. Being able to handle oneself, to ‘give as good as one gets’ might be a point of personal pride.

But even more broadly, having a go at a ‘darkie’ speaks of a cultural pride, of sorts. In the colonial view of the races at that time,
Aborigines were the ‘Other’. A defeated, inferior, primitive, profoundly different—yet somehow mysterious and threatening—race. Certainly any white man can defeat even the best the Aboriginal race can put forth. It is a matter of common sense.

You’ve got to bear in mind, these people, it must have being a great treat for them. These people didn’t get proper nourishment. They probably subexisted off rabbits and damper and dripping. And then they’d walk, if they couldn’t get a ride, to these boxing tournaments. They would fight, more than likely they’d win their fights, then they’d walk all the way back home. Len Clarke, son of Henry (Banjo) Clarke

For Aboriginal Australian tent fighters money and pride were also key motives. The Depression that affected non-Aboriginal Australians also affected them, perhaps even more so. The formal legal policies and informal social practices of apartheid that systematically separated them also denied them the resources available to other Australians. The Depression was not about a lost job, it was about the options to work further denied. The Depression threatened survival of the person, the family and the community in ways that were unexperienced by non-Aboriginal Australians.

So for the Aboriginal tent fighter, it was about earning a quid or two—but it was also about much more. It might not only involve their own survival, but also that of their immediate family, their extended family.

If it was easy everyone would be doing it. But they were making money. They’d probably do all this to feed the families as well. Whatever little bit of money they made they didn’t earn that much it supplemented the income to the family. Because most of these people were living in abject poverty. They certainly got a lot of jobs on the road hitchhiking around so forth they had seasonal work. But they found that they could earn a bit of money also in the boxing industry. Len Clarke son of Henry (Banjo) Clarke

Just as pride was a factor for non-Aboriginal tent fighters, it was a strong motivation for Aboriginal fighters. But pride here was viewed and experienced from the other end of the cross-worldview telescope. It wasn’t about proving one’s cultural superiority in the same way as a non-Aboriginal might. Instead, it can be understood as cultural validation, as defiance in the face of claimed Western superiority and as a
statement of cultural continuation, despite all attempts at eradication or removal.

(reflecting on his father and all his brothers who were also tent fighters) It must have been in his blood, because he was a natural. Eric Clarke Snr

They had to have styles that bought in the crowd and I’ve seen Aboriginal men very showy and up front in capitalising on the hype and the type of crowds that were drawn to the boxing. People are always looking for heroes, and I guess some of these men fitted the bill. This boxing experience was their way of life, and even for the challengers that went up onto the stage. These guys wouldn’t want to be embarrassed. Eric Clarke, Snr

Pride, in this context, was demonstrated as a sense of continued fighting prowess—despite the outcomes of past wars with European-Australians, despite being segregated and marginalised from the dominant Australian culture and despite living at the edge of survival.

Sometimes you meet blokes that are out to take money from the tent. If they beat you they (managers) get upset about paying the money, but if you have to stop them you don’t pull your punches, but if your working with them you do...When you have to win you’ve got to give them some good punches...The main thing we had to do was win for ourselves or work with the fighters who came in. If the fighters were really serious, we had to make sure they didn’t take any money from the tents, because we wanted our own pay too. Eric Clarke Snr

The experiences of the Gunditjmara from Western Victorian districts is an example of this. The Gunditjmara people were renowned as ‘the fighting tribe’ or ‘the fighting men’. The resounding reputation of the Gunditjmara tribes was not only worth considering for their strength and cunning in warfare and hand to hand combat during the Eumerella War, but by the skills, the art and the finesse of their boxing.

In addition to this cultural aspect was the personal aspect of pride. The development of a uniquely identifiable personal style became more than a matter of individuality, it involved a personal statement of standing and status, of pride in all aspects of whatever they did. The cultural and personal aspects of this sense of pride also interconnected. For a people who had been forcibly dispossessed and stripped of language and custom, the recognition of the importance of role models, for the sake of the continuation of the People, would be another motive to tent fighting.

But what would happen when the need for money conflicted with pride?
Which won out? As the interviews with former tent fighters reveal, in the end, survival wins.

**LEARNING THE ROPES: PROVING YOURSELF**

Against the interviews’ discussions of the motivations to become involved in tent fighting, the next question to ask is just how, exactly, hopeful tent fighters became competent or accomplished tent fighters. What was the process? Was there a tent fighting school? Was it a matter of getting into the ring and learning the hard way? Was it more of learning from a mentor? As the interviews reveal, it was a little of each.

Some future tent fighters simply caught on with a show. Some were ‘recruited’, some simply tagged along. The tent show itself was their training ground.

Certainly in the early years of tent fighting the idea of a ‘proper’ tent fighting school—as understood in the European British tradition—might not have been a way for young Aboriginal men to learn boxing, but the idea of a tent fighting school as a place where accomplished tent fighters taught and trained and mentored erstwhile fighters certainly was a pathway—one that was played out across Victoria and Australia.

*Well, I can remember when I was about 14 or 15 and I remember Harry Johns coming into the Royal Hotel one day and he was looking for fighters...and take one of us up to Fermtree Gully...there was a showing up there and he came and got me and a couple of other blokes that were there. Ted Lovett*

*...(at 14 years old) I went down there where a chap was teaching the young ones, that’s when I liked doing boxing. Some of us went on a trip to Adelaide and had a go at a fight and time to think about it... Eric Clarke Snr*

*Yeah, Bobby Greville, Pat North, who used to train us at one time. Alan Rain, we had a setup in our wool shed...Alan Rain used to come out and train us there. When Bobby Greville finished down on mission reserve we brought all his boxing gear, his punching bag and his cortisone ball and all that we took it out and set up in our wool shed. Norman Taylor*

During the Depression era the ‘school’ might have been little more than a shed or barn, or even a clearing under a tree, but lessons were taught and lessons were learned. Lessons in boxing, lessons in tent fighting and lessons in the importance to the family and the community.
In later years, with the growing recognition of the importance of tent fighting in the community, other training sites and resources—such as the YMCA—might be used to train up the young men.

The old man, Banjo Clarke, when he stepped down from the ring he had two sons, me and Ian. Ian had the nickname as Punchy. I tend to be a one-hit person, but Ian he fought with a lot of science. And so my old man, every Saturday, not only Saturday during the week also, he’d take us into the YMCA, he registered us in the YMCA in Warnambool. So we’d spend all of our time in the gymnasium doing boxing and everything like that...Ian and Johnny Chapfield and all them, they’d get up and start boxing in the travelling shows.... Len Clarke, son of Henry (Banjo) Clarke

Also during these later years, the phenomenon of Tent fighting and its’ rewards, soon became a life factor. Families would structure their young male prodigies into boxing careers. In some cases, whole families would be involved, from grandfathers and grandmothers. Friends and neighbours would also become a part of the training regime. The better the fighter was, the more money could be made. Tent fighting became a very significant part of mission life—a very important money earner. It kept whole communities of families living with adequate food supplies and clothing.

As the Depression gave way to World War II, the extent to which Aboriginal men were seen as different to non-Aboriginal was shown in an unexpected way. Despite the crying need for men for military service, at the beginning of the War Aboriginal men were not allowed to join. The ability for young Aboriginal men to show they really were as good as anyone else was denied.

Later in the War, when the need became even more desperate, Aboriginal men were allowed to join the military services. This option was doubly attractive because those who served were promised soldier settlements upon their separation from

The Lovett’s...they fought overseas and applied for soldier settlements and got knocked back from the very land they were born on and that was on acknowledged about ten years ago. And they also went up at the First and Second World War...We had a great uncle, Raulings, got the Military Cross at Flinders—died at Flinders in France...they have a big photo of him...in Warnambool...so a lot of the fellas took up boxing. Jim Berg

a lot of them in those days would join the army to prove they were as good as the next person, because in the early war days Koories weren’t allowed to join the armed forces because they believed they’d cross the line and fight with the enemy. Jim Berg
service. As history would prove, even after successful service, with soldiers’ settlements denied them, they were not remotely considered equal.

THE REALITY OF ENTERTAINMENT: WORKING THE CROWD AND KEEPING IT GOING

By understanding the motives for being involved in tent fighting—and the importance it took on as an economic lifeline for many Aboriginal communities—we can better appreciate the challenges in balancing the factors that would ensure it remained attractive as entertainment, would continue to offer the allure of reward to crowd members (as well as the fighters), but would be done so in a way that didn’t physically destroy the fighters, themselves. This, then, became the reality of entertainment that was at the core of tent fighting. The fights were real and often unpredictable, but the ‘rules of engagement’ took into account the dangerous nature of the fight game.

**Oh yeah, he would (c coax) the crowd, he asked the crowd, ‘Is anyone gonna fight this bloke’? and such. ‘He’s done this and he’s done that’. A lot of the people in the crowd were already put there by Sharman himself. It was all prearranged, most of it was prearranged. Norman Taylor**

The reality of the tent fighting entertainment experience was that it actually began well outside the ring, well before the fighters laced on gloves. It began with the working up of the crowd. Taunting, pleading, daring—they were all tactics that were used to encourage crowd members to have a go. This gee-ing up of the crowd wasn’t just the spruiker confronting stranger crowd members. The working of the crowd involved orchestration and choreography—between the spruiker and the crowd and between ‘crowd members’ themselves, they were tools that were used in working the crowd.

**Yes, I remember Eric (Clarke, another Aboriginal tent fighter). When they come to Ballarat Eric would stand in the crowd and he would yell out, ‘Give the local bloke a go’, and then what would transpire then, Jimmy Sharman would come up and stand on the stand up there and drum, and match him up with the fella that he was going to fight...I don’t know for sure, but I assume that he might of seen Sharman beforehand and arranged that he would be in the crowd... Norman Taylor**
Promoting the fighters standing on the board was also a part of the working of the crowd. Who would want to risk injury fighting a ‘nobody’? The possibility of having a go at—and possibly triumphing over—a young hotspur fighter teased a personal and cultural pride, and upped the emotional stakes.

Once inside the tent, the careful orchestration—coupled with some less obvious tactics—continued to tread the thin line between boxing as an unavoidably physical and dangerous sport and tent fighting as entertainment.

All the tricks for making money and for Sharman used everything to his advantage. Sharman even used 10 oz gloves for his boxers and they were nice and solid, where the challengers’ gloves were... filled with horse hair and softly padded, so that even with their best punches they wouldn’t hurt Sharman’s fighters. Geoff Clark

In my time it wasn’t real serious, it was showmanship, because he (Sharman) would be there refereeing it and as soon as it looked like anybody was getting on top of the other bloke he would push ‘em apart or stop it after three rounds, which was fair enough. Norman Taylor

At a point in time and in places where the medical care and attention to cuts and injuries was more makeshift than effective, any measures that protected the fighters (without taking away from the entertainment value) became part of the choreography.

One of my favourites was Nulla Austin. He was that good and elusive nobody, in all his opponents, could hit him. He used to duck and weave, crouch and bounce around and tease his opponent and then them to hit him. They would tire out trying and he would let loose and flatten them. He always put on a great show, and that’s what Sharman liked, the showmanship, where he would make up his own rules and if one of his boys was in the clinches, he would break it up and call a shorter round. All in a day’s work. Geoff Clark

In 1950s and 60s, the young medium of television was providing a different form of entertainment. To counter this new competition for the entertainment dollar—and with the worst economic memories of the Great Depression in the past—tent fighting impresarios placed greater emphasis on the entertainment aspect of tent fighting.
But the orchestrated spruiking of the crowds, the choreography of the fighting in the ring and the sometimes ‘flexible’ enforcement of ring rules did little to diminish the fact that in other ways tent fighting remained a dangerous way to earn money. Even with the ‘entertainment’ factors shaping some aspects of tent fighting to favour the fighters, other factors clearly came down against the fighters.

...when I was young I was big and strong and heavy and I’d finish up with a bloke who were a lot older than me and had a lot more experience, because of my weight and my size. I was sixteen, fighting blokes that were twenty, twenty three. I had a few hidings, sometimes even when you win. With Eric (Clarke) you still get a hiding. Just ‘cause you won doesn’t mean you don’t get a hiding yourself. Norman Taylor

...from South Vic to New South Wales...sometimes you had to do what Bell or Johns told you. If you got beat, they had to pay out money. But most times I was told to work with them so that the crowds would come back. They had to draw the crowd in who paid the money to see their fighter. The fighter wants to win for the people who follow you. Eric Clarke Snr

For instance, there were no real weight classes. Any man standing before the crowd on the board might find himself fighting any member of the crowd—regardless of size difference. And regardless of whether it was entertainment for the crowd, it was still very much a way to make a living for an Aboriginal fighter whose family’s existence might depend on the money the fighter earned. As the interviews reveal, entertainment is one thing, survival is another. When one meets the other, survival trumps all.

...this big heavy weight from the paper mills said, ‘I’ll have that little dinky there’, and you know I was pretty fit, but you know I said, Jesus, I have to fight this bloke?

And I remember in the first round I was throwing round and all I was doing was dodging and weaving, hoping he never hit me. The bell rang and I don’t think I threw a punch...I hid in the corner and I could hear Jackie yelling out, ‘You’re supposed to fight him, not run away from him’.

And I said, ‘How would you like to get hit by a bloke that big?’

...the next thing I went in there and I fooled left, jumped right and fooled left, and I jump up and hit him smack right on the chin, and the next minute he hit the floor and the next minute they rang the bell and declared a draw.

And I said, ‘Well, that’s boxing?’ ...Ted Lovett
In looking at how the entertainment of tent fighting meshed with the physical reality of tent fighting, it must be remembered that in many unique ways it managed to embrace both, and managed to keep its own sense of integrity with both. Across the cultural worlds that it spanned, it managed, too, to span both substance and appearance, even when they seemed contradictory.

**BLACK AND WHITE: INSIDE AND OUTSIDE THE RING**

By its nature, tent fighting brought Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal together in a competitive (even if also entertaining) setting. And this happened during a period in Australia’s history when the gulf separating the two cultural traditions was wide and the view across that gulf—from both sides—was often littered with suspicion, distrust, anger and resentment. Within this larger cultural context the questions of how race played out in tent fighting certainly come to mind. Was there the same anger and suspicion? What about between non-Aboriginal crowds and Aboriginal fighters? What about between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal fighters? What about between the non-Aboriginal impresarios and the Aboriginal fighters who worked for them? The questions are worthwhile. The interviews’ answers are sometimes intriguing.

……Ballarat when I first came here was a very racist town, had a lot of things happen, not only me but a lot of other people…Ted Lovett

……you had to be strong, otherwise they walked over you. You have a lot of racism, a lot of elements against you, and you’re told what you are, you’re this, you’re that, you’re not, you’re no good…Ted Lovett

A lot of people saw that (Aboriginal) crew, regarded them as bludgers, no hopers, alcoholics and so on…and tied everybody to the same branch…Jim Berg

To understand how Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal relationships played out in tent fighting it is necessary to take into account the historical path of race relations in Australia and the broader international interconnections.
Outside of the ring, in Victoria of that time, the view of non-Aboriginal Australians towards Aboriginals often varied from curiosity to wariness. But there was also evidence of a growing understanding—across the cultural divide—of how tent fighting touched on different issues. Of how those fighters who were successful could be seen as role models to non-Aboriginal, non-white, communities around the world.

The dangers of mixing with the crowd after the fights was the same lad (I) beat prior tried to ‘king hit’ (me)…the lesson there was always be aware on the outside too because sometimes you make enemies. Geoff Clark

At other times a fighter from the crowd really made us earn our money. If you were fighting one of the local lads you had to be wary of one of his mates or his girlfriend tackling you with her handbag if you were giving him a bit of a thrashing. Bruce Baxter

Inside the tent—inside the ropes themselves—the shared experience of tent fighting reshaped the relationship. Sometimes this reshaping was short-lived. In other instances, it lasted a lifetime.

I only found out just recently how (Banjo Clarke) got that name. He was walking down with one of his most famous heroes…Pompy Austin. They came across this whitefella in the streets of Warnambool. The whitefella said to Uncle Pompy, “Oh, you got your little friend with you, what’s his name.” And he said, “Banjo, his name is Banjo Clark.” He probably forgot his real name was Henry so he said, “Banjo Clarke”…That name stuck with him right to this very day. But when he used to do a lot of boxing he boxed under the name Henry Armstrong…There was another fella named Henry Armstrong, an American negro. I’m not sure but he was a hero and I think he had a bit to do with him. Len Clarke, son of Henry (Banjo) Clarke

Down at the mission they used to have boxing fights in Warnambool and all the uncles and cousins (would go to ) boxing nights and fighting arenas or travel up to some of the other towns and a lot of the Georgie, Ryder, Rexy, Alfie, Austin, even when they were at school, used to take up boxing Jim Berg.

Inside the tent fighting context, though, the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal was more complex and less definable. Certainly, there was sometimes tension and resentment between the non-Aboriginal crowd participant and the Aboriginal fighter.
...A lot of them would form a lasting friendships. A lot the coppers would come down from Melbourne or wherever they were stationed and they’d always seek out the old man, Banjo. And those relationships went on for years…in a South Melbourne pub… I said "I come from an Aboriginal community twelve miles north of Warrnambool." He said “That’s old Purna mission. I used to box a fella named Banjo Clarke down there.” Then the old man found out, and he went down and stayed with him. That friendship just continued right up to death. It’s an unwritten code, they formed lasting friendships. That’s where the discipline, the body, mind and soul comes from. Len Clarke, son of Henry [Banjo] Clarke

CONNECTIONS: LIFE ON THE ROAD

The shows were a good way for these fellows to get around, and it was not a side show to them either, like again thought by the non-Aboriginal persons. It was a good vehicle to make contact with other Aboriginal people for their social networks. Geoff Clark

As identified in the interviews, another area where the experiences of non-Aboriginal customers and Aboriginal tent fighters differed dramatically was in the fact that for non-Aboriginal customers tent fighting was an event that ‘come to town’. It came to them for a short time to make only periodic contact in their otherwise contained, local social network. In contrast, for Aboriginal tent fighters it was a case of being on the move, of being the connection between any number of local communities.

Some of those communities were primarily non-Aboriginal. But some of them were otherwise all-but-isolated Aboriginal Missions. In traveling between these communities the tent fighters not only related the news and experiences of one community to another, but also reinforced their sense of larger shared Aboriginal community, of shared cultural experience.

In their own unique ways, tent fighting troupes became important threads of connection, the webs of significance between those communities. Experiences were related, family connections were extended and understandings shared. The accounts of the tent fighters relate not only their shared experiences with other tent fighters, but also how their experiences connected families and communities.

I can remember back in the old, old days when... I was five or six, maybe younger...we used to live in Napier street...(and) there was...the Allcres, Clarkes, the Austins and the Lovefts...and occasionally you would hear this bloke yelling out and it was Jimmy Sharman looking for boxers. There on his loudspeaker yelling and all the old fellas and cousins would jump in a car and you wouldn’t see them for around six months. They used to tour Australia. Off they go disappear and see them when they come back. Boxing tents and trekking around the place. Jim Berg
Touring tent fighting troupes survived the Great Depression, World War II and the rebuilding during the 1950s. In the face of the various economic, political and social difficulties tent fighting not only survived, but flourished. It came to fulfil differing personal, community, social and cultural functions—for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal cultural traditions. But it was the changes in the factors that spawned tent fighting in the first place—mobility entertainment and economics—together with a global political change that was totally unforeseen in the Depression, one ultimately spelled the decline of tent fighting.

The economic hardship of the Depression had given way to the promise of economic growth and access of the 1960s. Similarly, the relative isolation of the early part of the century had been banished through greater railway and highway infrastructure combined with everyman’s vehicle of liberation, the automobile. The availability of entertainment had moved beyond the punctuated episodes of the travelling circus or country fair to where with the spread of radio and television it was available in households on a daily basis. Entertainment had become everyday.

And there was another factor, one that spread from its origins outside the country to affect all Australians: the global social upheaval and civil rights movements of the 1960s. In Europe and North America, in Africa and the Asian Subcontinent, in South America and Southeast Asia European new understandings of freedom took hold. Moving beyond the first post-World War II political adjustments by the European powers, freedom was seen as a right, not a privilege to be handed down by former uncontested colonial masters. The postcolonial movement found its voice (McLeod, 2000).
This new global movement found expression in Australian Referendum in 1967. Aboriginal Australians were, finally, legally recognised. Although the struggle would continue for decades to come, the genie of recognition and standing was out of the bottle. The new social understandings and expectations pointed to new pathways to personal expression and potential for Aboriginal Australians. New ways of relating as a community, as a culture, as a People.

Perhaps not totally ironically, the important functions of tent fighting as a means of connection and perpetuation of cultural values and identity were supplanted by other potentials, other possibilities. Tent fighting would still continue, but the nature of its social function in Aboriginal communities would change.

But what of the legacies of tent fighting? Was it a matter of a bunch of knockabouts who could not find other work? Did they silently fade into history? For many who participated as tent fighters, yes, they have slipped into the mists of personal memories. For others, though, tent fighting was only the beginning. For them, the lessons of dedication and application learned during their tent fighting experiences would serve well in subsequent years, in later efforts. For them, the legacies extended beyond the family and beyond the community to the entire nation.

Those whose legacies contributed and shaped the broader sporting world include those who went on from tent fighting to become Australian and international champions. The list of these influential tent fighters reads like a Who’s Who of boxers: Frank Burns, Teddy Green, Harry Mack, Mickey Miller,
George Cook, Herbert ‘Wal’ Truscott, Jack Hassen, Billy Grime, Jackie Green and Greg McNamara, to name a few. Some, like Dave Sands and the Sands brothers, developed into more than champions, becoming dynasties unto themselves.

Others, like Lawrence (Baby Cassius) Austin, not only succeeded in the Australian boxing scene, but moved between weight divisions and ended up holding Australian titles in three boxing divisions—welterweight, junior welterweight and lightweight—as well as twice holding the Commonwealth junior welterweight championship.

Several tent fighters went on beyond the ring to help shape communities and nations. These include Banjo Clarke, community Elder and author; George Bracken, a noted Aboriginal lawyer; Geoff Clark, former ATSIC chairperson and Douglass Nicholls, later Pastor with the Churches of Christ in Australia and then Governor of South Australia. The list also includes Eric Clarke Snr, whose stories instilled in his son the drive and desire to tell the story of tent fighting to others.

Another measure of the legacy of tent fighting is the degree to which it is recognised or has impacted mainstream, non-Aboriginal Australian culture. A development that would have been completely beyond thought or consideration in the depth of the Great Depression would be that this phenomenon that impacted so many Aboriginal communities would one day find a voice in the larger non-Aboriginal culture that was once so overtly separate and antagonistic towards the Aboriginal cultural tradition.
This voice has been expressed in the same entertainment media that tent fighting was a part of. Cold Chisel’s song ‘Yesterdays’ includes lyrics that refer to Sharman’s boxers. More pointedly, the Australian rock band ‘Midnight Oil’s’ 1984 album, Red Sails in the Sunset, includes the song ‘Jimmy Sharman’s Boxers’, which points to the ways that Sharman exploited the Aboriginal tent boxers. Interestingly, those lyrics speak to the same dynamics and social conditions described earlier and ask the same questions asked of the former tent fighters who were interviewed as part of this project. Tellingly, they allude to the same answers given by the former tent fighters themselves:

From the red dust north of Dalmore Downs
Sharman’s tents roll into town
Twelve will face the auctioneer
Sharman’s boxers stand their ground

Their days are darker than your nights
But they won’t be the first to fall
Children broken from their dreams
But they won’t be the first to fall

Fighting in the spotlight
Eyes turn blacker than their skin
For Jimmy Sharman’s boxers
It’s no better if you win

Standing in the darkness
Lined up waiting for the bell
The days are wasted drinking
At the first and last hotel

Why are we fighting for this?
Why are you paying for this?
You pay to see me fall
Like shrapnel to the floor

What is the reason for this?
There is a reason for this?
What is the reason
they keeping coming back for more?

The blows now bring him to his knees
But still the crowd calls out for more
The drums are burning in his ears
The man keeps counting out the score

_Midnight Oil: Jimmy Sharman’s Boxers_
_Songwriters: Robert Hirst & James Moganie_
Further reflecting the shift in the social construction of tent fighting, and its enduring legacy extending even in popular movies, the film *September*, by Peter Carstairs, depicts two teenage boys setting up a backyard boxing ring in anticipation of a visit by Sharman’s boxing troupe.
CHAPTER 4
MORE THAN INTERVIEWS: A LIVING LINK

The factors that were of greatest influence in considering the video production that accompanies this exegesis have already been discussed earlier: how it was important to attempt to recapture the entire experience of tent fighting—not just the sights and sounds, but the lived ‘texture’ of the experience as the person approached and engaged with it. Also discussed was the importance of somehow relating the social understandings of the time—together with the shifts from then to now.

Perhaps most important is the idea of keeping faith with the actual experiences of those involved, to avoid reducing their experiences to some novelty, or stereotype. This would be furthered by two critical approaches: the first is the use of a post-colonial perspective to shape the content, process and emphases of the video; the second is the incorporation of the first-hand accounts of those participants. These accounts are not intended to simply punctuate the video, but to serve as prime influences around which the video presentation is based.

Drawing on these ideas, the video presentation can be understood as involving three stages: the initial anticipation and approach, the immersion and connection of the viewers and linkages and replication. How these are formulated, and how each serves to keep faith with the key conceptual factors described earlier, is discussed next.

ANTICIPATION AND APPROACH

This video production involves more than just a series of interviews with former tent fighters. Such a video would certainly keep faith with the fundamental concept of giving voice to the participants, but it might not support and facilitate the true communication of the breadth of experience, or the depth
of meaning, involved in tent fighting. This is because in its heyday, attending (or participating in) a tent fight show was not simply something that one did on the spur of the moment, or casually. Because they were road shows—travelling troupes—going to a tent fighting show meant planning, it meant scheduling. It meant that sweet, agonising anticipation of ‘is it time yet?’

More than just emotional, this anticipation was heightened with every physical step towards the show grounds. Before the sights of the tent show could be heard some of the iconic sounds—the measured pounding of the big bass drums and the indistinct shouts of the show barkers geeing up the murmuring crowd. The ringing of the bell to signal the start of a match.

The sights, though, meant that it was nearly time, it was nearly here. The giant banner above the canvas backdrop. The stage, or platform in front (which was sometimes little more than an elevated board) where the fighters were lined up in view of the gathering audience. The string of bare bulbs overhead.

In the real tent fighting context, some in the audience would have come only to watch. It was entertainment. They would be enjoying the banter between the geeman and the audience, trying to figure who might fight whom. Others in the audience, though, would have come to be a part of the proceedings. Some to ‘have a go at a darkie’, some to try to earn a quid or two in prize money, some to prove themselves for their mates or girlfriends. They would be carefully sizing up the fighters on the board. Which ones looked like a safe go? Which ones looked a bit too fit, a bit too hungry?

And with the drum still beating, the ring bell signals time to move into the tent. With the feel of worn, gritty canvas underfoot, the outside world is left behind, and one enters the world-within-a-world of tent fighting.

This video production seeks to capture and recreate that sense of anticipation, the sense of gradual approach. To do this means that the approach to the video’s actual coverage of tent fighting must first position the audience—historically and culturally.
This anticipatory positioning of the audience will be accomplished through the use of historically correct images and sounds presented in a coordinated montage that is further positioned by the narration of the author. This background positioning leads to the next sequence of images, sounds and author’s narration—those of the actual tent fighting experience.

IMMERSION AND CONNECTION

In those times, stepping inside the tent meant being physically and cognitively immersed in the experience of tent fighting. This was not a matter of watching on TV, nor was merely a video game. One was within, not outside. Here, too, the video attempts to keep faith with the nature of the experience and with the mandate to connect the modern audience member with the past phenomenon.

The images reflect what would have been experienced within the tent, with its warmer, closer and darker feel—the patterns of light and dark created by the bare overhead globes.

The author’s narration recreates the introduction by the tent fight barker, with the images and sounds playing out across and behind the narration.

This is where the whole experience of tent fighting unfolds within the context of Australia in the Great Depression. These images of the shows, themselves are only part of the way of connecting the modern audience with the
experiences of those times. It was stated earlier in this exegesis that a key consideration was giving full voice—theoretically, figuratively and literally—to those who were there, those who shaped tent fighting.

To do this the images and narration of those times include the words from those times—as spoken by those who were there and related here by the barker/presenter—are a key part of the display. It is through these thoughts that the real meanings of tent fighting are revealed: What drew these men to tent fighting? What was life like on the road? What were the costs to the family? Was tent fighting sport or entertainment or survival or all? What was it like fighting with ‘whitefellas’?

What was it like fighting with other ‘blackfellas’? What were the longer term legacies of tent fighting?

All of these themes constitute the richness and true meanings of tent fighting—physical, social, cultural, psychological and even spiritual—as described by those involved. This aspect of the presentation involves more than immersion in an experience. It involves the connection across the decades, across worlds of being and understanding. It keeps faith with those men who contributed so much to this exegesis and video production. The video concludes with the striking of the ring bell: once for every name of every tent fighter acknowledged.

**LINKAGES AND REPLICATION**

This exegesis, and in particular the video production, attempt to connect the present with the past before that story is lost forever. It does so in a way intended to convey the full breadth of experience and meaning. In this way, it keeps faith with the driving factors described earlier. But if this presentation ends there, it has only postponed, for a very brief moment, the extinction of the story. For once the presentation is forgotten, the story it sought to describe is also forgotten. To avoid this, another aspect of this presentation is in the linkages it can forge with other audiences of the present.
To continue the telling of the story of tent fighting, the video will be made available to Indigenous community organizations—including schools—for their presentation/showing. This allows for the video production to take the next step in keeping faith with the richness and value of the tent fighting experience. Like tent fighting, the video presentation can ‘go on the road’, stopping and going on display wherever potential audiences might gather, bringing the experience of tent fighting, once again, to Victoria and Australia.
CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Tent fighting. The sideshow that started as a great nephew of European travelling carnivals and boxing exhibits would become a phenomenon in its own right. A tradition that would grow in importance to the point where its economic, social and cultural influence on entire Aboriginal communities can now be understood.

This research effort has explored a phenomenon that has criss-crossed the Australian consciousness for nearly a century and, for the first time, examined the complexity of its meaning and implications to Aboriginal communities across Australia. It is the telling of a story that might have never happened, a story that might have been forever silenced with the passing of the last of its participants.

From its beginnings, this research has sought to explore, understand and communicate the full richness of the tent fighting experience. This is not the first effort to try to do this. But it is the first to use a postcolonial perspective to reveal how previous efforts were limited and incomplete because of the then-existing assumption of the secondary importance of the Aboriginal perspective. It is the first, too, to build on this perspective through the use of interviews with the last of the tent fighters of that period in history.

Through the use of this approach and those interviews this research has revealed that in addition to the personal economic and sporting motives and contributions of tent fighting, other contributions and influences interwove the experience of tent fighting into the fabric of Aboriginal Australian life in the over most of the twentieth century. In contrast to the understanding of tent fighting as a medium of entertainment—as experienced by non-Aboriginal audiences—tent fighting became an important economic and social basis of Aboriginal community life in Victoria and across Australia.
Through this research a number of key understandings and contributions to Aboriginal have been explored, including:

- Particularly during the Great Depression, tent fighting provided Aboriginal Australians a much needed opportunity to earn money. But this was not simply ‘money for jam’, it was money for survival—of themselves, their families and, eventually, their entire communities.
- At a time when Aboriginal Australians experienced legal and social apartheid, tent fighting was a rare context in which they could engage openly with the non-Aboriginal society and compete as equals.
- Tent fighting not only contributed to the economic survival of local Aboriginal communities, but it also served as an important means of connection and communication between separate communities. It was responsible for the interconnection of the fabric of Aboriginal life across these otherwise isolated communities.
- In its combining of sporting effort and entertainment attraction tent fighting predated and anticipated later ‘sports entertainment’ television events.
- The legacy of tent fighting is more than just one of an entertainment artefact of a past era. Its participants went on to take up positions of authority and importance in all levels of Aboriginal and mainstream Australian society.

The video production that is an integral part of this effort is, similarly, more than just a static representation of what once was. Keeping philosophical and methodological faith with the postcolonial perspective informing this effort means creating a comprehensive experience as a way of relating the depth and complexity of tent fighting. Also building on and presenting the accounts of the last of the tent fighters of that era, this video does more than simply communicate their words, it attempts to capture the essence of the tent fighting experience.
Even more, by combining the background historical, social and cultural aspects with the interviews of the former tent fighters the video becomes a documentary of the experience of tent fighting.
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APPENDIX A

This research project, both video production and exegesis, would not have been possible without the interviews conducted with the following former tent fighters and their families, Mr’s and Uncles:

- Henry Alberts
- Albert Allen
- Jim Berg
- Geoff Clark
- Eric Clarke Snr
- Len Clarke
- James Egan
- Ted Lovett
- Jeff Malley
- Norman Taylor

Not all of these participants consented to being recorded, either audio and/or video. Transcripts of those who agreed to an audio recording of their interviews can be found in Appendices B, C, D and E.
APPENDIX B


Interview with Uncle Henry Albert. (It is very difficult to understand what Uncle Henry is saying)

Eric: Clarke: We are here with Uncle Henry Albert in Warnambool. He’s one of the old boxers from way back and he’s a product, you could say, from Franlingham. Now Henry, in your early years, what was it like to live on the mission?

Uncle Henry Albert: Well in the early days, you ain’t going to school and that. We were ... as kids ... we got... Spend all day walking the dog ... There was a daughter... and that was a big loss.

Eric Clarke: Pretty tough life.

Uncle Henry Albert: It was a tough life. No work, no money.

Eric Clarke: Pretty tough when you had to get permission.

Uncle Henry Albert: And here it was all seasonal work. You had to make a living out of the bush. You had to trudge in and out picking up wood. After that, when the rangers came in, you couldn’t get ... to get anything in and out.

Eric Clarke: Sport was a big thing amongst the people.

Uncle Henry Albert: Oh, yeah, sport. We used to do a lot of boxing.
Eric Clarke: Boxing, that’s what I really want to talk about. Now, did you box for a living, or did you do it for fun or did you do it for both?

Uncle Henry Albert: We all got paid for it.

Eric Clarke: Do you remember what years you were doing it? Forties, fifties? After the war of course.

Uncle Henry Albert: Early fifties, late forties, yeah.

Eric Clarke: A lot of the times when the fighting men like Jimmy Sharmen, Lloyd Bow and Harry Johns were coming around to the shows, were you involved in the tent boxing then or did you box somewhere when you went to the city?

Uncle Henry Albert: No, I box in the ring here...

Eric Clarke: How good were you, Uncle Henry? How good a fighter were you?

Uncle Henry Albert: Well I was good enough to get in there and come out winner, anyway. Even if I do say so myself.

Eric Clarke: That is good. When you start winning of course you get a bit of reputation, and then the next day you’re the favourite to win. So did they place you against some good opposition or...Ballarat...

Eric Clarke: You walked?

Uncle Henry Albert: Now, coming from Framingham, they produced a lot of fighters over the years?
Eric Clarke: That’s the manly way to fix it up. Now they use weapons and knives and every bloody thing.

Uncle Henry Albert: That’s they way, you’ve gotta have a knife like most people, or you wack ‘em in the head with a bloody bottle. Or you could walk over ... that mob ... wasn’t game enough to.

Eric Clarke: So, I was talking to Lennie Clarke the other day and he was talking about Uncle Banjo. So did you two knock around a bit?

Uncle Henry Albert: He was in Melbourne.

Eric Clarke: So he liked staying up here in the country and a lot of other fellas?

Uncle Henry Albert: We used to train together.

Eric Clarke: I’ve run out of questions.

Uncle Henry Albert: You’ve run out of questions.

Eric Clarke: Is there something you can think of...?

Eric Clarke: Have you got any photos of yourself?
APPENDIX C

This is a synopsis of the first interview conducted with Geoff (Jeff) Clark, conducted by telephone. Subsequently, a video interview with Geoff was also recorded.

Geoff had his first fight in the Tents with Jimmy Sharman at Noorat, near Warrnambool at age 15. He lived at Framlingham and as one of the younger generation of boxers from the mission, the older men would take care of him and show him the ropes.

One of his favourites and a delight to watch was ‘Nulla Austin’. He said Nulla was that good and elusive, nobody – in all his opponents could hit him. He used to duck and weave, crouch and bounce around and tease his opponent and tell them to hit him. They would tire out trying and he would let loose and flatten them. He always put on a great show and that’s what Sharman liked, the showmanship, where he would make up his own rules and if one of his boys was in the clinches, he would break it up and call a shorter round. All in a days work.

The mission boys would come to the shows and Sharman had an ‘Old Chinese’ guy working on the door/entrance named Rud Kee, but the boys would demonstrate and cry out for ‘landrights’ and for Kee to go back to his own country, before he would weaken and let them in for free.

Like the Framlingham fighters before them, this younger breed of boxers would travel with Sharman through the Western District and Victoria to New South Wales up to as far as Dubbo. The shows were a good way for these fellows to get around, and it was not a side show to them either like again thought of by the Non-Aboriginal persons. It was a good vehicle to make contact(s) with other Aboriginal people for their “social networks”. Jeff says that is why we have relations up in these areas now, as it was a way to work and get to Dubbo and places like Narrandera and West Wyalong along the way boxing in the Tents.
The late 1950’s and early 60’s where the times where the Managers wanted the less serious side and to please the crowd more and be more entertaining, so the employed fighters had to work and either be a ‘take’ or a ‘gee-up’.

All the tricks for making money and for Sharman used everything to his advantage. Sharman even used 10 oz gloves for his boxers and they were nice and solid, where the challengers gloves were 8 oz ones filled with horse hair and softly padded, so that even with their best punches, they wouldn’t hurt Sharmans’ fighters.

Jeff recalled when he was 15, one fight he had against an 18 year old lad from Cobden and much bigger than Jeff. This was with the Billy Leach troop, were Jeff beat the older lad and was given a ‘shower’ which happened when the crowd witnesses a real good fight, they throw money in the ring, and the winner gets to keep the shower money. He said he made 5-6 pounds that fight.

The dangers of mixing with the crowd after the fights was the same lad that Jeff beat prior, tried to ‘king-hit’ him, but Jeff was startlingly aware and dropped him again. He must have hurt his ego that much for him to have another go, but said the lesson there was always be aware on the outside too because sometimes you make enemies.

Jeff moved to Western Australia to play football for Subiaco and fought at the Perth’s Royal Show. He said "I was only 12 stone and I had to fight these big 16 stone blokes as a heavyweight, it used to get me fit, and I won most because these guys had been drinking, and you only had to hit ‘em in the guts a coupla times and it was all over. George Stewart was the manager and would spruik- ‘We’ll take any challenge from 1pound to 1 ton, but also with another breathe, if you lose, there will be no sugar in your tea for a week. All these jesting terms would have been quite funny."
APPENDIX D

The following are notes taken during the interview with Eric Clarke Snr. He was aged 86 when the interview was conducted.

This is what you want to know about my time in boxing, you might have heard quite a lot what goes on in shows in different towns.

Well things in my days wasn’t easy, I had to earn money working in boxing tents, for $2 pounds a fight, to help buy food for my family. I did work on farms like milking cows, feeding cattle and horses.

You wonder what’s going on in your life- things I’ve done, to love my life also to help my mother at times things wasn’t easy, as Mum reared us from money from the State, after we lost our father. I always did what ever I could, work on farms, also picking tomatoes in Dimboola for different growers.

We done all these things for a bit of money to help our Mum in our young days, I got a bike- a ‘Malvern Star’ at 14 years old, 8 p.

I rode to Warrnambool from Dimboola, got to Purnim/Framlingham and stayed at Granny Clarke’s for a month then rode back to Dimboola.

I then went to see Granma Harradine at Lillamor then over to Bordertown. That’s when I remember getting interested in Boxing, as they told me about my dad and all his brothers in Boxing. So I went down there where a chap was teaching the young ones, that’s when I liked doing boxing.

Some of us went on a trip to Adelaide and had a go at a fight and time to think about it. I joined the Army and had a round or two with a few fellows, and got to learn a bit about boxing, but it come to me, it was something I done, and thought that what I done must have been in my blood. I was told all my people where very good.
To this day I remember what they said to me-, but I spoke to your mum about what they offered me, a house in Carlton and a job, only to train 3 nights a week, you know what your mum said. That’s why I never went ahead.

Then came back to Kingston (Mums former home) and worked on the highway patrol, then came back to Lillamor and worked on the railways for 34 years. I played football you know all the Eric, your dad did travel- all places with boxing tents from South Vic to New South Wales.

Met quite a lot of blokes to work with, sometimes you had to do what Bell or Johns told you. If you got beat, they had to pay out money, but most times I was told to work with them so that the crowds would come back. They had to draw the crowd in who paid the money to see their fighter. The fighter wants to win for the people who follows you.

Sometimes you meet blokes that are out to take money from the tents, if they beat you they (managers) get upset about paying the money, but if you have to stop them you don’t pull your punches, but if your working with them you do. When you have to win you’ve got to give them some good punches and you need to do that because it’s only 3 rounds.

I worked with Harry Johns Boxing and travelled with him from Sth Aust, to Victoria to NSW. I also worked for Roy Bell and Jimmy Sharman around the same areas but different times. The main thing we had to do was win for ourselves or work with the fighters who came in. If the fighters were really serious, we had to make sure they didn’t take any money from the Showmen /tents, because we wanted our own pays too.
APPENDIX E

The following is a partial transcript of the Interview of Len Clarke, whose father was Henry ‘Banjo’ Clarke, conducted in 2008.

Eric Clarke: Len, how did he get that name?

Len Clarke: I only found out just recently how he got that name. He was walking down to one of his most famous heros and that was Pompy Austin. They came across this whitefella in the streets of Warrnambool. The whitefella said to Uncle Pompy, “Oh, you got your little friend with you, what’s his name.” And he said, “Banjo, his name is Banjo Clark.” He probably forgot his real name was Henry so he said, “Banjo Clarke.” And my father said he’s never ever heard that name in his life. That name stuck with him right to this very day. But when he used to do a lot of boxing he boxed under the name Henry Armstrong, or was it Henry Armstrong Jones, or anyway. There was another fella named Henry Armstrong, an American negro. I’m not sure but he was a hero and I think he had a bit to do with him.

My father did a lot of boxing in his time, apparently he was a great fighter. We got to see him as children, boxing in the Warrnambool City Town Hall. A proper ring. He loved to fight but a lot of people turned up. That’s when he threw in his gloves, after that. He just didn’t take much interest. He was getting old and he wanted to give it away.

Eric Clarke: What age was he then?

Len Clarke: Couldn’t... probably in his thirties or forties. Prior to that he was an excellent boxer. I used to see them organise buses and have transport and they’d put on boxing tournaments, whether it was in Hamilton or in Warrnambool. They’d get the buses and
take them around to get the old boxers, the old Aboriginal boxers.

You’ve got to bear in mind, these people, it must have being a great treat for them. These people didn’t get proper nourishment. They probably sub-existed off rabbits and damper and dripping. And then they’d walk, if they couldn’t get a ride, to these boxing tournaments. They would fight, more than likely they’d win their fights, then they’d walk all the way back home.

Eric Clarke: Incredible.

Len Clarke: Yeah, but that’s what makes it so good. If it was easy, everyone would be doing it. But they were making money. They’d probably do all this to feed the families as well. Whatever little bit of money they made, they didn’t earn that much, it supplemented the income to the family. Because most of these people were living in abject poverty. They certainly got a lot of jobs on the road, hitchhiking around, so forth, they had seasonal work. But they found that they could earn a bit of money also in the boxing industry.

The Gundai-Tamara tribe and the tribe that we come from, the Koray tribe, they were great fighting people. We made that documentary, The Fighting Gundai-Tamara. You could see that many of our people not only went to all theatres of war, but they were great with their fists in boxing. And they were great showmen. In recent times there would have been, a cousin of mine, Graeme Brooke, he was a young man, his mother came from ****Queen Austin. So Graham, he got pretty high up in boxing. And then there was Lionel Rose, his grandfather, or great grandfather, was born under a bollock dray. He used to call it the old highlander...
There’s always that connection. Great pride. Our people held great wars. It held back the colonisation of the rich Western district of Victoria for 21 years. They always used to come into the whitefella’s property under the cover of darkness. As I say, it was the pure guerilla warfare tactics that they used, and I think our people were the first to use undercover guerilla tactics. But they certainly had the people living in absolute fear. Then after that, when they became (?????) much for there muscat and the gunpowder, their spears and boomerangs were no competition for that. They seemed to then, this pride and will to fight, will to stick up for your rights then seemed to have been transferred to fighting for their land. There’s all sorts of history where they’ve tried to move our people off... Kunda. Off ****land. Off Ebinizer. Off everywhere. And for some reason our people here at Cram**** they’ve just totally resisted and would not leave there land. So you have this fighting spirit. You have this fighting urge all the time. And then it developed. With the boxing troupes.

Eric Clarke: With the older people that you’re talking about, did you ever have a fight, did you ever put on the gloves?

The old man, Banjo Clarke, when he stepped down from the ring he had two sons, me and Ian. Ian had the nickname as Punchy. And they certainly got a lot more aggressive than I was. Even though I fought as a southpaw. I tend to be a one-hit person. But Ian he fought with a lot of science. And so my old man, every Saturday, not only Saturday during the week also, he’d take us into the YMCA, he registered us in the YMCA in Warnambool. So we’d spend all of our time in the gymnasium doing boxing and everything like that. And I never ever really took it up like them. Ian and Johnny Chapfield and all them, they’d get up and start boxing in the travelling shows.
And I felt I could not be bothered with all that, possibly because I had my eyes set on fighting for land rights. So I put my aggression over that way. I’m a fighter in other ways.

We certainly grew up with boxing all around you. And it certainly is a physical science. They had a lot of respect for their opponent. They had absolute respect for the sport that they were involved in. And it taught them a lot of discipline and how to control their tempers. Temper management. I’d see them. They’d hitchhike. And they looked old to me at the time, they were possibly just young fellas. And I was just a child. The food and stuff, they weren’t getting properly nourished and eating green vegetables. If they didn’t grow it themselves they probably wouldn’t have seen them that often. They certainly wouldn’t have known about the scientific truths about ***** to give to great athletes and sportspeople. These people, they hitchhiked, as I said before, miles to get to boxing.

There was a lot of athletes within our community. They were great athletic people. Like there were quite a few them who even ran in the Stawell Gift. And I think that that the will to win, they had that in their psyche, and I think that got transferred to politics later on in life.

Eric Clarke: To win against white people or just to win?

Len Clarke: I think to win to survive.

Eric Clarke: Very good. Now there’s probably several other questions I’d like to ask but you’ve probably covered those. The main thing was that that the men had to fight, not only to survive, but they did it as a sport, and it was something that they did well. They’d get a bit of a reputation if they won at a fete at Warnambool, if they’d won a couple of fights in the time that
the show was there and then it would move to Port Fairy and then Portland and if these fellas were fighting with them of course their reputations would go with them. You dad, Uncle Banjo, his reputation would have gone far and wide.

Len Clarke: There was a lot of people in the white community that were into the boxing. A lot of them joined the police force later on. I’ve always found that this place here has a lot visits from police and that coming to see the old man when he was alive. And they still come to his grave today. You see them sitting around his grave. He’d tell you stories, I forget most of it, but at the boxing tournaments there was no such thing as weighing people. If you were a little five foot eight fella you fought a six foot four fella. You might be nine stone or something and the big white fella could be fifteen stone.

Eric Clarke: A lot of those whitfellas would be farmers and they’d have a few beers and want to fight an Aboriginal fella.

Len Clarke: And a lot of them would be mates. A lot of them would form a lasting friendships. A lot the coppers they would come down from Melbourne or wherever they were stationed and they’d always seek out the old man, Banjo. And those relationships went on for years. And they lived down there in *********, a South Melbourne pub, and this fellow said, and I said “I come from an Aboriginal community twelve miles north of Warrnambool.” He said “That’s old Puna mission. I used to box a fella named Banjo Clarke down there.” Then they old man found out, and he went down and stayed with him. That friendship just continued right up to death. It’s an unwritten code, they formed lasting friendships. That’s where the discipline, the body, mind and soul comes from.

(Sound goes bad. Wind in microphone.)