

Some preliminary thoughts by Gary Foley, Historian and Senior Curator, Indigenous Cultures Department, Museum Victoria.

## VAHS History Project:

### Online Exhibition on History of VAHS and Fitzroy Aboriginal Community

#### Description of the Project:

#### Background:

The Victorian Aboriginal Health Service (VAHS) in Fitzroy has been one of the most important indigenous community-controlled organizations in Victoria. Emerging in the era of Black Power/Self-Determination, the VAHS represented a significant success in terms of Aboriginal people 'controlling their own affairs'. For the thirty years since 1973 it has lived up to its motto of "Caring for the Community" by providing free health care, support, advocacy, welfare and a variety of specialist services that Aborigines had been deprived of for the greater part of the twentieth century. In that time it has energetically campaigned for Land Right and justice for the Aboriginal people, as they regard health in a holistic way which means that the physical and psychological well being of indigenous people is inextricably linked to the political and economic security of the Koori community. The VAHS has for 30 years maintained a determined and resolute stance against government and outside interference in Aboriginal community affairs, and also played a key role in the development of a national network of like-minded community-controlled Aboriginal & Islander health services that have been the only successful attempts to address indigenous health problems in recent decades.

The VAHS is therefore an organization of enormous historical significance in the struggle for land justice in Victoria that continues to this very moment as the Aboriginal community in Fitzroy is dispersed yet again, this time the invaders and colonists are trendy traders and the wealthy young elite of Melbourne yuppie-dom. There is a major irony in the contestation of Fitzroy space in the present as the VAHS was founded by

people who had strong links with the legendary Cumeragunja walk-off in 1939. Many of the Aboriginal community leaders of Fitzroy from the 1940s through till today have strong links to that significant moment in 1939. Names like Doug Nicholls, Marge Tucker, Jack Patten, Bill Onus and many of their children were important leaders involved in the Aboriginal struggle for rights over the past fifty years. Cumeragunja and Fitzroy produced some of the most important leaders on the national stage of the Aboriginal struggle. People from these two communities were involved in the famous 1938 'Day of Mourning' protest and the founding of the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines & Torres Strait Islander (FCAATSI) in Adelaide in 1958. They also played a key role in the campaign for a "yes" vote in the significant 1967 Referendum. Bruce McGuinness, who was Chair of the VAHS Board of Directors for most of its existence, was a protégé of Bill Onus and Jack Patten who are two of the most important Aboriginal leaders in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Additionally, the VAHS has, over the period of its existence had the advantage of the involvement of some of the most important family groups in the Melbourne community. The VAHS is an organization that reflects and personifies the values and ideas of people of that calibre.

#### **The Project:**

The VAHS began life in 1973 in Gertrude Street Fitzroy and operated out of a cramped terrace shopfront for the first ten years. In 1983 the service moved further up Gertrude Street into a larger building that had previously been the local VD Clinic. After another ten years even this building proved inadequate for the rapidly developing health and social programs of the VAHS, and this resulted in the service being able to build a new centre on its present site in Nicholson Street.

When the VAHS moved to its new premises ten years ago, all of its records and other material relating to the first twenty years history of the service were lodged in a storage locker in Collingwood and effectively forgotten. One week ago (June 2004) the locker was opened and a veritable gold-mine of archival and historical material was 'discovered'. This material has not really been touched for ten years and nobody working

for the service today has any idea what is really there. Needless to say, this material potentially contains sufficient important documents, images, film, video and objects to mount several major exhibitions at the VAHS or Bunjilaka at Melbourne Museum. An easier immediate means of communicating the stories that reside in this material is through the creation of a major on-line exhibition via a website.

#### **Four Phases of Project**

It is therefore proposed that an urgent project be developed in four phases with the following aims:-

1. To take immediate action to secure and properly store the VAHS Archive Collection.
2. To catalogue and index the VAHS Archive Collection.
3. To research and develop a comprehensive history of VAHS and the Aboriginal community of Fitzroy/Collingwood that it originally emerged from.
4. To develop a major online (website) history of the VAHS 1973 – 2003 which would incorporate the political, economic and social history of the Melbourne inner-city Aboriginal community since the 1930s.

The four phases of the project would each involve the following:-

Phase One. - To inspect and sort the collection currently in storage so that important material be identified and stored in appropriate manner for long term preservation. To assemble sorted collection in an accessible manner, to enable the beginning of Phase Two. To identify other material at other VAHS locations that should also be stored with Archive and transfer all material to single place.

Projected Time: 3 weeks

Phase Two: - To catalogue and index entire VAHS Archive Collection. This to be achieved with assistance from Dr. Tony Birch of Melbourne University and the Australian Centre of the University of Melbourne, as well as research postgraduate students. All material and copyright shall remain owned and controlled by the VAHS.

Projected Time: 3-6 months

Phase Three:- Using the VAHS Collection and other local history resources, to conduct research into the history of the service and its place in the history of the local Koori community over an extended period encompassing the period before and during the life span of the VAHS. This research would be supervised by Gary Foley in consultation with Dr. Tony Birch and would involve research assistants from University of Melbourne and VAHS personnel.

Projected Time: 6 months

Phase Four: From research material develop online website exhibition.

Projected Time: 3 months

#### **Projected Outcomes of the Project**

1. Permanent, evolving History of the VAHS website.
2. Permanent evolving exhibition of modern history of Melbourne Aboriginal community.
3. Permanent and evolving historical archival collection of VAHS, available for general research subject to VAHS approval. This in itself would be a significant

addition to existing historical records, archives and collections relating to the history of Melbourne.

4. Invaluable experience for indigenous undergraduate and postgraduate students in researching local indigenous history.
5. Opportunity for VAHS personnel to be trained in maintaining and developing VAHS Archives and Library.
3. Future exhibition in Bunjilaka on history of VAHS

### **Funding the Project**

There exists the possibility of funding the different phases of the project from different sources. A conservative, preliminary estimate of the total costs for such a project is \$53,000. If funding could not be obtained for the overall project then possibilities for funding of each phase might be as follows:-

#### **Phase One:**

Cost:	approx. \$4,500
Possible fund sources:	Aboriginal Affairs Victoria ANTAR (Vic) VAHS

#### **Phase Two:**

Cost:	approx. \$18,000
Possible resources:	Aboriginal Affairs Victoria State Library Museum Victoria

Melbourne City Council  
University of Melbourne  
Monash University  
La Trobe University  
A.I.A.T.S.I.S. (Canberra)  
National Archives of Australia (Canberra)  
National Museum (Canberra)  
National Library of Australia

**Phase Three:**

Cost:

approx. \$18,000

Possible resources:

Aboriginal Affairs Victoria  
State Library  
Museum Victoria  
Melbourne City Council  
University of Melbourne  
Monash University  
La Trobe University  
A.I.A.T.S.I.S. (Canberra)

**Phase Four:**

Cost:

\$12,500

Possible resources:

Aboriginal Affairs Victoria  
State Library  
Museum Victoria  
Melbourne City Council  
University of Melbourne  
Monash University

La Trobe University  
RMIT  
A.I.A.T.S.I.S. (Canberra)

**VAHS Online Archival Project - Preliminary Budget**

**Phase One:**

co-ordination	\$1,000
wages 2 x \$300 / week x 3	\$1,800
office costs	\$500
storage materials	\$1,000
storage rental	\$600
<b>total</b>	<b>\$4,900</b>

**Phase Two:**

co-ordination	\$5,000
office costs	\$1,500
printing/photocopying	\$2,000
stationary	\$500
telephone/fax	\$500
computers	\$5,000
computer incidentals	\$2,000
office rental	\$1,000
contingencies	\$500
<b>total</b>	<b>\$18,000</b>

**Phase Three:**

co-ordination	\$5,000
office costs	\$1,500
printing/photocopying	\$2,000
stationary	\$500
telephone/fax	\$500
computers	\$5,000
computer incidentals	\$2,000
office rental	\$1,000
contingencies	\$500

**total** **\$18,000**

**Phase Four:**

coordination	\$5,000
office costs	\$1,000
telephone/fax	\$500
internet costs	\$2,000
computer software etc	\$3,000

contingencies

\$1,000

total

\$12,500

**Total Project Cost**

**\$53,400**