

Wonnangatta Station, its owners and the stock routes, a proud history, a sad ending

Until taken by the Cain Government in 1988, Wonnangatta station was the most remote freehold cattle station in Victoria. It is now part of the Alpine National Park.

Its early settlement history is clouded but it is known that Oliver Smith was probably the first permanent settler in 1870, carrying out subsistence farming in the naturally open valley. A partnership developed with the Bryce family in 1871 and that family eventually took over, developing their cattle herd and improving the Station. They took up leases on the Howitt and Bryce's plains. The Original Dry River and Bryce's Plain stock routes to the High Plains which then led to the markets at Heyfield and Maffra are being used by one Heritage ride this week

The Bryce's regularly visited Dargo and the Goldfields at Talbotville and Grant for supplies and legend has it they once brought a piano in to the valley by packhorse. In later years Harry Smith packed mail and supplies to the Station. Part of this original bridle track and stock route is being used by the second group of Heritage riders this week.

Phillips and Ritchie from Delatite station at Mansfield purchased Wonnangatta in 1914. They purchased bullocks in Wodonga and walked them to Wonnangatta to fatten. They then walked them to Mansfield via Zeka spur, Macalister Springs, Mt Howitt, down the steep and dangerous Howitt Spur and along the Howqua River. Sections of this ancient stock route are being retraced by another group of heritage riders this week.

Phillips and Ritchie's Wonnangatta manager James Barclay was a legendary Horseman and is reputed to have ridden from the Station to visit friends at Merrijig in 11 hours, using this stock route. Barclay also had leases with Jim Bullock and the Wares on Mt Clear, King Billy and the Bluff and would have accessed those using the original stock routes. Barclays hut was on Barclays Flat where Lovicks hut now stands.

The grisly Wonnangatta murders in 1918 saw Barclay buried in a shallow grave beside the Home (Conglomerate) creek and the body of his cook Bamford discovered hidden under a pile of logs on the Howitt Plain. The Murders were never solved but investigating policeman Detective McKerral is reputedly quoted as later saying, along the lines, that "justice appeared to be done"

After the murders Phillips and Ritchie sold out to the Allen Bros. of Jamieson and Darlingford about 1920 and the stock routes up the Howqua River and over the Great Divide continued to be used. Then an Alexandra syndicate owned Wonnangatta for a short time before selling to the Guys from Crooked River in 1934.

Alex and sons Arthur and Jack Guy developed the leases and built Guys Hut on the High plains. They expanded their lease interests to King Billy using the stunning and dangerous Mt Howitt, Mt Magdala stock route, (being revisited by a heritage ride this week.) This lease and stock routes were taken over by the Lovick family in 1960 when they lost Mt Buller.

Unfortunately the Wonnangatta homestead was burnt to the ground in 1957 and only a small hut remains along with the cemetery and other remnants of the Station.

A group "Friends of Wonnangatta" do good work around the Homestead and cemetery site. The same cannot be said for Parks Victoria, which is totally under resourced to manage their National Parks and places like Wonnangatta, properly.

In 1971 the Guys sold to Bob Gilder of Licola and in 1988 the Cain Govt paid Gilders out and closed down grazing on both the leasehold and freehold country. At that time there was a private buyer wanting to purchase the Station but the Govt put enormous pressure on Gilders to sell it to them by saying it would make a new private owner's position impossible.

Within a few short years, major vegetation changes occurred in the valley. Grass grew long and unchecked in the open valley floor, weeds infested the valley and the fire danger dramatically increased. The Govt of the day tried to combat this trend by employing contractors to slash the growth. This proved costly and ineffective and access for tractors was difficult and dangerous.

The valley has been a Mecca for serious four-wheel drivers, horse groups with or without packhorses and some walkers for many years. People with an extensive knowledge of the valley and fire behaviour say now that the valley has developed into a death trap for visitors.

They point out that the fuel loads are so high the any fire will roar up the valley like an express train creating its own wind between the mountains each side. These experienced people say nothing or anyone in such a fires path would escape the flames. It would be all over before any fire crew could attend because of the distance.

The recent Mountain Cattlemen's protest heritage ride and cattle drive met at the Station on Tuesday January 10th . This historic meeting of the Dargo, Merrijig and Heyfield cattlemen, the cattle and the supporters highlighted the dangerous fire situation and what happens when grazing is removed from such areas. It demonstrated to Victorians that removing cattle from Wonnangatta in 1988 and the other leases last year has created the worst long term outcome possible for that land and indeed the people of Victoria. It also protested at the taking away of the Cattlemen's licences and therefore a 170 year connection with the land.

The protest reminded Victorians that the Conservation movement has not rested since convincing the Govt to take Wonnangatta in 1988 and recently influenced the Bracks Govt to stop grazing in the rest of the High Country. After this victory the environmental movement have now turned its attention to the Red Gum forests and is peddling mis-information about those forests in its next campaign to stop grazing and sustainable harvesting of Victorian Red gum. So it goes on in a familiar pattern.

As regards grazing in the Victorian High Country, the conservation movement's efforts have been self-serving. Their scientists took a short term and narrow view with the objective of removing the cattle. Their opinions differ from other learned opinions. The Government chose to listen to the former as it suited its political agenda.

It is worth reminding the public that all the higher more sensitive areas in the Alpine Park were removed from grazing many years ago. The balance, which until last year was grazed, grows an abundance of grass and undergrowth. History is proving that removing the cattle from those grazing areas has not been in the best interests of good land management or a balanced use of the Victorian High Country including protecting the 170 year living history and culture of the Cattlemen.

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