

HIGH HOPES

Peter Game goes bush to one of Victoria's most unusual annual meetings

STARS twinkled through the restless canopy of leaves as camp fires flickered on the circle of faces.

The beefy voice of Jack Treasure, a cattleman from Dargo, boomed out an adaptation of his favorite bush poet, Billy Wye . . .

"There's a valley in the ranges, where the hills are always green.

"With the Wonnangatta river running like a living thing between

Jack Treasure is president of the Wonnangatta-Buffalo River Road Development Association.

He had just finished chairing the association's annual meeting on the banks of Conglomerate Creek, in the Wonnangatta Valley — one of Victoria's most inaccessible places.

The association has been battling for 17 years to persuade the Government to build a low altitude, all-weather road through the valley linking north-eastern Victoria and the Riverina with Gippsland.

At present the only direct route between these two big primary producing areas lies over roads which climb high into the Alps above the snow line.

The association points out that even the Alpine Highway link by way of Hotham Heights can be cut if a big snowfall overwhelms the CRB's snow ploughing. And anyway, that road is too risky for transports in winter.

The association wants the new road, free of snow and fog, as a link for the big traffic in stock and fodder between the two areas, and for tourists.

The present detour through Melbourne from Myrtleford to Sale is about 311 miles. The new road would chop off about 131 miles.

At present the only route through the Wonnangatta Valley is over a hair-raising, spring-breaking 42 miles of Forests Commission jeep track.

Only four-wheel-drive vehicles can dare the 14 river crossings, and incredible tracks which rise abruptly up narrow spurs at either end of Wonnangatta Station.

These rock-strewn tracks, often heavily channelled by wash-aways, have gradients of up to one-in-two. They are a challenge to vehicle and driver.

Three people were missing from the 80 who turned up at last Saturday night's meeting in the valley. They were Wangaratta bus operator Eric Hoy, his wife, and Mrs William Peters, of Myrtleford.

The three were riding in the last vehicle in a nine-vehicle convoy carrying about 33 people which set out from the

with 19 vehicles carrying about 50 people.

The 64 miles to Wonnangatta Station where we camped and held the meeting included 23 miles of jeep track, and took 4½ hours.

At the wheel of my truck was Jack Browne, vice-president of the association, and shire president of Myrtleford.

We headed out up the Buffalo River valley through country where Jack reckoned the biggest kangaroo he's ever seen still roam — 7 ft. old men Grey Foresters.

Beyond Catherine Station (where the cattlemen still yell "Salt Oh" to bring the herds down for the annual muster) the road soon petered out into a narrow winding jeep track.

Three hours out we began the disconcerting climb out of the valley bonnet pointing skyward towards the Barry Range saddle. As we started upwards, stapled to a peppermint gum was a hand-printed cardboard sign which read: "NO ROAD THROUGH THE WONNANGATTA" — the first of many similar signs.

"Conservationists," Jack explained, as he shoved the truck into four-wheel-drive, wrestled with the wheel and headed sharply up the spur. "Conservationists believe a place like this shouldn't be opened up. I believe in conservation but I feel we are so conscious of this today we won't repeat the mistakes of the past.

"I think if the road goes through, the area should be a national park. Anyway, it's too late to oppose the road because people are already getting into the valley over the jeep tracks. It would be better if we could get together with the conservationists."

On top of the Barry Range saddle about 3000 ft. above sea level, Jack pointed south across the endless blue hills: "That's Gippsland. From here on the rivers flow the other way."

We bumped onwards towards the final descent into the valley. As we began the rise from Riley's Creek Jack handed out the comforting reassurance that the brakes were coming good after the last water crossing.

CONTINUED
NEXT PAGE



Jack Treasure, president of the Wonnangatta-Buffalo River Road Development Association.

Gippsland end of the track.

The rest of that convoy waiting at the top of a steep pinch of one-in-two near the summit of Wombat Range watched horrified as something went wrong with the gears of the Hoy's four-wheel-drive vehicle only 20 ft. from safety.

The vehicle began rolling back, gathering speed. It snapped off a tree, overturned and began somersaulting down the steep incline.

The three were flung out as it rolled. The tree fell across Mrs Hoy. The vehicle kept tumbling until it leapt a log and landed upside down 250 ft. from the top of the pinch.

Jack Treasure and the rest of his party slithered back down the steep gravel track to help the three lying unconscious on the road.

While a Forests Commission escort crew radioed for a helicopter, the party began hacking a 60 ft. wide helicopter pad out of thick timber on top of the spur.

The helicopter brought a doctor and the injured were on their way to Gippsland Base Hospital at Sale three hours after the crash.

All are now in a satisfactory condition with cuts and abrasions, but Mrs Hoy has a fractured leg.

That morning we had driven in from Myrtleford at the opposite end



The forestry track from Myrtleford to the Wonnangatta Valley. Myrtleford shire president Jack Browne's vehicle is climbing a gradient of about 1-in-2.



One of 14 major river crossings on the jeep track.

FOR A LOW ROAD



Wonnangatta station homestead in 1956 — the year before it was destroyed by fire. It was 110 years old.

Then we were plunging and jerking down the final rock-strewn pinch towards the Wonnangatta valley floor.

Past the spot where Jack saw a dingo on an earlier trip we scraped through clawing blackberries, then glimpsed the station cemetery.

Wind murmured in the trees shading the sad and lonely collection of scattered headstones. One inscription on a rough rock slab bore the nearly obliterated name of Ellen Smith, chiselled by her husband Oliver after she died in 1864.

Oliver Smith, an American who moved into the valley about 1861 in the wake of prospectors, found no gold, but good grazing country.

He, Ellen and their son Harry settled on the banks of Conglomerate Creek, and built a slab hut.

Meanwhile a Scottish university graduate, William Bryce, opened up a packhorse business between Myrtleford and Grant goldfields about 100 miles to the southeast.

Because the Harrierville route to Grant was often snow-bound, he found a low-level route below the snow line over the Barry Range and down the Wonnangatta Valley — the same mo-

tive inspiring the association today.

Smith invited Bryce to join him in the cattle run as partner. Bryce agreed, but brought in cattle from NSW, and with them pleuro-pneumonia which spread to Smith's herd. Smith sold out.

Mrs Bryce was a widow with one child when Bryce met her; they had nine more children—the last five born at Wonnangatta Station.

Mrs Bryce died in 1914, aged 78. She lies in the tiny graveyard among the red-berried briars, along with two of her daughters — one who died in 1878, aged three, the other in 1891 aged 22.

It was a hard, lonely life, Mrs Bryce educated her children. She would ride side-saddle with each new baby 30 miles to Grant to have it christened.

The trip involved two river crossings, and two stiff climbs. The round trip took three days, including a rest day in Grant.

Grant, now only a clearing, served a population of about 10,000 and the Bryces sold butter, bacon, cheese, and eggs to the miners. Their cattle and horses were sold at Bairnsdale and Heyfield.

Jack Treasure is a true bushman. Tall, powerful, blunt, and with a keen sense of humor, he's one of three brothers and a



An annual meeting with a difference . . . members of the Wonnangatta - Buffalo River Road Development Association camped on the banks of Conglomerate Creek to listen to their president, Jack Treasure.

sister who run cattle at Dargo and on the high plains.

He drove me out of the valley, over the Wombat Range to Dargo — the opposite way to which I had come.

Jack pointed to the place on the flat where they brought Sir Henry Bolte up on a fishing trip about three years ago.

Sir Henry told them: "I know what you fellows want, you want that road. Well I'm coming in to get some blackfish."

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Jack said: "Poor old Henry sat on the river till midnight and didn't catch any blackfish; but we did kill a couple of brown snakes and chased four others away."

But Sir Henry didn't hold it against them. He authorised a CRB survey. The Board came up with two estimates — one for a fully-sealed 18-ft. wide 40 mph road between Myrtleford and Stratford costing about \$9.3 million (\$8.13 million unsealed), the other for a bridgeless four-wheel drive road along the

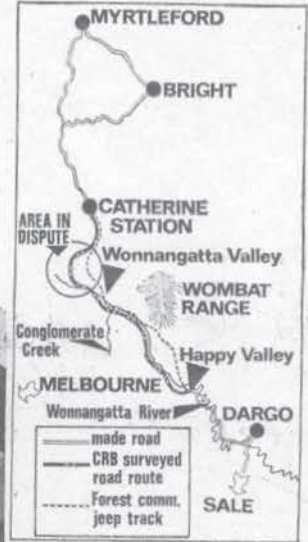
Buffalo and Wonnangatta valleys, linking the two existing roads at either end and costing \$700,000.

The Board said it thought neither would benefit the community enough to justify the cost.

Last Saturday's meeting resolved to go back to the CRB to try to convince them of the need for a road, and to point out that what it wants is not a high grade road—just a 14-ft. wide gravel road link of reasonable standard and cost, with bridges, between the two existing roads. Jack Treasure reckons it could be done for around \$1 million.

One other minor disagreement the association has with the CRB is the point at which the road would cross the Divide. Jack wants it to go over the Barry Range at 2800 ft. — a point which would be both snow and mostly fog free.

The CRB route crosses the Divide nearly 450 ft. higher. The Local Government Minister, Mr Hunt, has promised a survey of the disputed crossing.



The Hoys' wrecked four-wheel drive vehicle which hurtled backwards out of control down a steep gradient on the Wombat range.