

The "Riddle Of The Snowy High Plains"

NEWS at the weekend told how the historic homestead of Wonnangatta cattle station, in the East Gippsland Ranges, had been destroyed by fire. That same homestead 40 years ago was the scene of one of Victoria's most baffling murder mysteries—the Riddle of the Snowy High Plains, as it came to be called.

Put briefly—Jim Barclay, manager of the cattle station, was murdered. For 10 months in 1918, detectives searched for the station cook, John Bamford.

Then Bamford's body was found in Terrible Hollow, 13 miles from Wonnangatta, and he, too, had been murdered. Ever since, amateur sleuths have been putting forward ideas about what happened on the bleak and lonely mountain. Police have demolished a score of theories.

Back in 1917 every cattleman who rode the flint-strewn trails to the grasslands of the Dargo and Snowy High Plains knew Jim Barclay, manager of the Wonnangatta Station. At 49 he was acknowledged one of the hardest and most competent of this race of mountain horsemen.

Barclay was strong, lithe and fearless and he knew the Alps, the bush, and the ways of cattle as few men knew them.

He lived in a weatherboard house not far from a willow-fringed creek which the melting snows of spring turned into a torrent.

Barclay's nearest neighbor—Harry Smith—lived at Eagle Vale, 21 miles away, over foothills strewn with boulders and through gullies cluttered with dead timber.

Barclay loved a good horse and he knew every steep and serpentine path in the district. He had blazed a few trails and short cuts of his own round the rock outcrops and loose flints of Mount Howitt.

From his house near the turbulent creek, Barclay looked out over a vista of gorge and mountain which had changed little since Alfred Howitt and his prospecting party carved the first tracks along the Mitchell River in 1860.

Up there on the plateau the ways and wiles of cattle thieves were Barclay's chief preoccupation in the closing months of 1917.

Ordinarily, the cattle in the summer months were allowed to roam at will on the high plateau, breeding and fattening. But when rustlers active Barclay directed the cattle-men who worked on the station to keep constant track of the herds.

Friendly Terms

His cattle drafters on this job worked and camped miles from Barclay's house, and he seldom saw some of them for weeks.

In December, 1917, Barclay came down from his eyrie on the lofty plateau to meet his mates at Talbotville. A month earlier the Wonnangatta station cook had pushed on to another job and Barclay wanted a new cook.

On December 14, 1917, he engaged John Bamford to cook meals and carry out odd jobs about the station. Bamford, a bushman of 57, lived at Black Snake Creek, 12 miles from Talbotville. He had a bushy greying beard and a furtive eye.

His manner was morose and his temper fiery. He was inclined to argue with great tenacity about all manner of unimportant subjects.

Albert Stout, storekeeper at Talbotville, warned Barclay not to be drawn into heated arguments with Bamford, and he apparently followed the advice, for when he and Bamford came down the mountain to record their votes in Talbotville for the second conscription referendum on December 20, 1917, they seemed on cordial terms.

Murder Mystery In The Mountains

Three days back, Albert King, of Mansfield, visited Wonnangatta Station and stayed overnight. He noticed that Bamford was nervy and looked worried.

While the new cook seemed friendly toward Barclay, he was obviously restless. Several times he paced back and forth across the sitting-room in Barclay's house. He seemed to be tensed up and listening for some sounds out on the plateau.

At that time Arthur Phillips was the proprietor of Wonnangatta Estate, and his practice was to deposit Barclay's monthly salary cheque in a bank at Mansfield.

Barclay kept little money in his house by the creek and his visits to Mansfield were widely spaced.

But his friends always counted on Barclay's appearance in the town on New Year's Eve. He invariably came down the mountain for a quiet celebration.

But on New Year's Eve, 1917, Jim Barclay failed to turn up. His absence caused his friends to wonder whether he was ill. There was no way of finding out except by facing the difficult trek across the mountains.

Harry Smith, of Eagle Vale, rode up the steep trail to Barclay's house early in January, 1918, with some letters. He found tacked to the door a written notice, "Home Tomorrow," and went away.

On February 14, Smith again rode over to Wonnangatta. He found Barclay's house silent and deserted. There was no response to his knock and there was no sign of either Barclay or Bamford anywhere around the homestead.

One of Barclay's cattle dogs, hungry and emaciated, was whining at the back of the house. Barclay's other cattle dog and his horse had vanished.

A week later Arthur Phillips in Mansfield received a telegram from a friend in Dargo. It read: "Jim Barclay not seen since January. House empty."

Phillips and a couple of his men at once set out from

Mansfield on the 76-mile trek to Wonnangatta.

Phillips suspected a bush tragedy as soon as the party approached Barclay's silent house. There was no sign of Barclay or Bamford.

Searching along the creek Phillips found a place where dingoes or foxes had been scratching in the sand. Then he saw the decomposed head of a man protruding from a shallow grave in the creek bed. It was the head of Jim Barclay!

The dead man had been dressed in trousers, singlet and vest and the corpse had been wrapped in a blanket taken from Barclay's house.

The left boot was on the foot and the right one was lying near the body, which had been buried under two feet of sand and pebbles.

Phillips and his party disturbed nothing, but returned to Mansfield to tell the police.

On horseback, Det. (later Inspector) Alex McKerrall and two police troopers, with a cattleman for a guide, set out on the long trek from Mansfield on February 26, 1918.

Near Barclay's house up on the plateau was a plantation of pines and other young trees. It was enclosed by a fence of wire netting. McKerrall discovered that this netting had been cut in one place and something heavy had been dragged through.

It was obvious from the way in which the banks of fern had been beaten down that Barclay's body had been dragged from the house or near it and through the plantation for burial in the creek bed.

Barclay's revolver and blade razor were missing from a cardboard box where he kept them. More important, however, was that the cook, John Bamford, had vanished. So had Barclay's horse and one of his two favorite cattle dogs.

Barclay's corpse was strapped to the back of a pack horse and was taken across Mount Howitt and on, through rugged, rain-drenched country to Stratford for the autopsy.

There the Government Pathologist, Dr. Mollison, found that the dead man had 15 shotgun pellets in his back.



The homestead at Wonnangatta Station, built in 1862 from local timber. Lower picture taken from the homestead, illustrates the rugged loneliness of the countryside, a hundred times lonelier back in 1918, when police arduously scoured the ranges for a killer.

—Photos by courtesy of Victorian Journal of Agriculture.

A doctor estimated that the shots had been fired at close range—possibly 10 yards or less.

Barclay did not have a shotgun, and although his revolver was missing it had not been used against him.

"Only Bamford can tell us what happened," McKerrall said. "He has to be found and he has two months' start on us. He may have left the State."

It was clear that the note "Home Tomorrow" that Harry Smith had seen on Barclay's door in mid-January had not been written by Barclay but by his "murderer." Having buried the body, the killer's aim was to deter callers from searching in or around the house.

Cattle Thieves?

McKerrall had to ponder over three theories on how the station manager met his death.

● Was Barclay shot by John Bamford after a quarrel, and did Bamford escape on Barclay's horse?

● Did cattle thieves shoot down Barclay after he had surprised them on the station property?

● Was Barclay shot by some bush wanderer whom he caught stealing food from the house?

A clash with cattle thieves could not be ruled out entirely. Yet McKerrall was puzzled as to why cattle thieves should approach the

house. It was obvious that Barclay had been surprised and that his murderer had shot him either in or near the house.

No clue could be found to the whereabouts of John Bamford, the cook. False leads were followed to Dargo, to Talbotville, to Omeo and to Sale.

Deserted huts in the hills were examined and careful checks were made with everyone who had known him.

He became the No 1 murder suspect. McKerrall felt that if he were innocent he would come forward. His description had appeared in every newspaper and he must have known the police wanted to see him.

At this point the investigation reached a stalemate, while local gossip snowballed and became more and more irresponsible.

Then, on March 11, 1918, a mounted trooper picked up a derelict of the bush who had been begging food at farm-houses in the Yarram district. This man had a greying beard and looked a little like Bamford. After giving several different names he declared he was John Bamford.

When he was brought to Melbourne McKerrall noticed that he was three inches shorter than Bamford. He did not have Bamford's stoop, his small dark eyes, or his long pointed nose.

This man had told the Gippsland police that he had taken off Barclay's boots and was then wearing them. Obviously he had read newspaper reports of the tragedy, but he did not know that

By HUGH BUGGY

Barclay's boots were found with the body.

He was questioned at Russell St. by McKerrall and the then chief of the C.I.B., Supt. Bunker.

"I don't want to cause any trouble or expense," he said to them. "I'd like to be hanged in the morning if it's convenient."

That was enough. Bunker strode out of the room and McKerrall went back to Dargo.

There was no sign of Bamford and the C.I.B. swung to the belief that he had taken his life and that his body would be found somewhere on the Wonnangatta plateau. So Const. Hayes of Dargo, with experienced bushmen, carried out periodical searches.

Ten months passed before the assiduity and patience of Hayes were rewarded.

On November 10, 1918, the day before the armistice in World War I, Hayes and two bushmen, who had been born in the mountains, penetrated Terrible Hollow, 13 miles from Wonnangatta, on the Mount Howitt plateau. Terrible Hollow was aptly named—a narrow cleft in the hills choked with wild scrub and boulders.

There the party found the decomposing corpse of the missing John Bamford. Contrary to theory, however, Bamford had not taken his life. He, too, had been murdered.

Bullet In Temple

A revolver bullet had entered Bamford's left temple, but there was no trace of the revolver. A heavy log had been placed on top of the corpse. The arms were spread out. A smaller log and a boulder lay on one arm and a third log lay across the other arm.

Bamford could not possibly have dragged those logs on top of himself after committing suicide. The absence of the revolver proved clearly that he had been murdered.

Investigation was reopened on the line that Bamford had been shot by the same person or persons who had killed Barclay. Bamford's agitation, noticed by Albert King in December, 1917, might have stemmed from a threat made against himself and Barclay.

McKerrall thought that Bamford, after the shooting of the station manager, which he had witnessed, had struck off through the bush in search of help, possibly on Barclay's horse, which later returned to the station without a bride.

It was thought that the murderer or murderers of Barclay pursued and caught up with Bamford. To destroy eye-witness evidence they killed him with Barclay's revolver taken from the homestead. It looked as though Bamford had been trailed through the bush by someone on a horse.

But Bamford must have been dismounted when he was murdered. He could hardly have been shot in the left temple had he been riding hard "shak' off a pursuer."

McKerrall and other police were told many stories in the district that this man or that man might have killed Barclay and Bamford.

But it all resolved itself into a queer medley of hints and supposition. There was not one piece of really solid evidence that would have enabled the police to act.