

VICTORIA'S HERITAGE

WONNANGATTA

MURDER MYSTERY AT WONNANGATTA STATION

By Mary Ryllis Clark, *Discover Historic Victoria*, 1996

The Wonnangatta-Moroka section of the Alpine National Park is a remote and rugged haven for wildlife. The creeks and rivers are so undisturbed that platypuses have been seen chasing each other up and down small waterfalls for the sheer joy of it.

Europeans first ventured into this part of the Great Dividing Range in search of gold in the 1850s and created the townships of Grant and Talbotville. Ten years later, an American prospector, Oliver Smith, found an isolated valley of rich river flats framed by mountain ranges and established one of Victoria's most inaccessible cattle stations.

It was called Wonnangatta after the river running through it. Here he lived a hard and lonely life with his wife, Ellen, and their sons. In 1882 he persuaded William Bryce to join him as a partner.

Bryce ran the pack-horse train with supplies for the gold diggings, but one of his more memorable journeys must have been moving his wife Annie, seven children under 14 and their possessions over the 48 kilometres of rough track between Grant and Wonnangatta. Annie rode side-saddle carrying the baby in her arms while the two toddlers, Alan and Jessie, travelled in gin cases tied to each side of a pack-horse.



Wonnangatta Homestead, 1916. Photograph by Constable Hays, from Hazel Merlo, courtesy of DSE.

The next year Ellen died giving birth to stillborn twin girls and Oliver Smith decided to quit. He sold his share of the partnership to the Bryces and they ran the Wonnangatta Station for more than 30 years.



Grave of Jessie Bryce, daughter of William, near Wonnangatta Station, 1956. Courtesy of DSE.

They became something of a legend among the cattlemen of the high country. Three more children were born and all 10 were educated by their parents. As young adults, their parties

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were famous. Each played the fiddle or accordion by ear and they and their guests sang and danced for hours.

William Bryce died in 1902 and Annie stayed at Wonnangatta until her death in 1914. The station was then sold to Geoff Ritchie and Arthur Phillips, who installed a local cattleman, James Barclay, as manager.



Bryces Hut, 1937. From Hazel Merlo, courtesy of DSE.

Barclay was an easy-going man of 45 whose 18-year-old wife died of tuberculosis only nine months after they married. He was a real bushman, content to live with his dogs and horses in the solitude of Wonnangatta's quiet forests and mountains.

Late in 1917, Barclay decided that there was more work than he could handle and he employed John Bamford as cook and odd-job man. A wiry man in his mid 50s, Bamford had a wicked temper. He had been suspected of strangling his wife, but never charged.

Friends warned Barclay against Bamford but he had little choice. The war in Europe had lured most of the young men away and few of those left were prepared to accept the isolation of Wonnangatta.

Bamford arrived at the station on 14 December. Eight days later, he and Barclay rode into Talbotville to vote in the referendum

on conscription. They spent the night in town and people who spoke to them said later that they were cheerful and seemed to be getting on well. This was the last time they were seen alive.

On 22 December, Barclay's neighbour and best friend, Harry Smith (stepson of pioneer Oliver Smith), rode to Wonnangatta with the mail. There was nobody about. He went back on 14 January and was alarmed to find still no sign of life other than Barclay's dog, Baron, looking distressed and half starved.

Smith raised the alarm and a few days later a search of the property uncovered Barclay's half-buried and badly decomposed body, with its severed head lying nearby. He had been shot in the back. There was no trace of Bamford and it was assumed that the two had quarrelled and the unsavoury Bamford had shot Barclay and escaped on a horse that was also missing.

A Melbourne detective was sent to view the scene of the crime. When he and his police troopers reached Wonnangatta, they sat down tired, cold and hungry to a meal of bacon and eggs in the homestead kitchen.

They sprinkled the food liberally with powder from a tin marked "pepper" but before they had a chance to eat anything, the eggs started to turn a funny colour. The 'pepper' was strychnine.

Nine months later, when the winter snows had melted, Bamford's body was discovered under a partly burnt-out woodpile on the Howitt Plains, about 12 miles from Wonnangatta. He had been shot in the head.

The mystery of the Wonnangatta murders was never solved. Rumors abounded, from one suggestion that Barclay was killed by a jealous husband who then chased and shot Bamford - to the more likely theory that Barclay had discovered cattle thieves in the area and he

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John Bamford's body straddles a pack-horse after being discovered on Howitt Plains. Harry Smith is on the left. Picture Courtesy of DSE.

and Bamford had been shot to stop them reporting their activities.

There are few connections left with the dramas of the past at Wonnangatta. Cattle no longer graze in the valley and the old homestead was burned down by careless walkers in 1957. All that is left are the ruins of the house and a tiny cemetery containing the graves of Annie Bryce and two of her daughters, Ellen and Jessie. Ellen Smith is also buried here.

Wonnangatta station is now part of the Alpine National Park. Tracks intrude into the silence of the valley, bringing four-wheel-drivers, campers, walkers and riders. The scenery is always grand and the wildflowers wonderful, especially in spring and early summer. But evenings round a camp fire can be cool at any time of year and even the deepest sleep can be disturbed by dreams of the dark secret the valley has never given up.

GETTING THERE

Any trip to the Wonnangatta Valley should not be undertaken lightly as it is serious four-wheel-drive country. Tracks are subject to seasonal closure so check with Parks Victoria. There are three main access routes the easiest of which is the northern approach from the Hume Highway via Wangaratta and Myrtleford on the Ovens Highway. The other routes are via Dargo (Dargo High Plains Road) or Licola (Howitt Road via Heyfield).