The story of Wonnangatta Station

The Wonnangatta Valley was once Victoria’s most remote cattle station; a place where families settled, made a living and held great hope for the future.

In 1860, Oliver Smith was prospecting for gold when he discovered an isolated valley at the junction of the Conglomerate Creek and the Wonnangatta River. He settled on this land, perfectly fertile for livestock and produce, with his wife, Ellen, and her son and started a cattle station.

Just one year later, Ellen Smith died during childbirth and the newborn twins also died; one at twelve days old and the other two days after. Their graves can still be seen in the small cemetery at Wonnagatta a poignant reminder of those hard times. It was too much for Oliver Smith and he sold his share to William Bryce a friend from his gold prospecting days and returned to America.

Following the deaths of Bryce and his wife, Annie, two local men bought Wonnangatta Station and installed James Barclay as the resident station manager. A few years into the job, Barclay hired a cook, John Bamford, a man in his mid-fifties not his ideal choice of staff given the man’s age and unsavoury background, however all the younger men were away at war.

In December 1917, Barclay and Bamford rode to Talbotville to vote in the conscription referendum. They placed their votes, stayed the night in town and left on horseback the following morning, bound for Wonnangatta. They never reached the station alive.

Barclay’s body was found near the property, half-buried, with gunshot wounds in his back. As the police returned from their investigation they found Bamford’s horse running wild without a saddle and he became the prime suspect a likely scenario as it was believed he’d killed his wife years earlier. A state-wide search was soon underway and a reward placed upon the man police were sure had murdered the station manager.

It was almost a year after he went missing that John Bamford’s body was found by local bushmen under a wood pile at Howitt Hut. The hut, twenty-three kilometres from the homestead, was originally built by one-time Wonnangatta Station owner William Bryce to house stockmen when the cattle were brought to graze in the summer. Bamford had been shot in the head.

Hence, a number of new theories circulated. Perhaps Bamford had murdered Barclay, and a neighbour, upon discovering this truth, invoked revenge. Maybe Barclay had stumbled upon cattle thieves on his return to the station. Another rumour involved an affair with a married woman and an angry, murderous husband. But the mystery of the Wonnangatta murders was never solved. Some say Howitt Hut is haunted by Bamford.

In 1947, writer and historian Niall Brennan wrote a paper on his rediscovery of the Wonnangatta Valley, describing it as only accessible via horseback. Brennan wrote poetically of the magic of the place, disagreeing with others views that the area was useless not even worth mapping. What I have found is something that impresses me with the greatness of many things: the spirit of pioneering men and their families; with the greatness of human adaptability that could create from a mountain fastness the amenities of home and society,

and which could enjoy those amenities more fully and more exhilaratingly than the men of today can enjoy that which they purchase so much more cheaply.

To me, it seems the surrounding wall of mountains stands guard over the secrets of the open plains of the Wonnangatta Valley: a sort of Eden where the key to life itself is held if you have both the willpower to get there and the patience to listen to the land.
A decade after Brennan wrote about the remote Wonnangatta Valley, careless walkers destroyed the homestead with a campfire. Only the ruins remain the homestead foundations and the graves of those who died there.

Campers, meanwhile, dot the riverbank in their search for shade and protection from the land’s harsh elements, leaving the flats exposed and empty except, I suspect, for a few slithery sunbakers hiding in the long grass.

CH
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