

Victorian 4 Wheel Drive Show at Lardner



Centenary of the Wonnangatta Murders. Labour Day Weekend.

Wonnangatta Valley is a beautiful and unique place in the Alpine National Park. One hundred years ago it was a thriving cattle station managed by James Barkley who employed John Bamford to help him out. Some time in late 1917 or early 1918 James Barkley was brutally murdered and his body buried not too far from the homestead site. Speculation at the time was that John Bamford had an argument with Barkley and killed him. That theory seemingly collapsed when Bamford's body was found on Howitt Plains near the site of Howitt Hut.

The murders remain unsolved despite numerous investigations, several books and plenty of theories. To mark the centenary of the gruesome crimes the Friends of Wonnangatta Valley, with considerable assistance from Parks Victoria, hosted an event over the Labour Day weekend.

The event, supported by Four Wheel Drive Victoria, the Mountain Cattlemen's Association of Victoria and the High Country Huts Association, was a great success. I was fortunate, in my FWDV Regional Representative role, to be able to travel and camp with the six Parks Victoria staff who were there for the weekend.

There was plenty to do in the valley. There were regular talks about the history of the area, a cold case analysis of the murders, a Saturday night happy hour followed by an outdoor screening of "The Man From Snowy River", camp oven scone cooking demonstrations, static displays, including the Macalister 4WD Club who represented Four Wheel Drive Victoria and the highlight, a forum discussing the murders.

Leading the forum was Philip Davis, the ex parliamentarian. The two key speakers were Keith Leydon who is the co-author of a book on the crimes and Geoff Burrowes, the producer of the "Man From Snowy River" movie and expert on the High Country. With input from the large crowd, many of whom were descendants of key figures in the murder, the forum laid out the know facts, possible solutions and speculations. A fascinating couple of hours under the shade of trees beside the creek.

Apart from the organised events it was great fun just watching the hundreds of four wheel drives roll through the valley. Strangely I only saw three Land Rover products. It was very much a Toyota tray type of weekend. There were trail riders on sweaty horses to add to the colour of the weekend. There were even two police troopers wandering the valley looking for clues.

I was able to spend time over the weekend chatting with Ron Moon, a name many of you will be familiar with from his setting up of 4x4 Australia magazine and other media roles over many years. Some of you have probably used Ron and Viv Moon's excellent guide books and camp cooking books. Ron Moon was also a member of the Alpine Advisory Committee. Parks Victoria staff and the Friends of Wonnangatta Valley had the area looking the best I have ever seen it in my nearly forty years of visiting Wonnangatta. Visitor behavior was very good, especially considering the large numbers camped in the valley.

Mike Dower and I used the route; Eaglevale, Cynthia Range, Wombat Spur in and out of the valley. The tracks were very dry and dusty and had deteriorated significantly over the three days. We travelled in Mike's PV basic model Hilux dual cab ute fitted with ARB front and rear differential locks. It causes me grief to say it, but the vehicle went very well.

Philip Davis officially announced that there is a proposal to build a replica of the Wonnangatta homestead. The original was accidentally destroyed by fire in the 1950s. The plan is that the rebuilt homestead would be a visitor centre and refuge plus a base for activities like volunteer work, camp host programs, etc. the detailed proposal is supported by many stakeholder groups including Four Wheel Drive Victoria. The proposal documents are currently being studied at government department level. The murders were not solved over the weekend despite all the evidence being re-examined. As Geoff Burrowes said at the conclusion of the forum, some things should stay as mysteries.

Greg Rose.



Ron Moon chats with Greg Rose