

Wragge's Hut

by Wendy Cross

Scratch the surface in the right spot on Mt Kosciuszko's summit, and you might uncover a bottle containing a report, written in January 1892 by Adelaide businessman and philanthropist Robert Barr Smith, about his ascent of Australia's highest mountain.

Barr Smith was accompanied on the Kosciuszko trip by Adelaide University's revered foundation Professor of Anatomy, Archie Watson, who in 1867 had helped Alexander Black (later Victoria's Surveyor-General) build the summit cairn. Five years later, Barr Smith provided the initial funds – 150 pounds – to establish a weather station very close to the spot where he buried his message in a bottle.

The weather station, later known as Wragge's Observatory or simply Wragge's hut, was the brainchild of the eccentric Queensland Government Meteorologist, Clement 'Inclemency' Wragge.



Clement Wragge circa 1901



Wragge's Hut circa 1898

In December of 1897, before the hut was built, Wragge installed a number of scientific instruments and left three volunteer observers, his nephew Bernard Ingleby, Basil de Burgh Newth and retired shipmaster Charles Iliff, to take readings throughout the summer. They lived in an 'Arctic' tent until mid-February, when the camp was ripped apart by a ferocious storm, forcing them to retreat to Jindabyne.

The New South Wales Premier, George Reid, then agreed to provide 336 pounds for construction of a permanent building on the observatory site and a Cooma firm completed the work in May of 1898. Ingleby and Newth returned to their posts as weather observers but Iliff was replaced by Danish-born Harald Jensen.

Jensen provided a detailed description of the hut, and life on the roof of Australia, in an article first published in *The Lone Hand* of 1 June 1909 and later reprinted in Klaus Hueneke's book *Kiandra to Kosciusko*,

published in 1987.

According to Jensen, it had originally been intended to build the hut of granite quarried on the spot, but this idea was abandoned because the approach of winter meant that water used in the mortar would freeze, thereby ensuring the building's collapse in spring. Weatherboard was used instead, to erect a hut with two rooms each measuring 3.3 m by 2.7 m, a flat galvanised iron roof well bolted down, a large stone fireplace and three windows of inch-thick glass fitted with storm shutters. Granite boulders were stacked against the external walls.

The hut was equipped with two primus stoves, kerosene and ample firewood carted to the summit on bullock drays. The men wore sheepskin coats, fur hats and gloves and thigh-high gumboots and were well-supplied with high-carbohydrate food and drinks but no alcohol. Their sleeping bags were similar to those used by the famed

Norwegian explorer, Fridtjof Nansen, and Ingleby had additional warmth supplied by his St Bernard dog, Zoroaster.

By mid-June, the hut was completely buried by snow, with access via a snow tunnel that had to be shovelled clear non-stop during exceptionally bad weather. The men excavated two other tunnels leading to the woodheap and the frozen meat store but did not realise until spring arrived, that Zoroaster had also tunnelled into the butcher's shop.

The scientific instruments had to be read regularly throughout each 24-hour period but when the weather was fine, Ingleby, Newth and Jensen also found time to enjoy skiing. As Ingleby wrote, they "...raced wildly down the mountain side like dogs let loose from the chain.....we had many a terrible 'buster' before we became experts."

The three weather observers even went skiing on moonlit nights, and Ingleby described the obvious danger of this activity as lending "a special charm". But far more dangerous were the monthly trips to Jindabyne via Friday Flat to post the scientific data to 'Inclemency Wragge' in Brisbane and bring back mail and supplies. At various times, almost every observer over the five-year period of the observatory's operation had a near-death experience en route.

The hut was improved in 1899 by the addition of the sloping rooftop entry chute which gave it its unique appearance. Ingleby and Jensen had resigned to pursue other interests but Newth was joined by Leslie Burcher and later, Wragge's eldest son,



Wragge's Hut, summer 1899

Egerton. Another of the Wragge boys, Rupert, also spent a few months at the observatory.

A total of 14 volunteers served as observers on Kosciuszko's summit but, in early June of 1902, the NSW Government advised that it could no longer provide finance for maintenance beyond July 1. Wragge appealed in numerous Eastern States newspapers for private funds to continue the work but nowhere near enough was subscribed and in mid-July his staff vacated the premises. Most of the scientific instruments and some of the stores were eventually retrieved but much, including

what Wragge described in both *The Brisbane Courier* and *The Telegraph* as "a unique little library" was left to rot.

Wragge's hut was then maintained by the NSW Intelligence Department (which became the NSW Tourist Bureau in 1915) as a summer shelter. After the Hotel Kosciusko opened in 1909, summer picnic parties on Kosciuszko became popular, with fashionably attired men and women conveyed to the summit by coach to sip tea and nibble cakes in the sunshine, oblivious to the bush rats occupying the old building. In 1910, Kosciusko Alpine Club



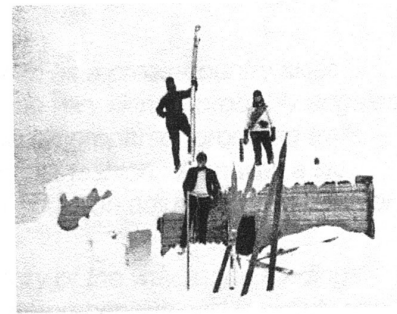
Tourist party to Wragge's Hut

members Herbert Schlink, Oscar Paul, John Cosgrove and Arthur Pitt posed on the observatory roof for a photo taken as proof of their successful winter ascent of Kosciuszko.

Wragge's hut burnt down some time between June 1913, when it was seen intact by ski tourers on nearby Mt Etheridge, and April 1914, when a writer using the nom-de-plume Vesta described a trip to the summit on horseback for an article published in *The Queenslander* on 11 April. In

it, he said "Wragge's Hut, the remains of which can be seen, was destroyed by lightning on Christmas Day" but did not explain how he was able to fix the date of the fire so precisely. However, other visitors to Kosciuszko later that year noted that the building no longer existed.

A century on, no trace of Wragge's hut remains. But does Robert Barr Smith's message in a bottle still lie somewhere on Kosciuszko's summit? The truth is, nobody knows.



*The Schlink party at Wragge's Hut, 1910.
State Library of NSW.*

Snowfields colder than Antarctica

By BRETT de VINE

AUSTRALIA recorded its lowest temperature yesterday -23C - a mark well below the average in Antarctica for this time of year.

The mercury fell to the new low at Charlotte Pass in the Snowy Mountains about 2am and prompted even seasoned snow dwellers to complain about the cold.

Residents and workers at Charlotte Pass told of their eyelashes sticking, clothes turning to ice and instruments malfunctioning in the extreme temperatures.

Bureau of Meteorology spokesman Steve Simons said the conditions were due to clear skies, light winds and a high pressure system over south-eastern Australia.

Mr Simons said because Charlotte Pass was situated in a valley, cold air rolled down the mountains and sat in the small village, creating colder temperatures than on some of the highest peaks.

The previous low, also recorded at Charlotte Pass, was to -22.2C on July 14, 1945.

Mark Robinson, who operates the snow-making machine at the pass, was transformed into a walking snowman as he braved the conditions.

"Some water from the machine sprayed into my face and my eyelashes instantly froze together. I couldn't open them," he said.

"The water also froze down the front of my suit and it turned to ice.

"I certainly have never felt that cold since I have been here."

Joanne Mills, who works at Charlotte Pass Village, said an instrument used on one of the snowmakers to record temperatures went haywire.

"The graph went right off the page once the temperature went below -10C. It just plunged that quickly," she said.

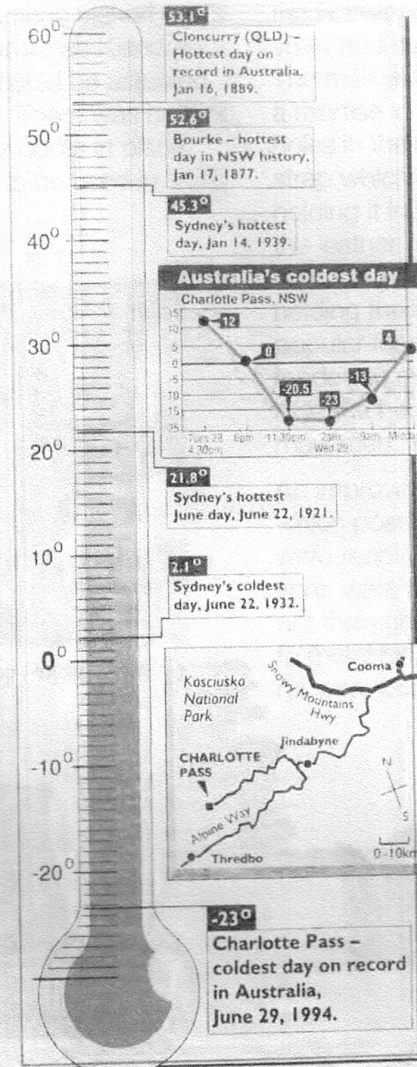
"According to our other instruments it reached -23C about 2am and did not get back near zero until about midday."

Meanwhile, at the Federal Government's Casey station in Antarctica, meteorologist Neil Adams said his colony was experiencing "quite warm" conditions - the temperature was around -6C yesterday.

"But -23C is pretty cold for even down here. The average temperature for this station in June is about -10C."

Mr Simons said: "Obviously the Snowy Mountains, because of the altitudes, is the coldest area in Australia.

"A combination of the high pressure over the area, very light winds and clear skies are perfect for these sort of temperatures.



Charlotte Pass
June 29, 1994
coldest day
on record
in Australia.
-23 deg C

Cutting from the
Sydney Morning Herald,
courtesy Bob Dix.