



A SYDNEY BUSH WALKERS CAMP. PHOTO: REG ALDER 1941.

## Wild men and wilder water

Reg Alder gives an account of a three-week walk in January 1941 from Nerriga to Tallong and Joadja to Wentworth Falls

Our exploration turned into a real adventure with the breaking of the drought, turning the normally placid rivers into flooding torrents.

In the war years it was difficult to take your holidays as and when it suited you best. With a lull in the work between converting ships into troop transports I was told, "You better have some leave, Alder" and so I cast around for some companions to accompany me on a walk I had planned for some time.

So it was not because of any charm on my part that the only walkers immediately available were two schoolteachers. The news spread and soon I was to have five companions, all female. The record of 'four women' in *Fitzroy Falls*

and *Beyond* is slightly incorrect and I think they deserve names: Doris Young, Edna Stretton, Mary Stoddart, Joan Athill and Winifred Duncombe.

Why now five you might ask? The original number at Nerriga was four but because of illness Joan went home after the first night. She rejoined us later at Mittagong, accompanied by Win, for the second leg of the walk. So there were three companions in the first week and five on the second and third weeks.

We travelled by mail coach (few could afford to own a car) from Nowra to Nerriga to make camp on a grassy flat just downstream from the Endrick bridge.

As the tents went up it started to rain

and before we had finished unpacking we were inundated with about 200 millimetres of water coming from a previously dry gully, swirling over the flat and through our floorless tents.

---

Feverishly, near naked, we began chasing articles of food and clothing across the flat to hang them on any convenient branch.

---

Rescuing eggs was particularly difficult. The rain stopped but the Endrick continued to rise overnight, and next

### BIRDS OF A FEATHER CAUGHT BY WEATHER

morning it was obvious that our plan to walk downstream past a gorge was out of the question.

Plans were changed to walk to the Shoalhaven junction over the ridges and by lunchtime we were clambering down a very steep ridge to rejoin the Endrick about a kilometre from the junction.

To my great surprise the Endrick was clear and placid — had I made a mistake? This seemed impossible so we settled down to lunch pondering where last night's water had gone. Were we on another river? It was soon answered as suddenly, with a roar, a wave of filthy water about a metre high came down the river. Last night's flood!

Realising our plight, since we were then on the wrong side of the Endrick, we rapidly went down to the junction, as success for the walk depended on being on the western bank of the Shoalhaven. The Shoalhaven had already risen and with the water at about a metre deep we just managed to wade across the head of a swirling rapid.

Rain came again and with it the Shoalhaven continued to rise. We camped high on a sandy bank and, noting the potential of the river to flood over it, I spent an uneasy night observing whether a white rock on the other bank was being covered. It was obvious that our plan to walk and swim down the Shoalhaven was out and the flood showed no signs of abatement.

So I decided to climb out since we had the Block Up to negotiate and none of us knew what other hazards there might be in between. The only map we had was the southeast tourist map, so we had little to go on.

The northern ridge at a large creek junction had a faint track and after reaching the plateau on a wider path we met a lone horse man — our 'wild man of Bungonia'.

He was dishevelled and dirty and created some misgivings in my mind as he led us to shelter, especially as he seemed to have taken a liking to one of the girls and called her 'a pocket Venus'. He left us and we settled down to sleep on the floor to the sound of rain on the iron roof.

His appearance and manner was such that with my imagination of all manner of eventualities, I half expected him to come back after dark. I said nothing to my companions but I propped the doors.

Next morning he came back, all cleaned up, a clean hat, a near-white shirt and a vest, albeit somewhat food-stained. The principal culinary delight that he brought us was a brown chunk

of paste which he said was his soup stock — made by boiling down a sheep in a kerosene tin. It was accepted with apparent gratitude but soon consigned to a convenient bush as his standard of hygiene seemed low.

We carried on to Bungonia Gorge to find it also in flood with about 600 millimetres of water in the normally dry gorge. On the way out along the Shoalhaven we passed the long stretch of water, unbroken by rapids, now known as Louise Reach.

In January 1939, on my first visit to the Shoalhaven, I remarked that this particular stretch of water looked like Lake Louise in Canada. I had been conditioned by the Canadian Pacific Railway travel poster of the pine tree-lined lake. The long line of casuarinas on the banks created the illusion. The name stuck, changed a little by the Central Mapping Authority in giving it a more appropriate designation for a stretch of a river.

The rain continued for the remainder of the time until we reached Tallong. On the second leg the Wollondilly was in flood with difficult, wide rapid cross-

ings. Later, going up Murrain Creek, we came across a deserted farm which had peaches for picking and a weed known as fat hen growing around the house. Win said it was as good as spinach.

Since we had now been on spartan foods for a week and a half, we made a good meal of the fat hen with our dried peas, potato and bully beef. This was followed up with peaches.

---

The next day all of us, except Win, were incapacitated with gripping pains.

---

After a short distance we called it a day. Bodies lay where they fell. Win said it could not have been the fat hen, it must have been the peaches — we all had weak stomachs.

We recovered overnight and went on to find the Kowmung River pristine with fine weather and good walking and camping for the remainder of the three week walk to Wentworth Falls.

BILL WELLS, THE 'WILD MAN OF BUNGONIA'. PHOTO: REG ALDER 1941.

