Chapter 8: Early Rangers and Visitors

In January 1909 the Park’s first ranger, Charles J. McLennan, was appointed. He was installed in a canvas tent rigged up in the shelter of a thicket of tea-tree and paperbark beside the Darby River.

The appearance of the river flats as they now are bears little resemblance to the scene as McLennan knew it. The flats were then covered with small trees and shrubs – mostly tea-tree (Leptospermum laevigatum) and Swamp Paperbark (Melaleuca ericifolia) – and a narrow track wound its way through the trees from a rustic bridge to small open spaces where cattlemen and others had been accustomed to setting up camp. To the east it was more open and paddock-like where the cattle had gathered before dispersing to their grazing grounds. It would have been kept that way by regular burning.

Near the bridge was a clearing where stood a small building known as the telephone test hut. The hut and the small clearing where it stood was the property of the Postal Department. The building held the equipment and maintenance gear needed for the Fish Creek–Lighthouse telephone line and it was visited regularly by the telephone linemen. When McLennan took up his duties he was given access to the telephone.

He was a Scotsman, short and solidly built, with something of the traditional penchant for whisky. He had spent many years in the Mallee, around Pinaroo and in the northwest of Victoria, where he earned a living as a dingo trapper.

He was a keen observer of nature with a special interest in birds – a talent he put to good use by writing natural history notes and articles for newspapers and magazines.

In the days of the Argus and Australasian nature columnist Donald MacDonald, he was an occasional contributor under the pen name ‘Mallee Bird’. One of his articles in The Australasian of 20th April 1909 describes his introduction to Wilsons Promontory and its bird life.

It is said that he was paid as much as four or five pounds for an article and, as his one-time assistant, Alex. Selby, comments, “that was money in those days”.

McLennan was about sixty years old at the time of his appointment but hale and hearty enough not to be dismayed by the lack of amenities available to him in his new job.

The 16x12 foot tent (with fly tacked to the tent pole!) with a stone fireplace and wooden chimney at one end and a canvas flap at the other made reasonably comfortable quarters for an outdoor man. A camp oven, billies, wash basin and hessian bunk with a few items of simple furniture satisfied his domestic needs.

In contrast to his former Mallee domains there was no difficulty about a water supply. He had the Darby River.

The Committee provided him with a quiet chestnut mare. It needed to be quiet for Mac. was no horseman. He was a well-seasoned walker but walking in the Mallee is a different proposition to walking on the Promontory, where even confirmed walkers could (and still can) walk themselves into trouble.

The horse, acquired from the Falls brothers who had held the grazing lease on the Promontory, knew all the bogs, morasses and other hazards to be avoided, which was just as well because, like other bird observers, its owner was likely to have his eyes directed towards tree tops rather than at the ground. In some parts of the Park the ground required careful scrutiny if it was to be crossed without mishap. The Darby River could be forded easily enough at its mouth where it trickled across the sand into Darby Bay but higher up, near the ranger’s camp, it was deep. Here it was bridged by a couple of logs covered with wooden decking wide enough for cattle to cross in single file.

Tidal River, further south, had no bridge at all. A cattle track crossed its course at a particularly boggy spot on the slopes near the site of the present bridge. The crossing was safely negotiable only because the cattlemen had corduroyed it with heavy logs. Despite the logs cattle had been known to become engulfed in the morass after being pushed off the track by their companions. Much the same sort of bogs exist upstream along the course of the Darby River and over on Singapore Peninsula between Three Mile Beach and Mount Hunter. Experienced horses and cattle ventured into these bogs just ‘so far but no further’ so McLennan wisely accepted the advice of the local cattlemen and used a horse.

At first his duties were rather nominal. His time was largely occupied in getting to know the Promontory and its denizens, noting population densities and selecting routes to places of interest. A number of tourist tracks were planned to places such as Sealers Cove, Refuge Cove, Oberon Bay and one or two of the more spectacular gullies which had been discovered by those who had carried out the biological and botanical surveys in previous years. To get the work going the ranger was provided with an assistant in the shape of a 17-year-old youth named Dick Selby.

When Selby took up his appointment in July 1909 (at 10 shillings a week with the privilege of finding his own tucker) he arrived by the route which at that time was the recognised approach to the Park – by boat from Bowen (now known as Port Franklin) to the Yanakie Landing.

The traveller arrived at Bennison by train and was then conveyed by horse tram to Port Franklin. This
conveyance was a kind of trolley car which ran on a spur line built to carry supplies and equipment brought by sea for the construction of the Great Southern Railway – the main South Gippsland line.

When that purpose had been served the steam engines and trucks were withdrawn but the line was allowed to remain for the use of the local fishermen who could convey their catches direct from the boat to the rail siding at Bennison. Much the same kind of arrangement existed at Port Welshpool.

The trolley, while not designed for passenger transport, was frequently used for that purpose even though in the fishing season it did stink to high heaven by reason of the accumulation of fishy residues which clung to it.

Having arrived at Bowen, travellers could engage one or other of the fishermen to take them across to the Promontory, provided the tide was on the flow. If prior arrangements had been made Billy Millar would be there at the Yanakie Landing with his wagonette to convey the visitors and their luggage to his cottage, and from there to the Darby River.

The arrangements were made through the good offices of the occupants of the Yanakie leasehold – generally the Falls brothers, Jim and Will. They, along with the Buckleys and Cotters, had taken up leases there in 1892 when the old Yanakie Pastoral Run was resumed by the Crown and subdivided. They had renewed the lease in 1898, this time for 25 years.

The brothers’ holdings and the National Park had a common boundary, and since there was no boundary fence the cattle were free to wander into the Park – into the erstwhile grazing lease which, for so long, had been their familiar territory.

Although this intrusion was a source of irritation to the Committee of Management and one which gave a lot of unnecessary work to the ranger, who had continually to round the cattle up and drive them back to their owners’ property, the parties maintained amiable relations.

Falls’ head stockman, Billy Millar, lived with his wife and son at the ‘Old Homestead’, which stood near the site of the present aerodrome, and by his employers’ favour he was always available to help visitors to find their way to the Darby River.

Billy’s wife was a sister of W.J. (Bill) Cripps, a Bowen fisherman, and it was Cripps who brought the lad across to the Yanakie Landing where he was met by Billy Millar.

After spending the night as the guest of the Millars he was taken to the Darby and duly delivered to ranger McLennan. He took up his quarters in a tent similar to that used by the senior Ranger.

His first job was to cut a bridle track from Tidal River to Sealers Cove and this was done with the help of Cripps. It was a task arduous enough to remain a vivid memory to Selby even after the lapse of fifty years.

After crossing the corduroy track over the Tidal River morass the route ascended to some dense scrub, following an apparently ancient trail (it was in fact a...
relic of the timber milling days of some forty years earlier). The toilers had to use slashers to penetrate the barricade of wire-grass and, at one spot on the steep slope, a big tree trunk lay across the trail. Much time and energy were spent in cutting out a block of it to permit further progress. Sunday, the day of rest, dawned and the two set off up hill to a more open timbered area to get their bearings but the blazed trail led them into a dense gully into a veritable tangle of very high bracken and wire-grass.

They followed the gully downhill, slashing a path as they went, and came to a spot where the blade of the fernhook struck a metal object. On scraping away the litter the pair discovered that they were on, and in fact had been following, a timber-tram track which went up and over the hill. They followed it and presently reached a point where the scrub opened. ‘There’ said Selby ‘lay before us one of the loveliest spots I have ever seen – Sealers Cove – wild and unspoiled. Moored at an old jetty, much of which was perfectly sound, was the *Despatch*, red lead and all. The steamer was sheltering from a gale. (The *Despatch* was one of the steamers which operated on the Gippsland Lakes at that time. It was wrecked at Lakes Entrance in September 1911. *Omeo* and *Gippsland* were two other well-remembered vessels which sailed those waters.)

The two men made their way to the beach for a yarn with the mate, Alfred Wise, and, refreshed with a pannikin of tea, they retraced their steps to the camp in the scrub.

A day or so later the track to the Cove was completed.

As the visitor of today well knows, it branches from the lighthouse track at what is now the car turntable below and to the east of the summit of Mount Oberon. There a signpost encourages one to believe that the Cove is just eleven kilometres away, easily reached by a three hour walk, but this is often disputed by those who have not been properly conditioned to hiking on the Promontory.

Since 1909 it has been successively overgrown and re-cut a number of times. Now at last it is likely to remain clear of undergrowth, logs and litter to provide a pleasant walk along a trail that will accommodate three or four abreast instead of in single file as of yore. No longer is it an adventure to follow the trail to Sealers Cove.

Back in 1909 things were very much quieter and the two track cutters spent some time exploring the adjacent bush.

They discovered two well preserved huts, the
remains of the saw mill which had operated there not much more than a couple of years earlier, and the route of one of the tracks which penetrated far back into the ranges, crossing Sealers Creek and several other small streams with substantial bridges which had been built to accommodate the log trolleys. The bridges as well as most of the mill had been dismantled when the millers departed but enough remained of the bridges and huts to permit of reconstruction without much trouble and expense had the Committee so desired.

It was at Sealers Cove that Selby saw a Pilot Bird’s nest for the first time and, for the first time, observed the Beautiful Firetail in the dense scrub near the creek. It was his recollection of Sealers Creek gully that persuaded him to recommend it to Mathison, who succeeded McLennan as ranger, as the place where lyrebirds should be liberated.

Selby and McLennan were an incompatible pair. By the following December Selby had taken a job in more congenial company – with one of the Falls brothers with whom he worked as a stockman for some time. It was while thus employed that he was commissioned by Falls to trap lyrebirds for delivery to the Park. With Jack Bourke, another of Falls’s men, he managed to collect a number, including two fully fledged males. They were duly released in Sealers gully and, until the great bushfire which swept down from Singapore Peninsula a few years later, were reliably reported to be well established.

The Committee of Management was determined that the National Park should be a true sanctuary and a place for the preservation of as many species as possible of Australian wildlife – rare or otherwise. They rightly judged that what was rare today might well be extinct tomorrow and what was common had but very slender chances of remaining so unless habitat for them was retained inviolate. Their only mistake lay in the belief that Wilsons Promontory was the ideal habitat.

It certainly was well suited for an extraordinarily large variety of plants but, curiously enough, the vertebrate animal life it carried has never been remarkably varied.

Man has not been kind to the place and its value for such animals as it harboured has steadily declined to a stage where only radical measures can hope to restore it successfully to the condition which it was even fifty years ago.

Fire has been the major and most terrible agent of habitat destruction. The Promontory’s use as a cattle ranch runs a good second. A third important factor is now making itself apparent – the growing density of the human invasion and the ‘developments’ needed for the comfort and accommodation of its thousands of visitors.

McLennan was instructed to commence a program of fauna introduction. With the help of Constable Corrie of Foster a few kangaroo hunts were undertaken in the Woodside district – with rather disappointing results. A couple of emus were captured and released near the Darby River.

However, the residents of the district entered into the spirit of the thing. Constable Corrie donated two kangaroos. Mr Crawford brought along a wombat, and Jim Falls, who had a lot of cattle grazing illegally in the Park, offered to trap a few lyrebirds and satin bower birds and, later, brought in four more wombats which Mr Thomson of Kinglake was doubtless glad to get rid of from his own property. The wombats quickly dug in at the foot of Darby Hill where they proceeded to make a nuisance of themselves for some time to come. Eventually they were banished to a more remote and less vulnerable part of the Park – over towards Whisky Creek. The task of trapping them fell to Mathison, who succeeded McLennan as ranger in mid-December 1910.

McLennan’s career as ranger came to an abrupt end as a consequence of what was described as ‘gross negligence’ in a matter involving the telephone.

In 1892 the Post and Telegraph Department acquired an area on the south bank of the Darby River, where it erected a hut to house the telephone and switch gear. When the National Park was established fourteen years later the paddock was excluded from the Park but, by arrangement with the Department, the ranger was authorised to use the telephone – at the usual charges and thus was given access to the hut.

In October 1910 plans were being made for a great event.

The State Governor, Sir T. D. Gibson Carmichael, in leisure moments a keen entomologist, was going to pay a visit to the National Park, and the visit was to be made the occasion for a nature study excursion. The preparatory work and (as we might call it) the countdown to the moment of his arrival could be greatly facilitated by use of the telephone and Secretary Kershaw expected to be able to make good use of it, but evidently things went awry. McLennan’s independent character and Kershaw’s autocratic manner were irreconcilable.

The ranger, tired of being tied to the telephone hut at the stipulated times, overcame the annoyance by simply disconnecting the telephone and departed for a spree at Foster or Fish Creek.

Legend has it that he was at Fish Creek refreshing himself at Andy Unger’s pub while awaiting the arrival of the Governor and party. No doubt his friends at Foster or Fish Creek had relayed to him Kershaw’s instructions about the further arrangements for transporting His Excellency and party to the Park, and
so it was that on Saturday 24th October he was there waiting. Unhappily the Great Southern Express arrived late, and Unger’s hospitality so engrossed the ranger as to cause him to lose interest in the whole affair.

The Committee was considerably discomfited, although one may doubt whether the Governor was much upset. From that time the ranger was *persona non grata*. Shortly afterwards he retired from the scene, and a few weeks later his place was taken by Gordon Mathison of Poowong.

Despite the poor start the excursion was a great success, and His Excellency and suite, accompanied by municipal dignitaries, their wives and a team of naturalists, which included several members of the Committee of Management, was able to visit the Darby River, the vicinity of Mount Vereker, Chinaman’s Long Beach and Biddy’s Camp. Since that time several Vice Regal personages have enjoyed informal visits to the Park, but, curiously enough, those who have organised Royal tours have never considered the place as worthy of inclusion in an itinerary.

If we are indeed proud of Wilsons Promontory National Park (or any other of our national parks) surely we should make a point of letting our honoured guests see something of the source of our pride – even if it does lack a luxury hotel with a Royal Suite.

Vice Regal personages seem to have survived and even enjoyed the primitive atmosphere of the place.

During the six months while McLennan and Selby were together they were the only permanent residents in the National Park. Although the place was lonely enough for most of the time they could, when in residence, generally depend on some sort of company dropping in or else the solitude might be broken by a trip to the ‘New Homestead’ at Yanakie, then occupied by the Muldoons. Here one or the other would collect the weekly mail and return to the Darby well fed and laden with fresh meat and home-baked bread. On the way in or out the traveller could be sure of a welcome, a cup of tea and a yarn at Harry McLean’s hut.

McLean lived a kind of hermit’s life in one of two cabins over on Shallow Inlet, situated in a place which used to be part of Fraser’s Shallow Inlet Run – the pastoral station which in earlier days adjoined the Yanakie Run.

The other cabin belonged to two brothers, Tom and George Winchester, who used it as their fishing shack during the fishing season. Both of them became well known to regular visitors to the Park during the years when the recognised land route to the Darby from Fish Creek or Foster included a six-mile stretch of sandy beach along the eastern shores of Waratah Bay. Visitors intent on making their way to the Park by that track came on to the beach not far from the cabins, and in doing so, if they were wise, called on McLean or the Winchesters for advice about the times of ebb and flow of the tide.

McLean was an occasional visitor to the Darby. He and McLennan had a good deal in common. Both were good bushmen. They shared an interest in natural history, especially in bird life, and both preferred the quiet of solitude. They were evidently well educated and enjoyed an argument, especially if it arose out of some ornithological discussion. According to Selby a stuffed wedge-tail eagle which graced the entrance to McLennan’s tent provided material for endless argument.

McLean was said to be a chemist by profession and the shelves of his tidily kept cabin were lined with the Proceedings of the Royal Society, scientific reference books, classics and volumes which today are regarded as collectors’ items but which to him were there for study and recreation.

When the Field Naturalists’ Club had its first official excursion to the National Park in the summer holidays of 1912-13 McLean was engaged as camp assistant, so it may be inferred that he was not an
altogether dedicated hermit. In fact, the Committee of Management engaged him from time to time for various labouring jobs in the Park.

There used to be a free-flowing freshwater spring at the base of Darby Hill and he was employed to fence it as a protection from animals. Because of the number of cattle wallowing about on the Darby flats the fence was very necessary. The spring provided a reliable water supply in the summer when rainwater tanks became depleted.

The Committee lost no time in planning improvements, the first of which was a three-roomed galvanised iron cottage for the ranger and fifty-foot jetty over at the ‘Beehives’ or, as it came to be known, ‘the South-west Corner’ or, simply, ‘the Vereker landing’. The boundary fence was another item requiring immediate attention.

Stanmore of Jeparit contracted to do all the jobs and, towards the end of 1910, the cottage was ready for occupation. The £50 jetty was completed a little later. It had to be rebuilt within a few years.

The building of the jetty reduced one of the minor hazards of entry to the National Park.

Those who preferred the route from the ‘Beehives’ landing to the isthmus track from the Yanakie landing would arrange for a boatman to run them across to the south-west corner. The cautious boatman would time his arrival at the landing place to coincide with high tide. With a combination of judgment and luck the boat could come right inshore while there was sufficient water to keep it afloat. The passengers could then jump ashore with comparative ease. If luck was out or judgment at fault they would have to wade through a stretch of shallow water which covered an appreciable depth of sticky black ooze overlain by a thin veneer of sand. At low tide there might be no water at all. The ooze would then be seen to be populated with myriads of mangrove crabs.

The new jetty, while it remained serviceable, saved the discomfort of squelching through mud.

Over at the Darby the new cottage became the home of Mathison and his family from the time he commenced duty until he resigned at the end of April 1914. It is doubtful whether McLennan ever occupied the cottage.

The new ranger was a tall, lanky and rather bow-legged man with a drooping moustache – the type of man people sometimes refer to as having been ‘born on a horse’. Whether he enjoyed the life is hard to say. Evidently he was determined not to endure quite the same austerity as his predecessor because arrangements were soon made for him to keep a couple of milch cows and, within six months of commencing duty, he had persuaded the Committee to supply him with a number of fruit trees – apples, pears and peaches. Kershaw arranged to get them for nothing from the Emerald nurseryman Nobelius, through the good offices of his friend Charles French the Government entomologist.

Although the trees possibly provided successive rangers with fresh fruit there is now nothing at all on the Darby River flats to give the slightest hint that there ever was a small orchard there.

Of course, the cottage was inadequate for a family man. The building had cost the Committee £15 but the alterations and additions sought by Mathison and carried out in the winter of 1912 cost an additional £128. The ranger now had a comfortable cottage of reasonable size, water laid on from the spring, and, by arrangement with the Posts and Telegraph Department, a telephone. It had been transferred from the old hut. Mrs Mathison was appointed honorary officer in charge of the telephone office.

Mathison carried on from where McLennan left off in the fauna introduction program. Every now and again a consignment of animals had to be collected from Fish Creek and distributed to a selected part of the Park. They came from various parts of the State – usually as donations. Quinney of Mortlake sent four possums and bandicoots; another batch of four possums from some other benefactor was taken to Lilly Pilly Gully. Freeman of Bennison brought in a few more lyrebirds; someone else sent down a couple of emus from Creswick and another from Maryborough. Between them Mathison and Corrie captured several young kangaroos at Woodside and some Tasmanian Black Possums were released in the Vereker Range. Collins of Woodside offered to get the Committee as many emus as it was prepared to buy at 10/- each. The committee settled for £6 worth. In between times Mathison shared with the Committee the worries caused by wandering stock.

When the Promontory became a national park the four grazing leases were not renewed by the Lands Department, but this did not matter much to the Falls brothers who held the Corner Inlet lease. There was no fence to separate the former lease from their current leasehold which adjoined the boundary of the Park and, for some time, upwards of 800 head of their cattle enjoyed free agistment in the Park, much to the annoyance of the Committee. In 1908 the Government had promised to set aside $800 for the purpose of erecting a boundary fence but before the work could begin the money had been diverted to some other job on Mount Buffalo. In the absence of money the fence project had to be deferred. Meanwhile the Committee thought the best that could be done would be to renew the Falls’ lease and let them graze their cattle with a
clear conscience on condition that they paid £50 for past favours and £150 for the right to graze 800 head for the next three years. The brothers agreed and good relations were restored.

When McLennan departed one of them was engaged as caretaker of the Park pending the appointment of a new ranger. They were good friends to the Committee and its secretary in a number of ways in the years that followed.

When the money from the fence did become available the job went ahead with reasonable speed. By the autumn of 1911 it was well under way and, by June, the first section was completed according to specification. Unfortunately the specification was astray on one or two important points.

The wire netting was stapled to the wrong side of the posts. Cattle outside the Park had only to lurch against the wire to force it from its hold. A few heavy lurches would soon bring the wire down. It was a seven foot fence with a two-foot overhang at the top to prevent foxes and dogs jumping up and over, but the overhang was built pointing the wrong way so as to make the effort of jumping into the Park a lot easier. The Public Works Department had the errors corrected.

This so-called “vermin-proof fence” did not follow precisely the actual boundary line between the Park and the Crown leaseholds occupied by the Falls brothers. By agreement it took in eighty or ninety acres of the southeastern (?) end of Block 76 so as to bypass a swamp. In return the lessees were given an equivalent area of the Park on the northern (?) side of Block 74 which, at the time, they were leasing from the Committee. The brothers accepted this arrangement because the Lands Department had let it be known that it proposed to exclude the swamp from the lease when it came up for renewal in 1923 and they surmised that they didn’t have much to lose anyway.

A second and last section remained to be built and tenders for the job were called in the spring of 1911 and in 1912 its completion was announced. Now grazing could be properly controlled and the Committee could rely on having a steady income by letting in just as many cattle as it considered the place could carry for whatever period it thought fit at sixpence a head (threepence for poddies). Cattle agistment and grazing became a quite established business which kept successive rangers pretty fully occupied. In the first three years it netted £300 for the Committee, but it was only a beginning.

As well as looking after fences, cattle, introduced animals and general maintenance work at the Darby River, Mathison was expected to patrol the Park regularly and report on progress of the developments which began to move swiftly.

One of the ‘developments’ was the Forestry Department’s plantation over on Barry’s Creek.

To properly appreciate the reason for the existence of the plantation it should be understood that before its dedication as a national park Wilsons Promontory was simply Crown land, sometimes under threat of piecemeal alienation and mostly under lease for grazing. By law, forests on Crown land were the responsibility of the Forests Department. That law still obtains, the only significant difference being that the forests are now [1960s] administered by a Commission – the Forests Commission of Victoria which was set up in 1918.

When the Promontory became a national park in 1908 neither the Committee nor the Forests’ Department were quite sure whether the latter’s statutory duties still persisted and, in February 1909, the Committee played safe by agreeing to the Department’s proposal that it should establish an experimental plantation of exotic trees in the Park. A site on Barry’s Creek was chosen. It was to occupy 2,640 acres (about two and three-quarters square miles) and included sixty chain on each side of the stream and stretched from highwater mark to Barry’s Hill. The Committee acquiesced on the understanding that the Department would plant an equal number of native trees, that it would fence the plantation and do all the work necessary for its upkeep. Its employees would be expected to observe the Park regulations which had been promulgated only a few months earlier.

When Mathison came on the scene he found a team of men busy clearing the area and, in their leisure time, shooting the native animals. The Conservator of Forests promised to see that their guns were confiscated.

The place must have been very lively. Boatloads of seedling pines and a few other exotic trees were brought in and planted. Boatloads of curious fishermen and sightseers also came over to watch progress.

The Department seemed not to welcome the kind of publicity it was getting and an attempt was made to stop visitors entering the plantation, but Kershaw curtly pointed out that the control of the whole Park was vested in the Committee of Management and the Committee’s policy was to encourage visitors.

When the plantation scheme got under way in May 1909 the Department had tree men working there and it proposed to build a cottage which the park ranger would be permitted to use when on patrol. There would be no objection to the Committee erecting a permanent dwelling on the site if it desired to do so.

In 1912, on the insistence of the Committee, the Department fenced the plantation and provided it with a locked gate. The ranger was given a key. It is doubtful if the fence would have been built had it not been for
the damage alleged to have been done to the seedling tees by marauding wallabies and Falls’s cattle.

All that was now required was the ‘permanent building’ and the Committee set aside £279 for a four-roomed galvanised iron cottage plus a 30’ x 10’ iron shed to be built at the northeast corner of the plantation.

For some time a site for a ranger’s cottage in the vicinity of Mount Singapore had been under consideration—either at Entrance Point near Biddy’s Camp or on the other side of the Peninsula at Freshwater Cove.

The Toora Progress Association, which took a lively interest in the new national park, wanted the tourist centre to develop on the Peninsula where it would be best placed for business in and around Toora. The Association envisaged a government-owned hotel or hostel—on the Esplanade at Seaford perhaps! There it would be conveniently situated for the local people to provide transport of both visitors and supplies.

At another time the Association suggested a jetty at Biddy’s Camp, and was toying with the idea of having the Chalet or hotel at that spot. The general opinion, however, appeared to favour Freshwater Cove because, in May, 1912, the Association was advised of plans to build a jetty there.

The jetty never materialised. Instead, the money which could have been used for it was spent on rebuilding the jetty at the Vereker Landing. The £50 job, completed just two years earlier, had not endured very well. The new structure lasted a lot longer. It was in regular use for more than a decade but in 1922 it had begun to suffer from neglect and it gradually disintegrated.

It has now almost entirely vanished. At low tide a few stumps are still to be seen on the tidal mud flats to awaken memories of the few still living who walked its deck.

The existence of the Forestry Department’s ‘Arboretum’ provided a good reason for having the ranger’s cottage at Barry’s Hill. Another good reason was that it was about half way between the Vereker Landing and Freshwater Cove and, therefore, conveniently placed no matter in what locality the future tourist centre might develop.

The cottage was ready for occupation in November 1912. Possibly the Department reimbursed the committee for its outlay, although that is an inference drawn from the advice which the Committee received from Mr Boston, officer in charge of the State Plantation at Wail near Dimboola.

Boston was evidently the supervisor of the Barry’s Creek plantation and he notified Kershaw that the cottage was not for the use of visitors to the Park. Of course he may have been referring to the cottage the Department contemplated building, not to the one the Committee caused to be built. But regardless of who paid for it, the well-built little house was situated in an almost idyllic spot not far away from Barry’s Creek and close to the shore of Corner Basin. It was surrounded by groves of grand old Banksias and tall Manna Gums inhabited by a large colony of koalas. To this haven came W.J. Cripps of Bowen.

Cripps was appointed ‘Ranger in charge of the Inlet’ as from the 1st December 1912.

The 42-year-old fisherman was no stranger to the park, nor to its managers. He had helped Selby to cut the track from Tidal River to Sealers Cove three years earlier. During the days of his career as a fisherman he had nosed his boat into practically every accessible part of the Promontory’s eastern and southern coastline. Cripps took on the job with the hope that the change in environment might restore the health of his ailing wife, but she died in the winter of 1914—some eighteen months later.

With the cottage inside the boundaries of the plantation the Committee was obliged to take a rather greater interest in what was going on there than might otherwise have been the case. It evinced its interest by requesting the Department to burn a firebreak around the plantation. Since the Committee assumed control of the Park it had experienced several severe bushfires. In October 1910—a week or so before the visit of the State Governor—an extensive fire swept the country inland from Five Mile Beach.

About eighteen months later another occurred in the Miranda Bay area, and in January 1912 there were two more big fires—one near Little Oberon Bay and another on the east coast of Singapore Peninsula, over towards Biddy’s Camp. There was no telling. The next one might be at Barry’s Creek.

The last-mentioned two fires were ascribed to the carelessness of Falls’s cattlemen and brought forth vigorous protests from the several societies which the members of the Committee represented. The pressure was great enough to cause the Committee to announce that cattle grazing in the Park was to cease as from June 1913.

Many of the fires which occurred in the early years of the National Park originated within the Park—usually at places where cattle were to be grazed – and Singapore Peninsula was certainly the most favoured grazing area during that period and since.

The Peninsula was far removed from the normal patrol routes of either of the rangers and the eastern coastline was open to any who cared to travel by boat.
The Mount Hunter tin prospecting leases and the continued use of the Park as a cattle run made things no easier for the rangers. Their greatest worry must surely have been the ever-present threat of fire in the summer and autumn.

Not without good reason were the cattlemen blamed for many of the fires. Their business was cattle, not the conservation of wildlife, and many if not most of them simply could not understand why anyone should want to feed a lot of useless wild animals at the expense of cattle which had obvious economic value.

Fires were a traditional and quite normal aid to what cattlemen believed to be good grazing practice and they failed to see anything reprehensible in firing their leaseholds in the Park. It was not easy for the rangers to cope with that philosophy.

The destruction of animals by fire is not viewed with any equanimity by the public, so that when, in the autumn of 1912, the holocaust swept down from the Singapore Peninsula grazing lease to Sealers’ Cove and destroyed some twenty thousand acres of the Park and its inhabiting wildlife, the outcry was sufficiently loud and sustained to cause the Committee to cancel the lease.

Most of the Committee members were only too glad to agree to the cancellation, even though it would mean a loss of revenue of about £150. Fortunately the Government’s annual grant of £500 was still maintained. Without it all developmental and maintenance work would have had to cease.

The Committee had no other source of income.

Many people have been puzzled by the apparent inconsistency of the Committee of Management towards this problem of cattle grazing in the National Park. The majority of its members must have disliked the practice, yet they tolerated it. Why?

It was not entirely a matter of revenue. There was a strong element of politics in it. Had the government grant been more liberal there would have been no need for the Committee to have attempted to supplement its income in this way.

It was a well-established policy of governments to settle men on the land and, having got them there, to keep them in business. In too many instances this could be done only by overstocking and by other forms of land misuse. The farmers themselves, under the relatively primitive conditions existing in the early part of this 20th century (and to some extent even now) were not able to carry an economically sound number of cattle on their holdings, and so otherwise idle Crown lands were leased to cattlemen.

The Lands Department is the trustee of Crown lands and, as a government department, is subject to government policy and, consequently, to political direction and pressure.

Wilson Promontory National Park is Crown land whose trustee was, in fact, the Lands Department which had appointed a committee of citizens to manage it as a national park.

If it was government policy to utilise the Park to produce some revenue by throwing it open to graziers then the Department had no option but to see that that policy was put into effect under the best possible terms.

It is only through catastrophes of the kind exemplified by the 1912–13 fire that the men who shape government policy can be jolted into thinking about much else than money-making because the ‘best possible terms’ generally meant no more than getting as much revenue as possible in return for as small an outlay as practicable.

It has been estimated that the few thousands of pounds gained over the years from the sale of grazing rights and agistment fees in the national parks of the State has cost Victorians more than two million pounds—a sum arrived at after taking into consideration the steady and continuous depreciation of a once rich public asset and the cost of piecemeal attempts at rehabilitation.

The leasing of Wilson Promontory National Park for private profit cannot be considered as having keen a gilt-edge investment in State development.

When the seriousness of this fire became known, a deputation was arranged to press for the cancellation of the grazing leases. A.G. Campbell, a member of the deputation, had been, for years, campaigning rather forthrightly against the practice, but he had made little headway.

When the Department’s spokesman stated that the managers of the Park depended upon grazing for revenue it was too much for Campbell. He jumped to his feet, thumped the table and roared ‘You get revenue from it, do you? It saves the Government financing the place from public funds, does it? Well, why not run cattle in the Botanic Gardens, another of our public parks, and save some more!’

It was heavy sarcasm, but it seemed to reflect the feelings of the public at that time.

Grazing was discontinued for a while.

Oddly enough, the Promontory fires seem to have occurred in greatest frequency in the years in which the Committee’s fauna introduction program was being pursued with its greatest vigour. It would have been astonishing if the recently introduced lyrebirds had escaped the 1912–13 fire.

The departure of the cattle freed the rangers for other work. As a kind of counter to the Barry’s
Creek plantation the Committee instituted its own planting program and, at every opportunity, native trees or shrubs or their seeds were planted. The Field Naturalists’ Club, during its first official visit, had ceremoniously carried out some planting and it fell to the lot of ranger Cripps to look after the specimens.

In the early winter of 1913 he was busily engaged in planting specimen trees on the Vereker Range and pines and Coast Tea-tree on the eastern side of Do Boy Island. In between times he functioned as a caretaker of the Forestry Department’s plantation with the added responsibility of keeping the fence and sheds in good repair. For this the Committee proposed to levy the Department £60 as a contribution towards Cripps’s salary of £104 per annum. After considering the matter for about nine months the Department agreed to contribute £25.

The Arboretum was a discouraging venture. In March, 1915—about six years after it had been started—Cripps, in his monthly report to the Committee, said that it was not thriving. The plants were mostly miserable specimens from twelve to eighteen inches high. A few in sheltered positions had reached a height of four feet! It took some years for the thing to be entirely forgotten. Even the site would be difficult to identify now.

An interesting point about the project is the conclusion reached time and again that, without special attention and perseverance, alien plants have a very hard struggle for survival when set down in a well established community of natives. Their root systems appear to be ill-adapted for successfully competing with the original inhabitants for the essential minerals which concentrate at different levels, and, if they do happen to strike it lucky, their luck may hold no longer than the first bushfire. Much of the native vegetation is well adapted to survive burns, something for which the human inhabitants of the country can be grateful.

Olaf Petersen of Foster, who had built the Barry’s Hill cottage, rebuilt the Vereker landing jetty and enlarged Mathison’s cottage, was also responsible for providing the hacks and pack-horses. These annual jaunts were somewhat strenuous for those unaccustomed to ‘roughing it’ and one or two of the Committee felt obliged to find a good reason for staying at home.

From the beginning the Committee had made its visits of inspection an annual event. The first, in January 1909, was by sea. The lighthouse ship Lady Loch landed the party at the lighthouse and Billy Millar—the son of the Millar who had managed the Yanakie Run for McHaffie and later had taken up the lease himself—was prevailed upon to act as guide.

As a matter of historical interest it is worth recording that in 1897 Mrs E.M. Millar, widow of McHaffie’s manager, still held 13,000 acres on lease under the old Land Act of 1860. It cost her £55 a year. Her son Billy held the Old Homestead block at a rental of £15. Buckley’s blocks (Nos. 71, 72 and 73) were worth £6. When the old run was subdivided for settlement about 1892 Mrs Millar strongly opposed the excision of Blocks 74, 75 and 76, but despite her objections the blocks were separated – although she did manage to retain one of them in an indirect way by acquiring it for her son Billy. It passed to the Falls brothers with whom Billy took a job as head stockmen—and that is how Billy Millar came to be established in the Old Homestead on Yanakie.

The Promontory tracks would have been as familiar to Billy as they had been to his father, consequently the visiting Committee in seeking him as their guide could not have made a better choice. The Falls brothers provided the hacks and pack-horses.

These annual jaunts were somewhat strenuous for those unaccustomed to ‘roughing it’ and one or two of the Committee felt obliged to find a good reason for staying at home.

On the second inspection the journey was by rail, horse tram, boat and horseback which brought them to the Darby River.

From time to time special trips were made by Kershaw and sometimes Thorn but every visit had to be planned to ensure that the visitors had sea and land transport and food and shelter awaiting them when
they arrived. While they were a novelty the official inspections were an adventure and, in retrospect at any rate, an enjoyable experience but, as the novelty wore off, the Committee began to consider their own comfort. So it came about that a cottage for the use of the Committee and for other official visitors was built at the Darby. The three room building, with verandah on two sides which Petersen built for £290 was ready for use in the spring of 1913. It formed the nucleus of what was to become, about ten years later, the famous Darby Chalet.

The next item requiring the attention of the Committee was the cutting of tracks. Most of the old ones, formed haphazardly during the pre-National Park days, had vanished in the undergrowth. The telegraph track to the lighthouse remained well enough defined because it was kept open by the two telephone linesmen Clavarina and Varney, but the branch to Sealers Cove which left it on the Oberon Saddle had become badly overgrown since it was cut by Selby and Cripps in 1909. Mathison had kept both the bridle path from the Vereker landing to the Darby and the riverside track to the mouth of the river in fair shape, but the appointment of ranger Cripps provided the opportunity for much more track work than had been possible. The path from his Barry’s Hill cottage to the Vereker landing was kept open and the old cattle track which passed the plantation on its way to Biddy’s Camp and Mount Singapore was made fit for a horse patrol if not for tourists.

In December 1913 Cripps, with the help of some outside labour, built a bridge across Chinaman’s Creek where it wound its way through a stretch of bog obscured by a dense stand of Paperbark. The present fire access track to Five Mile Beach follows much the same course as it did fifty years ago. Now, of course, it is for most of its length a properly surveyed and well graded road.

Towards the end of 1913 the Committee was able to arrange for a re-survey of the Tidal River–Sealers Cove track, and in the following year work on it commenced. It was intended also to run a track through to Refuge Cove. By June 1914 the first part of the job was done. A good four foot bridle path led from the Darby River to Sealers Cove via the Darby Saddle, Whisky Creek, Tidal River, the Bad Saddle, Mount Oberon and the Ramsay Saddle.

Back in 1909 McLennan had reported that the crew of a ship at anchor in Sealers Cove were seen stripping the decking from the jetty built by the timber millers,
but the Committee could not afford to restore it. Consequently it became more and more derelict as time went on. When the new track was made in 1914 it seemed a practical proposition to have the jetty rebuilt. Accordingly, in February, 1915, a contract for the job was let and duly carried out under the supervision of the Public Works Department.

During the years that followed the condition of the track alternated from that of a good bridle path to an almost impenetrable jungle. Every time a fire came through, the fast growing saplings of hazel, acacia and eucalypt would be killed and in no time masses of ferns and shrubby plants would interlace themselves so intimately among the fallen sticks and trunks that anything bigger than a wombat could not move through the tangle. It is now seeing one of its good periods. In fact, it is at present so easily negotiable that a recent visitor reported having encountered a party of walkers making their way over the saddle carrying a stretcher laden not with a disabled companion but with several cases of beer! Which goes to show that, with adequate planning and sufficient effort, the spirit of the old days can be recaptured—the days when Sealers Cove resounded to the revelry of old salts and sealers.

The branch track to Refuge Cove was not commenced until more than twelve months later. In the meantime the rangers and their helpers busied themselves in cutting a path into Lilly Pilly Gully.

In September 1914 this loveliest of rain forest gullies was open for the world to see. During the next thirty years every visitor to the Darby was encouraged to see the Gully. Nowhere else in Victoria was there known to be one quite like it. Nowhere in Victoria is there such a one now. A bushfire in 1943 accomplished what all bushfires in the preceding 100 years had failed to do. The Gully was burned to ashes. Many years have passed since that calamity, and regeneration is taking place gradually. Possibly in another thirty years the generation of that time may be able to look upon a scene such as their forefathers beheld way back in 1914.

By this time the job of the Park rangers had acquired a rather more responsible character. They were camp superintendents, supervisors, patrol men, cattlemen, watchmen, maintenance men, vermin controllers and labourers, all in one. It must have been too much for Mathison because he resigned at the end of April 1914. Kershaw laconically noted that he was ‘glad to see the last of him”—and that may have been because he did not measure up to the standard of efficiency expected by the meticulous Kershaw. He often forgot to send in monthly reports or cattle agistment returns.

His departure brought more work for Cripps, who transferred to the Darby River so that he could keep an eye on the Committee’s cottage. It was a kindly-meant arrangement because it brought the ranger fourteen miles nearer to his ailing wife who was staying at Millar’s cottage in the care of her daughter—Billy Millar’s wife.

When Mathison’s successor, J.G. Holmes of Longwarry, commenced in mid-May Cripps remained to instruct him in his duties. Mrs Holmes became honorary officer in charge of the telephone. One of the new ranger’s first jobs was to collect and release in the Park three Red Kangaroos which had been sent by rail from Deniliquin.

After the death of Mrs Cripps the ranger returned to Barry’s Hill to take over yet another duty—that of master of the motor boat Jessie which the Committee had bought.

Since 1912 his own sailing boat the clinker-built Grace Darling (or during periods of flat calm, brother George’s motor boat Daphne) had been called into service for bringing supplies and visitors across from the mainland. Daphne had earned local fame for its capacity to cruise all the way from Bowen to Do Boy Island without stalling or catching fire and thus was considered to be a reliable craft. From now on the Committee intended to provide its own means of transport. Jessie was to be manned by Cripps who would bring in the supplies for both the Barry’s Hill and Darby River establishments and land them at the Vereker landing jetty. The Darby ranger would carry them across to the Darby by wagon instead of by pack-horse as of yore.

As mentioned elsewhere, it took some time for Jessie to become operative but the transport system, when it did get going, provided a good service for some years to come.

The First World War had by now begun to exert its unsettling influence over Australia and Australians but, to many Victorians, particularly those in rural areas, an even more unsettling influence was the severe drought which had descended on the land. The effects were felt as far south as it was possible to go. Bushfires ranged through the Strzelecki Ranges, the Hoddles and Foster Hills, leaving in their wake a scorched earth, starving stock and many very worried farmers and cattlemen.

It may have been nothing more than a coincidence, but the National Park remained unscathed and, since its wide domains had been free of cattle since June, it was one of the few places in Gippsland where there was green feed.

The Committee of Management responded to the State-wide call to agist stock, and grazing in the Park was resumed in December 1914 when it was agreed to admit 2,000 animals for up to three months.

George Freeman was the first to take advantage of the opportunity. He ran in sixty head.
The Freemans were the pioneers of a Government township named Liverpool, which later came to be called Bennison. They were related by marriage to the Cripps family of Bowen.

By March the old graziers were back, and some new ones—Lester McCartney and Stoddart.

By May, cattle were arriving from far distant parts of the State, from districts like Tatura, Kyneton and Strathmerton.

In April, Holmes resigned his job as ranger to enlist for service overseas and it was not until September that his successor, A.J. Freeman of Korumburra, was appointed.

Meanwhile, Cripps was again transferred to the Darby and the Committee arranged for his appointment as an honorary Crown bailiff. He asked that he be permitted to remain at the Darby and the Committee agreed on the condition that his stepsister keep house for him and act as honorary officer in charge of the telephone.

When Freeman arrived Cripps changed his mind and went back to Barry’s Hill.

Mrs Freeman, like her predecessors, looked after the telephone and, when need be, catered for official visitors.

About this time some further unwanted introductions were coming to notice. Hares had been seen in the Park in 1909 but seem not to have multiplied significantly. Rabbits were known to be on Yanakie but not yet in the Park, but now the domestic cat was running wild. The Mathison family had brought their cats with them and the progeny had gone bush. Thereafter cats were banned and the rangers were instructed to trap and destroy any they saw.

The Committee itself had permitted plenty of foreign elements to enter the Park. In July 1909 it had decided that the deer known to be there in 1900 should continue to receive the benefits of sanctuary. Cattle and horses were grazed there. In the autumn of 1915 Perennial Rye-grass (*Lolium perenne*) was introduced to provide pasture for the rangers’ personal stock. In the following January £50 was spent in planting Marram Grass. In 1912 Uganda Grass had been planted. Both species were introduced to combat erosion.

Some years later another grass was introduced. In July 1924 the ranger in charge of the Inlet sector was given the task of planting *Spartina townsendii* in the mud flats below high tide at the Vereker jetty. The idea was to provide an underwater verge which would be an attractive habitat for marine fauna. With plenty of such
food available to them aquatic birds would be attracted to the area and their presence could be expected to make a very favourable impression on visitors.

Whether the Spartina survived is not known. It is not included in the current list of flora for the Park.

In later years Kikuyu grass (Pennisetum clandestina) was brought in as a sand-binder. So long as it is continually grazed, kikuyu is unobjectionable, but ungrazed it can become a quite serious pest, overgrowing everything else, smothering them out of existence. Its advance from the open clearings to the edges of the bush is rapid and it soon forms a barricade as dense and impenetrable as that formed by the native Wire-grass (Tetragrhena juncea).

Proliferation of the latter generally happens after a bushfire has passed through its rain forest habitat but the kikuyu entanglements become most noticeable after an animal poisoning campaign.

The intensive destruction of rabbits and foxes in the Park in 1962–63, by distribution of baits laden with 1080, led to some unanticipated results. Rabbits and foxes were certainly destroyed in great number. Along with them went deer, wombats, wallabies, possums and anything else that fed on the bait or on the carcasses of the dead animals. The regular army of grazing beasts which frequented the Tidal River grassed flats were killed and the kikuyu soon began to assert itself. Within a few weeks it was in among the trees and shrubs.

The more gloomy prophets consoled themselves with the conclusion that within a few years there would be no erosion problems at Tidal River. It would be enveloped in Kikuyu grass.

It may seem a ridiculous thought to entertain but is it? Much of our planned work directed towards controlling nature has been a series of experiments by trial and error. Far too rarely is it planned on the advice of an ecologist—mainly because there are too few trained ecologists to call upon for advice. So, we busily ourselves spreading non-selective deadly poisons throughout the land, introducing foreign insects, mammals and plants wherever we think they will serve some immediate purpose.

We spend huge sums on engineering projects only to find that we have to keep on spending huge sums to maintain those works in serviceable condition because the planning failed to take into account nature’s reaction to change.

We blithely let local River Improvement Trusts operate on our streams without regard to what may happen upstream or to what is going to happen downstream. We do the silliest things without knowing how silly they are until after we have done them. Wilsons Promontory National Park has been a grand place for experiments in making nature subservient to man. It has given even greater value in demonstrating where we have gone wrong in our thinking and planning of its development.

Rangers W.J. Cripps and A.J. Freeman kept a roving eye on the Park, its visitors and the cattlemen during the war years. The tin miners were busy sluicing and excavating holes and tunnels up on Mount Hunter, but so long as they appeared to observe the regulations nothing could be done to stop them or interfere with their operations. Visitors to the mines were always welcome. There was no telling. Some might be persuaded to become investors! But that was the affair of the syndicates, not of the Committee of Management of the Park.

While Jessie plied between Port Franklin and the Vereker landing, the new motor launch Janet Isles sped between Port Welshpool and Freshwater Cove, Chinaman’s Beach or Biddy’s Camp. They went their separate ways.

The Toora Progress Association still urged the establishment of a jetty and government Chalet on Singapore Peninsula but the Committee eventually decided in favour of the Darby River area as the place for its accommodation house. The Darby was developing fast as the future permanent settlement. It was at the boundary of the Park. The overland telephone line was at hand. Tracks that some day would become roads led to it, and the earlier difficulties of reaching it from across the waters of Corner Basin were almost overcome.

By 1915 all of the Park fencing had been completed, a jetty had been built at the Vereker landing, and Jessie was in service. The Forestry Department’s plantation was enclosed and a ranger’s cottage stood nearby on Barry’s Hill. Bridle tracks led from Barry’s Creek to the landing and then on to the Darby where stood a ranger’s cottage, a rest hut and the Committee’s cottage or ‘accommodation house’ as it was soon to be called. Tracks led from the Darby to Sealers Cove, to Lilly Pilly Gully, up on to the Vereker Range and the old jetty at Sealers Cove had been restored.

The Darby flats were being steadily cleared to accommodate the ranger’s kitchen garden and orchard, to make way for a paddock for the ranger’s milch cows and his horses and for the work horses and hacks which the Committee held for its own use.

Nine years had brought many changes in the character of the National Park, and especially to the environs of the No. 4 gate at the Darby River.

Freeman remained for more than two years. He resigned in September 1917 and Cripps, once more, repaired to the Darby. For almost two years he carried on without assistance. The Barry Hill cottage was closed.
and Jessie appears to have been put in the charge of his brother George.

In January 1918 the old bridge over the Darby was replaced—a job carried out by the Hall brothers for about £250. In May of that same year the paddock in which stood the Postal Department’s old telephone hut was abandoned by the Commonwealth in favour of a similar area on the summit of Mount Oberon. A few months later the old hut was demolished and removed. A notice in the Government Gazette of 12th June 1913 formally brought the small reserve into the National Park and under the control of the Committee.

In 1918 the Park was exempted by order in Council from occupation under Miner’s Right for mining and residence. This Order did not affect the Mount Hunter Mining syndicate because the area it leased was not regarded as being an integral part of the National Park although included in the area nominally controlled by the Committee of Management.

Cripps was the ranger at the time of the Railways 8-day Tour in mid-November 1919. Holiday-makers of today might be interested to be reminded that in 1919 one could enjoy an organised camp-out tour lasting eight days, including transport, camping arrangements with all meals supplied, for the modest sum of £5-10-0 [= $11.00]. It was organised by Maurice Harkins, an enterprising young man in the Tourist Bureau. Harkins, as is mentioned elsewhere, later became a member of the Committee of Management. Harkins was instructed to do whatever he could to assist the organisers. He was to make a special point of seeing that Barrett was made comfortable and given every facility for wandering around on foot while the rest of the tourists travelled on the riding hacks hired for the occasion.

Advance notice that the tour was being organised seems to have decided the Committee to re-open the Barry’s Hill cottage and to install a second ranger. Accordingly, in October 1919 Fred Webber, a recently returned soldier, was appointed.

Most of the earlier appointments had been for a probationary period of three months but Webber’s was for one month because he was not an experienced boatman. If he managed to master the art of navigating Jessie across the basin it was expected that his appointment would be confirmed.

Webber was more at home on a horse than on a motor launch but no doubt he persevered. With his sister as housekeeper he occupied the cottage for a few months, but by the following February he had resigned and was on his way to take up a block of land at Urangeline in the Riverina under the Soldier Settlement Scheme.

His brief stay at Barry’s Creek was at a period when koalas were extremely abundant in the vicinity of the cottage. It was claimed that they were destroying the trees so persistently that unless steps were taken to reduce the population the trees would soon be killed and the animals would die of starvation. To save them from this horrible fate the Committee approved the destruction of fifty. Webber was given the job of shooting them.

The public were not advised of this. Had people learned about it there certainly would have been an uproar.

The transfer of the koala Teddy Dincombe from the Promontory to Melbourne on the occasion of the Girls Camp-out in January 1920 brought down on the Committee the wrath of the Chief Inspector of Fisheries and Game, and there were some sharp exchanges before the Chairman of the Committee (Sir Baldwin Spencer) was able to convince the Chief Inspector that it was blameless. Had the newspapers got hold of the story of the Committee’s methods of game management there is no telling what might have happened to it.

By December 1920 the surplus ‘bears’ were being sold at 10/- a head, but only to institutions which required them for re-stocking public wildlife reserves. Some were sent to Buchan Caves Park where they flourished until the next bushfire.

Sales were not very brisk and ultimately the ‘bears’ were allowed to go their own way, free from direct human intervention.

There is some doubt whether a colony of koalas in an area of more than 26,000 ha can become over-populated to such a degree as to actually destroy its own feed trees.

In 1942 there was much publicity given to the plight of the koalas on Quail Island in Westernport Bay. They had been introduced to the island some years earlier and, in the absence of predators, had multiplied to a number that threatened their existence. There were not enough food trees on the island for them and they starved. But for the intervention of the fisheries and Game Department Quail Island would have been a graveyard of hundreds of koalas. The emaciated survivors were transferred to other sanctuaries on the mainland and the island was left to recover from the effects of an overcrowded population of the
animals. But Quail Island does not provide a good basis for comparison with the conditions existing on the Promontory.

On the island their freedom to move to fresh fields was decidedly limited. They were faced with starvation whether they moved on or stayed to eat what few leaves remained.

On the Promontory they were not so circumscribed. Their food trees grew in other places to which they had access, even though the supply would have been greatly diminished by fire. The animals were among the indigenes of the Promontory and it is reasonable to believe that the population levels in the scattered colonies had always fluctuated and become self-adjusting. Thus one is inclined to discount a suggestion which has been made that the forest of dead spars one can see today on the slopes to the north of Sealers Cove is due to koalas. It is much more likely that the eucalypts ran out of food, were killed by a fire or by a phenomenal dry spell or by some other natural cause unrelated to koalas, such as infestation by phasmids or some other insect in plague proportions.

With Webber’s resignation Bill Cripps was once again on his own. He had married again in 1918, his second wife being a sister of Viv Weston who was to become a Park Ranger a couple of years later—in October or November 1920.

During the several months which elapsed between Webber’s departure and Weston’s arrival Cripps’s son Norman was put on the Committee’s payroll as an Assistant Ranger.

The senior ranger’s salary was increased to £3 a week and, as well as being an honorary Crown bailiff, he was given a further responsibility—that of honorary Inspector of Fisheries and Game, an appointment which invested him with some necessary authority to take action against those who infringed the Game Act outside the boundary of the National Park.

When Weston arrived Cripps went back to the comparative peace and quiet of his Barry’s Creek cottage.

The summer of 1921–22 was marked by more than the usual number of bushfires in the Foster district which, of course, helped the Park finances through the consequent issue of grazing rights. The presence of cattle in the Park in summertime had the usual result.

Falls was blamed for a fire which started on his lease on Yanakie South. It spread across the boundary into the heathlands of the South-west Corner.
Another fire occurred on the Vereker Range, up near Paddy’s Rock, and it moved down toward the Landing and rest hut. It was believed to have been started by one of the cattlemen while shifting stock through to Biddy’s Camp.

Undismayed, the Committee had about 500 head of cattle in the Park in the following autumn.

In 1921 commenced a decade notable for developments in the domestic affairs of the Park. After some years of persuasion and agitation money was made available from various sources for the construction of a motor road to the Darby River, and in 1921 the road was opened for traffic.

It was still the old beach track but the approach had been re-routed. The new route followed the Fish Creek—Foster road to within less than a mile of the present Yanakie settlement and then turned west to Winchesters’ on Shallow Inlet. After negotiating some drift sand it embouched onto the beach and followed the almost traditional beach track for nearly six miles to a signposted turn-off which took the adventuring motorist over a pretty rough track beside Cotter’s Lake and thence on to the heathy plains near the site of what was later to become the aerodrome. It then made its way through the sandhills down to No. 4 gate at the Darby bridge. It was only just a road but it was the forerunner of the better thing to come.

Jessie was still operating but badly in need of an overhaul. This she got in May 1921 but the job was poorly executed and the boat gave endless trouble for a long time to come.

Foxes were reported to be killing muttonbirds on Bennison Island. They were doing the same thing forty years later.

A wombat on Tongue Point was making a nuisance of himself by barging through the vermin proof fence.

A dingo was said to be operating in the Park and marksmen were eager to help in its destruction. An enormous wild dog was subsequently shot by George Cripps.

A Leathery Turtle was washed up on the Darby beach in August.

What had come to be called ‘the Home Paddock’ at the Darby was ploughed so that it could be sown down with grass seed. There were horses to be fed—Darby, Joan, Sue, Duncan and Kit—and something had to be done to provide green feed for them. Duncan was Selby’s nag in 1909 so he doubtless deserved some special consideration in view of his long and faithful service.

The tea-tree and paper-bark were steadily retreating under the pressure of advancing tourist development.

Tin mining, despite objections by the Committee, was working up to a crescendo of activity. The syndicate put in its big pumping system. Sales of shares were improving. Mount Hunter was looking more and more like an elevated battlefield.

In July 1921 the Forestry plantation at Barry’s Creek was formally abandoned. It had been an experiment which had proved something but who now remembers what?

In 1921 the Government grant to defray the Committee’s expenses stood at £500 but it dropped to £400 in 1922, to £300 in 1923. In 1926 it was back to £500 at which level it remained until 1932 when it ceased altogether because of the Great Depression.

While it still stood at £500 the Committee was encouraged to contemplate the possibility of establishing the long-sought Government Chalet. It conceived the idea of extending its own cottage and, in May 1922, tenders were called for the job. The accepted contractor was T. Gordon who lost no time in completing the work.

In October 1923 the Chalet—eight bedrooms and accommodation for 25 to 30 guests—was open for business.

While this notable project was coming to fruition, lesser happenings might have been noted by an interested observer.

John King, the timberman of Metung, sought permission to cut out eucalypts, Blackwood and Myrtle-beech in the Park and the Committee must have granted the request because Dr J.A. Leach, who was acting secretary of the old National Parks Association which existed in those days, wrote a stiff letter to the Committee strongly objecting to the cutting of timber in the Park.

Ranger Bill Cripps, after almost ten years of service, retired in October 1922. He died at Toora on 9th April 1966 at the age of 95. His son and assistant of some
two or three years standing—Norman—retired with him. However, the name remained on the Committee’s payroll.

On Bill’s recommendation, his younger brother George was appointed in his place and for rather more than two years George was the occupant of the Barry’s Hill cottage.

His brother-in-law Viv. Weston was ensconced at the Darby but he came in for some censure in January 1923 because he allowed a fire to get out of control when he was burning a break near the Three Mile Beach. It spread across the Peninsula between Biddy’s Camp, Mount Singapore and Mount Hunter down to the mustering paddock opposite Bennison Island. The paddock had been fenced in 1919 by Hall, one of the licensed graziers.

Meanwhile the Committee was busily occupied in planning for the grand opening of the Chalet. Tassell of Fish Creek agreed to act as a kind of transport agent. He undertook to carry visitors from Fish Creek to Shallow Inlet by car for 30/- and from there to the Darby by horse for 20/-. The fare there and back made a holiday on the Prom a somewhat expensive undertaking for campers who, up to that time, were the only class of visitor who could be accommodated there. The rest huts were proving so popular that it was decided to make an overnight charge of 1/- a head or £1 a week for parties.

The hardier campers who happened to choose the autumn of 1923 for their visit to the Park would have found the huts a particular comfort. About ten inches (254 mm) of rain fell at the Darby River during April and May!

During the winter about 750 head of cattle were ranging over the accustomed grazing leases—mowing down the lush growth which the autumn rains had produced in the burned areas.

Native animals were still being introduced into the Park. The 1923 introductions included two Rat Kangaroos and three or four Bandicoots which were released south of the Darby saddle. Early in the following year two Nail-tailed Wallabies were brought in.

Since 1909 the Railways Department had provided free transport to the railhead at Fish Creek for all native animals consigned to the National Park—a generous gesture which the Committee gratefully accepted.

Mrs Elizabeth Weston, wife of the ranger, was granted a six month lease of the newly built chalet as from the 1st November and during this time Weston was relieved of his duties as ranger. His place was taken by a single man, Arthur Irving—a nephew of the Winchester of Shallow Inlet.

While the ‘season’ lasted the Chalet enjoyed some distinguished patronage. In the Christmas holidays a party of members of the Field Naturalists’ Club came to enjoy a stay in the park and, of course, stayed at the Chalet.

In February a large party on a holiday tour arranged by the Tourist Bureau came to enjoy its hospitable comfort. Like the naturalists they came by boat to the Vereker landing.

In March the Governor General and Lady Forster, with their entourage, came on an informal visit. They travelled along the beach track and, on the way, were entertained at afternoon tea by the Winchester brothers. At the Chalet the Westons and Irving made the Vice Regal party so much at home that the Committee was asked to convey to them the appreciation of the Governor General and his lady.

While all was bright and gay at the Darby the Singapore Peninsula was in the throes of some tribulation. The tin mines on Mount Hunter had attracted a good deal of attention from reputable investors but the miners themselves were not regarded with much favour by the Committee. Some of their visitors were held in even less regard—those who came across for some good weekend shooting. The pastime became so blatant that ranger George Cripps was instructed to go across to the mines, seize the guns and take the names and addresses of those who were breaking the Park regulations. It is not recorded how many guns he seized nor how many names and addresses were taken.

In April he was given another difficult assignment—to find out who set fire to Bennison Island.

The year 1923 was of some significance to the Committee because it was the year in which the Falls brothers’ lease of the Yanakie South blocks expired. The land was resumed by the Crown and thereafter became part of the Yanakie Common.

The No. 2 gate into the Park was closed so that the Promontory graziers were no longer able to pass into the former Block 74. This meant that the Committee would have to build another gate—in a position which would allow traffic to bypass the 90-acre swamp.

George Cripps resigned at the end of 1924 and A.O. Miller took his place as from 1st January 1925.

He came at a time when the growing popularity of the Park was producing some not altogether desirable consequences.

Poaching had become a serious problem which was beyond the present resources of the three rangers, Weston, Irving and Miller, to stamp out. So long as the Mount Hunter mines operated so would poachers find there something akin to sanctuary.
The miners themselves were not exactly ‘striking it lucky’. Even so the Lands Department was still receiving applications for the right to prospect and mine for tin and the Committee continued to object to the granting of the rights and the renewal of licences. But the days of the lessees were numbered. By July 1925 Beck, the manager of the Mount Hunter Tin Mining Company, was offering to sell the Company’s buildings to the Committee. By September the mines had closed and poaching fell away to a normal level.

In January 1925 two new shelter huts were ready for use by tourists—one at Sealers Cove, the other at Tidal River. The latter structure lasted about seven years before it was destroyed by fire.

Later in the year the shelter hut at the Darby was moved close to the Chalet and rebuilt as a cottage for the Westons. Mrs Weston again took over the lease for the coming tourist season and about this time her husband retained his job as ranger. The Committee must have considered him more useful as a ranger than as the Chalet factotum.

In August the Awaroa was wrecked near the entrance to Shallow Inlet and the Committee bought the rights to its cargo of timber for a nominal sum. With a good stock of Tasmanian building board on hand the Committee could look forward to achieving its plan to extend the Chalet but, as it transpired, the chronic trouble, shortage of funds, delayed its realisation for some three years.

When the Mount Hunter mines closed most of the cabins and equipment were removed but the miners, true to tradition, left the holes and scars to be attended to by someone else.

The Mines Department was asked to see that the holes and shafts were filled. Ranger Alf. Miller was sent to inspect and report on the scene and he averred that there were at least 37 open shafts ranging from four to thirty feet in depth, and bore holes from four to eight inches in diameter were scattered about.

Some shafts were more dangerous than others because they had been closed with boards deceptively covered with a veneer of soil. An exchange of correspondence between secretary Kershaw and the Mines Department continued for what must have seemed an interminable time to the Committee. In the end, some time in 1929 the rangers were detailed to fill them in.

It seems reasonably certain that no serious accidents to uninformed tourists occurred on Mount Hunter during the long interval of masterly inactivity. A few animals might have lost their lives by tumbling into the holes but such accidents would have been among the least of the Committee’s worries.

When the State Governor, Lord Stradbroke, and his wife visited the Park in December 1925 they were steered clear of Mount Hunter. Their Excellencies were taken to Tongue Point, Tidal River, Oberon Bay, the Lighthouse, Lilly Pilly Gully and Sealers’ Cove. They were also treated to a boat trip on the Inlet.

The visit must have exhausted the Committee’s coffers because no funds were left to retain a third ranger. Irving was the victim of the ‘recession’ and Miller was brought across from Barry’s Hill for a while to take his place at the Darby.

In December 1926 construction of the new Yanakie–Darby River road was commenced. With the prospect of a greater flow of visitors to the Park the Committee decided to again extend the Chalet building to provide increased accommodation. The work was completed in time for the opening of the 1928 season but, in the meanwhile, Mrs Weston had relinquished her lease in favour of her assistant, Miss Nicoll. Her future husband, George Butler, was engaged in track cutting and maintenance work in the Park and he was helped by Alf Miller’s son Jack.

Weston resigned in April 1927, after six years service as a ranger, to become Lands Officer at Yanakie—a job he held for several years. His place as ranger was taken by Ken Fuller of Melton who proved to be a difficult man to work with. In no time he was at odds with his predecessor, to the discomfort of both Weston and the Committee. However, there was work to be done and it was the job of Miller and Fuller to do it.

On Fuller’s appointment Miller returned to the Barry’s Hill cottage from whence he made his sallies to Mount Hunter. Fuller occupied himself in the Darby sector. In the summer they had the usual preoccupation—the fear of fires and in mid-December their fears were realised. The Caretaker of Yanakie, in burning off the Common, had let the fire get out of control. It spread into the Vereker Range and around the Darby River flats up to Tongue Point and out to Mount Latrobe—a most unfortunate happening in the midst of the tourist season. Later in the summer, visitors to the Darby suffered another but more unusual trial—a plague of fleas.

Wherever dogs (and cats) roam in company with human beings their parasites go with them. The cattlemen’s dogs would certainly have carried the normal complement of fleas and the cool shady spots beneath the Chalet would have provided good resting places for any of the dogs passing through on mustering duty. Every scratch would have released a shower of flea eggs from the thousands deposited in the fur of the dogs by the hundreds of fecund female fleas.

During a long spell of dry weather the contribution to the pool of eggs could become colossal. Normally flea
eggs will lie for a while unhatched in cool dry sand but as soon as the right conditions of warmth and humidity occur they hatch into lively little larvae which feed voraciously on whatever organic matter they can find. When fully grown the grubs pupate and as pupae they can exist for months without losing their viability. For the adult flea to emerge from its pupa conditions have to be just right. The temperature and humidity must be nicely adjusted but, even more important, there must be sufficient disturbance to ‘shake them out of their skins’ so to say.

No doubt such a combination of circumstances occurred at the Darby River in January and February 1928. Fortunately such flea population ‘explosions’ are uncommon and generally of brief duration. The disappearance of the insects can usually be hastened by a few elementary procedures in hygiene.

The indigenous biting midges or ‘sandflies’ were a much greater nuisance than the fleas. They enjoy a longer ‘season’, are much more widely distributed and can exist independently of man and his animals. When human beings are about, the tiny flies make their presence felt by a far more enduringly irritating ‘bite’ then any flea can administer and there was, in times gone by, little anyone could do to eradicate the pests or mitigate the nuisance. Visitors to the Chalet did their best to repel them by a method which still has its devotees.

It so happens that sandflies dislike smoke even more than do those they like to feed upon so the guests of the Chalet were quick to accept the recommendation that they should collect dried cow dung and burn it. The inexperienced guest must have thought it odd to see his fellow guests arriving back at the Chalet at dusk laden with slabs of dried manure and then, after igniting their collection, sitting on the edge of the long verandahs enveloped in a cloud of more or less aromatic smoke. Fortunately in temperate zones not every year is a plague year and biting midges, like the fleas, tend to multiply to unwelcome proportions only occasionally.

Miss Nicoll, the new lessee of the Chalet, ran the business very competently and the Committee was satisfied that she would carry on during the next season when a bigger and better Chalet was promised—on a two year lease. The remodelled building, with eight bedrooms, an enlarged kitchen and an additional bathroom was completed in August 1928 and re-opened on 1st November. Miss Nicoll had, by that time, become Mrs George Butler.

The new road was completed too but some severe September gales destroyed long stretches of the boarded track over the Hummocks. This made it more than usually hazardous for motorists, some of whom finished axle deep in drift sand. Road maintenance was not one of the normal duties of a National Park ranger but Fuller and Miller with what help they could get did their best to keep open for traffic that part of it which was within the Park. If the Hummocks were successfully negotiated a good run of five or six miles along the hard sandy beach brought the traveller to the signposted turn-off inland just before he reached Buckley’s Rocks. The beach road could go no further unless the tide was out because the rocks sprawled out into the sea. From the Rocks it ploughed through fairly firm sand, circumnavigated Cotter’s Lake (which was more of a large swampy claypan than a lake) from whence it meandered through groves of Sheoaks and Tea-tree down to the Darby River bridge.

The September gales did more than damage the new road. With the help of a king tide they pushed the Promontory’s tidal rivers upstream. The Darby spread out over the flats and completely covered the ‘kangaroo paddock’.

The ‘paddock’ had seen some vicissitudes since it was first cleared of tea-tree and paper-bark. Part of it was the site of Mathison’s orchard way back in 1912. Later, another portion of it became the grazing paddock for the ranger’s domestic stock. Then it was ploughed and sown down to provide fodder for the Park horses and finally a couple of kangaroos and emus were let loose in it for the benefit of such guests at the Chalet as failed to notice the animals in the rest of the Park.

In November 1928 the Committee decided to charge a camping fee. Much had been done to make the lot of the camper more attractive and comfortable and no small effort had been made to provide him with tracks which he could follow in safety to the many scenic spots in the National Park. Alf. Miller had restored the Sealer’s Cove trail and even rebuilt the bridge over Sealers’ Creek.

When not occupied in such maintenance work he tended to the boat Jessie which he, as successor to George Cripps and his predecessors, ran to and from Port Welshpool for provisions, supplies and furniture.
for both the Chalet and himself. Having brought them to the Vereker landing he then carted them across to the Darby in the official wagon.

The Committee purchased most of its supplies from the Great Southern Co-operative Company at Foster. The manager of the Company for some years was A. J. Fraser who, in 1957, became Minister of State Development and Chairman of the National Parks Authority—the panel of men who at that time shaped the destiny of all of Victoria’s national parks. The Company gave the Committee no special concessions despite the fact that it was a prompt paying and good customer. Eventually it sought the discount which was customarily given to most business houses in those days to account customers. There is nothing to suggest that the Company complied with the request.

Now the new road was through, the boat, jetty and wagon were becoming little used by visitors to the Park. Even the rest hut at the Vereker landing was falling into a decline so the Committee decided too sell Jessie if it could find a buyer and move the rest hut if it could find a more suitable site.

Jessie was sold in May 1930 but the rest hut remained where it was until destroyed by a bushfire some years later.

The year 1929 brought with it several problems. In March a careless hirer foundered one of the horses in the treacherous bog along the telephone line track to Tidal River. Fuller destroyed it and got into trouble for lending it.

In May a contract was let for the rebuilding of the old mustering paddock fence—an important project in the eyes of the Committee and justified by the requirements of its grazing activities.

The new road was not as good as it might have been. After a few mishaps to tourists’ vehicles and to the car of a visiting V.I.P. the Public Works Department was prevailed upon to divert it on to higher ground as it skirted Cotter’s Lake beside the horse paddock fence. By October the job was finished.

Despite the diversion it still presented difficulties. The Governor and party, on the way down for a brief holiday, got bogged in the sand in two places. Miller, with the help of Butler, managed to make it a little safer for the next comers.

They were becoming quite experienced road construction and maintenance men. Grimshaw, the Royal Mail contractor, must have welcomed the slight improvement. It was the mail that led to friction between Butler and Fuller and ultimately to the departure of Fuller in December 1929. The trouble caused the Committee to have the telephone removed from the ranger’s cottage to the Chalet. The contrettemps had another consequence. Poor Alf Miller was wrenched from his solitude at Barry’s Hill and installed at the Darby—for the time being. The ‘time being’ was for some seven months by the end of which time George Butler had been appointed to replace Fuller.

The Governor came at an inopportune time—just when the autumn burns were being conducted on the Common. From the Cotter’s Lake area one of the fires moved on towards the Darby and was stopped only by the tireless efforts of Alf Miller.

The Committee, or at least Kershaw, appeared to be most concerned at the destruction of at least sixty posts of the mustering paddock fence. A rather tart note to the Lands Department brought an unexpected response. The Department proposed that it should take over the Committee’s grazing business, which was only another way of suggesting that the Park might as well be recognised as just another Common functioning for the good of the public as it had functioned thirty or forty years earlier.

The Committee declined to cooperate despite the fact that McIver, the Secretary for Lands, happened to be a member of the Committee at that time. He died shortly afterwards.

When Butler took up his duties as Ranger in July 1930 Miller gratefully returned to Barry’s Hill, but not for long.

It had been decided to shift his headquarters to the Southwest Corner. The old rest hut was to be reconstructed as a residence. What happened was that the 30’ x 10’ shed at Barry’s Hill was moved to the Landing. The rebuilt edifice was the structure which became known to a generation of visitors to the Park as ‘Miller’s Hut’. Part of its chimney still stands as grim reminder of the ferocity of a bushfire as well as relic which recalls the romantic days when the Vereker Landing was the port of arrival for practically all visitors to the National Park.

The year 1931 was notable for two happenings beside the destruction of the Tidal River hut. A gentleman from Foster, Mr White, discovered a human skeleton in the vicinity of Buckley’s Rocks. The find aroused a good deal of interest and speculation at the time. Were the bones the remains of one of Bass’s Glennie Island convicts? – a forgotten and unknown pioneer? – a victim of some unrecorded tragedy? – or an Aborigine?

The more expert opinion settled for the last-named, which was a perfectly reasonable opinion.

About one mile of the beach frontage from the Old Homestead block 72 to the northern end of Cotter’s Lake was one of several favoured camp sites of the
group of Aborigines who roamed the Yanakie sandhills in days long since past. As a consequence there had been built up, bit by bit, an enormous repository of their artefacts, shells, animal bones, cinders from camp fires and suchlike evidences of their occupation. Unquestionably some would have died there and, of course, would have been buried in the nearby sand. 

The other happening was the discontinuance of the Government grant. It dropped from £500 to nothing. 

The Committee had to depend for revenue on the forty pounds it received from Mrs Butler plus about £500 it got from grazing fees, a few pounds from horse hire and camping fees and what it could get from the Unemployed Relief Council. 

During the ensuing unhappy years many men, encouraged by government assistance, went prospecting and mining in the hope of earning enough to keep their families together. Gold mining country was the main target but places reputed to hold other minerals were not neglected. The Promontory tin ‘prospects’ were remembered. Undeterred by the disappointments of Richardson, Blakeley, Hotstone, Freeman and all those who had gone before, newcomers thought it worth another try and applied for leases on Mount Hunter. 

The Committee stuck to its guns and objected to any further leases being granted. 

Towards the end of 1932 a new slant was put on the thirst for knowledge of the mineralogy of the Park. A party of prospectors wanted to look for osmiridium. Had it been twenty years later the search would have been for uranium or thorium! 

Although it resisted the granting of any further mining leases it gave in to the extent of giving permission for one man to prospect for tin. The prospector, McLeade, didn’t do any better than his predecessors. 

An interesting development began to take shape in 1932. What must surely have been one of the last of Victoria’s bullock teams was brought down to the Darby to commence the job of putting in a vehicle track to Tidal River. The work ceased before very much had been achieved. The Committee ran out of funds but got some more later on and the work was resumed in October 1933, using unemployed labour instead of the bullock team. It must be supposed that its construction was part of a general plan for development of the Park. No prescience on the part of the Committee could have caused it to anticipate the use to which it was to be put ten years later, nor later still when Tidal River was to become the hub of the Park. 

Its immediate purpose was to provide ready access to some of the State’s spectacular coastal scenery and, incidentally, to make it a little easier to protect it from fire. The Park needed all the protection it could be given. In the summer of 1932 a fire, started by the telephone linemen, burned up to Oberon from the lighthouse. 

As prosperity returned to the country the grey days of the Park faded. The Tidal River road was gradually improved and widened. By the time the A.M.F. was ready to occupy the Park it was in a good serviceable condition. 

The Chalet ‘takings’ rose again to its pre-depression level and the Committee’s interest in restocking the Park with native fauna revived. 

In December 1933 a Jew Lizard and a Fat-tailed Pouched Mouse were presented to the Committee. In March of the following year it received four Lesser Flying Phalangers and a Sugar Glider. In May 1935 the Bird Observers’ Club, in response to an appeal from Secretary Kershaw, produced a number of Bell Miners which were released at Sealeys Cove. In October 1936 another kind donor presented a Major Mitchell Cockatoo and this gift seems to have started the Committee toying with the idea of having an aviary built as a companion to its kangaroo paddock. Fortunately better counsels must have prevailed and the aviary did not eventuate. 

In 1938 Ranger George Butler ended an association with the Park which had lasted almost seven years. He left in an atmosphere of tragedy. His wife and children were drowned in the Darby River. The Park has been singularly free of such tragic happenings although twelve years later a walker, A.B. Howe, vanished between Refuge and Sealers Coves. He was never seen again. 

Butler was succeeded by Carl Mortensen, and Mr and Mrs Leigh Russell took over the lease of the Chalet. 

The Russells were initiated into the practices of the Prom by a fire which came within half a mile of the Chalet. It burned out several acres of heathland and grass trees on Darby Hill. In the spring of 1939 the grass trees and leek orchids responded by flowering in profusion in a place where it would have been difficult to find a flowering grass tree or orchid during the spring of the previous year. It is a phenomenon frequently observed by those who interest themselves in the habits of wildflowers. The little terrestrial orchids can survive without flowering for many seasons. The taller bushes grow up around their habitat and take from the soil the nourishment needed to stimulate the orchids into flowering and hide them from the sunlight which for many species is just as essential if they are to flower. A bushfire sweeps away the ground gloom and returns to the soil the minerals which the shrubs have extracted and concentrated in their leaves and stems. The orchid
tubers grow fat and well nourished and expend their overflowing energy in a riot of flowers, followed by millions—yes, literally millions—of seeds some of which, if their good luck holds, germinate and ensure the continuance of the species. In the spring of 1939 the Darby Hill was just such a riot of flowering herbaceous plants with Tall Leek-orchids, Spider Orchids, Sun Orchids, Greenhoods and Double-tails conspicuous among them. It could not have been entirely due to the fire though, because in other places where there had been no recent burns orchids flowered well. More than thirty species were found in the Park during a week’s hunting by an enthusiastic observer during mid-September of that year.

A personality who became known to thousands of visitors to the Park came on the scene in December. John Sparkes, one of Lester’s cattlemen, was appointed at £4 a week to take charge of the Park horses for eight weeks. In his spare time he was expected to keep the motor road to Tidal River in good repair and assist Mortensen to look after the camp sites at Darby River, Tidal River, Oberon Bay and Picnic Bay.

At the end of the eight weeks his appointment was extended and he was being referred to as the Assistant Ranger.

The Chalet was enjoying unprecedented popularity. The Rangers were kept as busy as they had ever been. The Committee began to contemplate further improvements to the Chalet. It was to be extended to accommodate eighty guests.

By the summer of 1940 work on the Yanakie aerodrome was under way. The contractors, busily clearing the heathy vegetation and tea tree scrub, used the traditional technique of firing it and what better time to burn scrub than mid-summer? Fortunately it spread no further than the horse paddock!

In the following March Alf Miller was told of his approaching transfer to Darby River but he let it be understood that he would prefer to resign, which he did in April after more than fifteen years of service—a period to be exceeded only by his successor, John Sparkes, who was asked to continue as assistant ranger on a week to week basis at £3 a week with accommodation provided.

When Miller departed in mid-April Sparkes was offered the job of ranger on a permanent basis, and he accepted.

By June 1940 the Second World War was beginning to make its impact on the National Park and its small human population.

Leigh Russell had decided to enlist and, as a consequence, Mrs Russell did not seek to renew her lease of the Chalet. Mrs P.S. Clendenning of Foster succeeded her as lessee.

The lady had a good deal to contend with before she could contemplate receiving guests. Household equipment needed either restoration or replacement and the place required fumigation to rid it of the bed bug *Cimex lectularius*—a ubiquitous foreign element of the present-day Australian insect fauna whose arrival on the Promontory could scarcely have been anticipated by the Committee of Management of the National Park. The guests at the Chalet certainly regarded the things with disfavour.

Bed bugs are neither more nor less revolting than any other of the natural Order Hemiptera. It just happens that they customarily feed on human blood, a habit they share with some fleas, lice and mosquitoes, and they are odorous creatures.

In the autumn of 1940 another alien introduction—this time a pest plant—began to make its presence evident in the Park. Ragwort (*Senecio jacobaea*) was noticed to be spreading at Barry’s Hill. However, about the same time, an observation of happier import related to the Five Mile Beach area of the north eastern sector where koalas were reported by cattlemen to exist in large numbers. Mortensen and Sparkes were instructed to investigate the report but, although much time was spent in exploring the locality in an endeavour to locate the big colony, they did not discover it. Nevertheless a few small outliers of the alleged main colony were seen—perhaps about fifty or sixty in all.

It will be recalled that about twenty years earlier koalas were superabundant at Barry’s Creek. The survivors of that colony seemed to have migrated to new feeding grounds but just where those grounds were nobody knew. Possibly their ‘promised land’ was across the peninsula to the east of Chinaman’s Creek. At any rate, here they were established in 1940. The fires which, in the intervening years had passed through the area, had surely left unburned enclaves where the remnant of the colony could recover its strength. As the environs recovered after those fires the regrowth would have allowed a gradual extension of their feeding grounds to accommodate their increasing number. That colony, by now, will have again diminished.

Its reservoir will have moved on towards Seale’s Cove, then on towards Refuge Cove, to Waterloo Bay, and gradually back along the backbone ranges to Mount Vereker and on to Barry’s Creek to complete the full cycle of its peregrinations.

Under the best of circumstances Wilsons Promontory National Park would be the ideal place for such a pilgrims’ progress. An assured food supply would be there, awaiting the advance guard of the colony about to be established. Unfortunately the unnatural frequency of fires has made the place...
far from ideal—and worse was yet to come.

It happened in January 1941 when the Army proposed to occupy the whole of the Park. With some misgiving the Committee acquiesced. The military authorities agreed to the Committee retaining its two rangers whose job would be to keep an eye on the native fauna. Their salaries would be paid by the Army but they would remain under the control of the Committee. The Army also agreed to pay £300 a year during the period of occupation. It was given the option of buying the nineteen Park horses or of hiring them for £9 per head per annum. It agreed to maintain and insure all Park buildings and their contents and to make good any losses or damage. Such permanent buildings as the Defence Department might build were to become the property of the Committee at the end of the occupation.

The Committee retained the right of entry as well as the right to introduce such flora and fauna as it might think fit and it persuaded the Army to agree not to damage unnecessarily tea-tree and other trees and shrubs and to use only dead timber for firewood. Mrs. Clendenning’s lease also came to an abrupt end. She was the last of the Chalet lessees.

On 1st February 1941 the National Park was closed to the public. Secretary Kershaw came down for a last survey of his beloved Park and, on his return, mentioned having seen platypus in Tidal River.

That interesting monotreme is by no means restricted to freshwater streams. It can tolerate moderate salinity and has been observed often enough in tidal streams but it was of some interest to know that the animal was an inhabitant of the Promontory.

In May Lester’s grazing lease, for which he paid £350 per annum, expired and, since the Committee could not renew it, the Army agreed to make good the loss of revenue.

The invasion by the trainees had not yet reached its peak and in September the rangers were able to report that kangaroos, wallabies and emus were noticeably abundant but, as the military population increased, the density of the native fauna decreased.

In the following year the pleasures of the chase were, for a short time, supplemented by the joys of the cup. The grounding of a freighter off Waratah Bay brought an unexpected windfall of liquor and tobacco to the inhabitants of the district and the army came in for its share of the jetsam. Army training so it is said was disorganised for a fortnight!

The old cottage at Barry’s Hill was still there. For some time past it had been used, for a small consideration, by Lester and his employees. When his lease expired the cottage was closed for the last time. In February 1942 a big fire raced in from Yanakie and in its passage through the Mount Vereker and Barry’s Creek areas on its way to Mount Ramsay and Mount Latrobe it devoured the building. The same fire wrote finis to the old vermin-proof fence as well. Almost one mile of it, from the South-west Corner to No. 1 Gate, was burned. The rest was destroyed by subsequent fires.

To protect its installations the Army deliberately fired the Darby Hill behind the Chalet but who started the main fire is not recorded.

In January of the previous year Mortensen had advised the Committee of his intention to enlist. He was not accepted for army service but joined the Civil Construction Corps and so was lost to the Park service. Although his job was kept open for him he never returned to the Park.

The Committee felt his departure the more because the Army’s compensatory contribution was reduced by an amount corresponding to Mortensen’s salary.

It was not until about August 1943 that the Committee learned anything conclusive about Mortensen’s future. In the meantime, as it was essential that a Ranger should be in the Park, John Sparkes was promoted in July 1942 to fill the vacancy.

In September of the following year he was appointed honorary Crown Bailiff and thus assumed the mantle of his predecessors. The senior ranger had, almost from the beginning, held this important post.

The domestic history of the National Park was almost a closed book until 1946 when the Army decided to vacate it. It was restored to the people as from 1st February 1946.

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A fortnight later Secretary James Kershaw died.

Slowly normality returned to the Promontory but the Park was on the eve of a new era. All but one of the original Committee had passed on. Arthur Mattingley, now an old man, was the survivor of the team of men which in 1908 had accepted its responsibilities with enthusiasm and optimism. One by one their places had been taken by new men with new ideas. Imperceptibly the policy of management had changed with the changing years. Nature conservation had long been the guiding principle—in theory, if not in practice—but lack of funds had always limited any expansive programs directed towards really conservative measures. The ‘improvements’ which were effected invariably aimed at attracting tourists to the Park, not with the intention of merely having numbers of people wandering about the place more or less aimlessly but with seeing eyes: eyes that would see and understand that in Wilsons Promontory National Park they had a wonderful asset which it was in their hands to protect and preserve for all time. But alas, there was no one to interpret...
the place for them. No guides, no guide books, no
tnature trails, no wayside museum, no fireside talks by
competent naturalists, little or nothing to tell one what
the Park was for, what it meant to the present and could
mean to future generations of citizens and scientists.
Has all that been changed with the arrival of the new
era? With sadness it must be said that the answer is No.