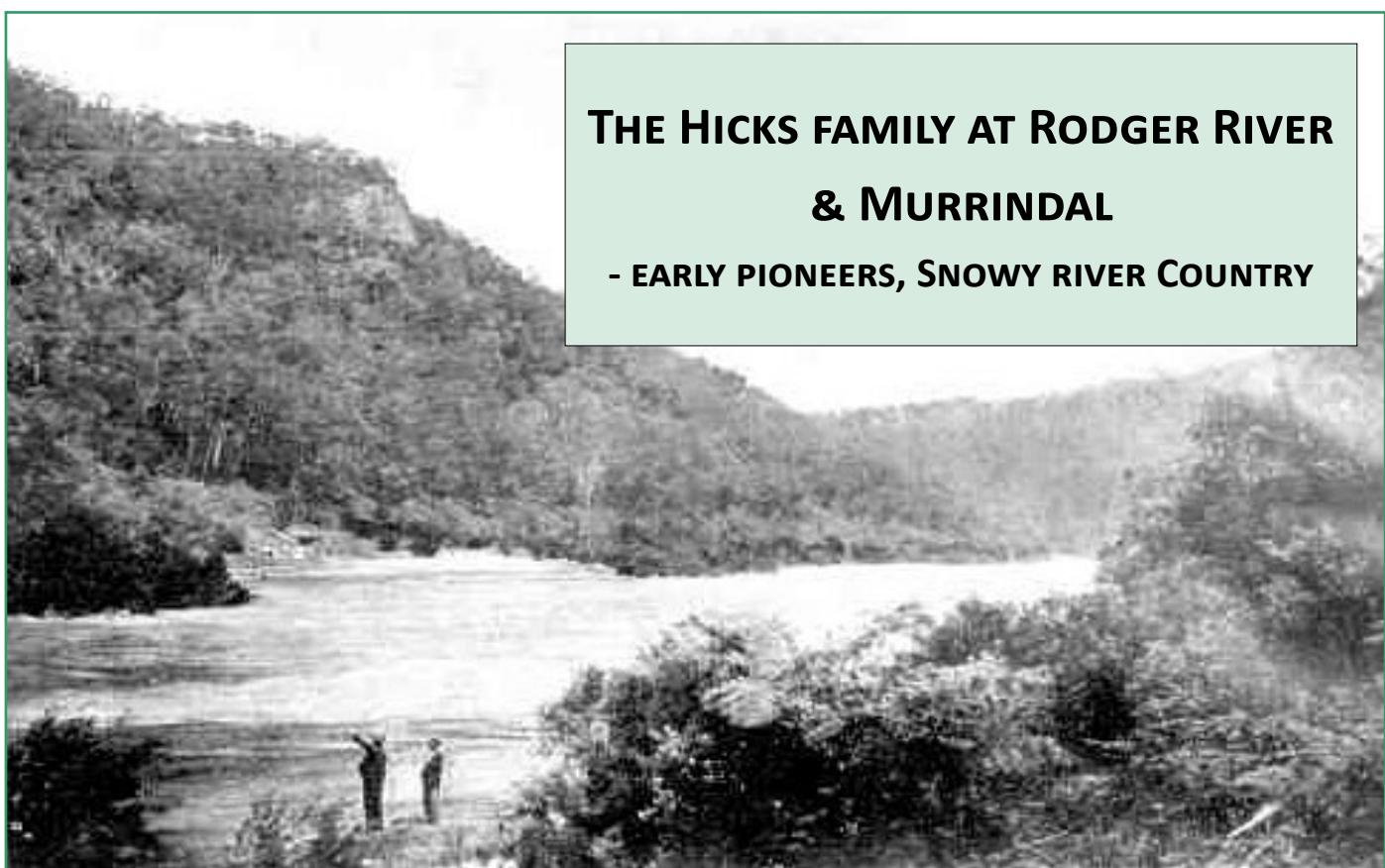




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## NEWSLETTER 177 - February 2024

### THE HICKS FAMILY AT RODGER RIVER & MURRINDAL - EARLY PIONEERS, SNOWY RIVER COUNTRY



The Snowy River near Buchan

*Weekly Times (Melbourne): 31st March 1906*

With the passing of Mrs. Alice Sarah Hicks, widow of Mr. Walter Hicks, of Murrindal, goes probably the last direct link in an epic of pioneering in its truest sense by a group of people in Gippsland East. The story is characteristic of the stout-hearted, resolute and courageous men and women who established their homes in the outposts of this great province.

Mr. Arthur Bishop, of Boolarra, told the story of early pioneering days at the Rodger, to a representative of "The Advertiser" while in Buchan recently to attend the funeral of Mrs. Hicks. [Mrs Hicks died in April 1953].

In the year 1903, said Mr. Bishop, it was considered highly probable that the Federal capital would be situated at Eden with its main highway from Orbost through the Rodger River and Yalmy River country.

Consequently the Hicks Bros., of Rutherglen, the late Alexander Cameron, and the Herbert Bros., of Orbost,

selected between them some thousands of acres of country extending from the junction of the Rodger and Snowy rivers to the Yalmy and Serpentine rivers.

#### Abundance of Native Grasses

The country formed a belt of Croajingolong which, before the advent of the rabbit, contained an abundance of native grasses. It was somewhat mountainous but healthy for man or beast and watered by clear crystal streams.

It was late in 1903 when Mrs. Hicks came with her husband, her brother, the late Bruce Godfrey, a strapping youth of 16,

and myself, a child just turned four years, to settle in "The Rodger".

The journey from Orbost was made on horseback, and was typical of Mrs. Hicks' courage for she had never ridden a horse before. However, she rode the 25-mile bush track. We had a string of pack-horses tied head to tail and I was perched on a pillow behind my uncle's saddle.

### Weekly Mail

The position of the little settlement was an isolated one. At first mail and papers were collected once a week from a point six miles away, later they were brought as far as Jackson's Crossing, a mere two miles distant. The nearest neighbours were the late Mr. and Mrs. Davidson, of Jackson's Crossing, next the late Mr. Tom Slocum at The Basin, six miles distant. The nearest towns were Buchan, 16 miles and Orbost, 26 miles. The nearest railhead was, at first, at Bairnsdale.

**SHIRE OF TAMBO.**

**ANNUAL ELECTION, BUCHAN RIDING.**

NOTICE is hereby given that the following candidates have been duly nominated for the office of councillors, viz.:—

WALTER HICKS, of Buchan  
JAMES T. WOOD, of Buchan  
and as the number of candidates nominated exceeds the number of councillors to be elected, a POLL will be taken for the election of one councillor on THURSDAY, 28th of AUGUST, 1919, at the following places:

Buchan, at the Mechanics' Institute.  
Gelantipy, at the State School, Upper Gelantipy.  
The poll will commence at eight o'clock in the forenoon and will close at four o'clock in the afternoon of the same day.

THOS. J. A. HODGE,  
Returning Officer for the Buchan Riding of the Shire of Tambo.

*Bairnsdale Advertiser: 16th August 1919*

Hicks' homestead was built of split timber with round pole rafters. The walls were of bark stripped from trees, the roof also was of bark. There was a lining of

An esteemed resident of Murrindal, **MR. WALTER HICKS**, 68 years, died at the Bairnsdale District Hospital on 16th March. [16.3.1945]

The late Mr. Hicks was born at Chiltern. He had resided in the Buchan district for many years, and for several years he was a representative of the Buchan riding in the Tambo council. He is survived by his wife, and daughter.

The funeral took place on Saturday afternoon, Rev. G.G. Lovegrove, of the Church of England, officiating at the Bairnsdale cemetery.

*Bairnsdale Advertiser: 20th March 1945*



*ancestry.com*

With the passing of **MRS. ALICE SARAH HICKS**, widow of the late Mr. Walter Hicks, of Murrindal, a link has been broken in the chain of pioneer settlers in East Gippsland.

Mrs. Hicks, who was within a week of her 77th birthday, died suddenly at her Murrindal home on Monday and her death came as a great shock to her many friends. Although in indifferent health for many years, she relinquished none of her interest in the local happenings and maintained a very active membership in a number of district associations.

Born at Horsham, the daughter of Frederick and Helen Godfrey, Mrs. Hicks came to Gippsland as a bride and in the closing years of the last century, settled with her husband on land in the Rodger River district, near Orbost. Her parents also settled in the Rodger district. Life here was that of typical pioneers, saddle-horses and bullock-drays furnishing the accepted methods of transport.

Thirty-six years ago, Mr. and Mrs. Hicks came to reside at Murrindal where both became well-known and respected figures in the district. For many years Mr. Hicks served as a member of the Tambo Shire Council, and his wife was always ready to assist in his many public engagements. Their home at Murrindal was renowned for its hospitality and Mrs. Hicks' chief recreation was

hessian and newspaper.

**Mr. and Mrs. Hicks had a few head of cattle and horses, a modest capital, stout hearts, the will to succeed and an inexhaustible sense of hospitality and kindness to all with whom they came in contact.**

### True Pioneers

From my boyhood memories I can recall some of the many achievements of this stout-hearted couple.

Some time after arriving, Walter Hicks built himself a second house at the Yalmy. It was similar to the previous structure at the Rodger, and we moved to it, a distant of four miles.

Meanwhile the first hard knock came. The season had been droughty and the northern cattle and horses, not used to the rough bush feed, had perished in large numbers.

In an amazingly short time Mr. Hicks had ring-barked a large area of the bush and within a few years had cleared 400 acres in a condition suitable for grazing. He had improved his herd of cattle and brought in some sheep. The flock of sheep built on the country was the healthiest I have ever seen and never needed drenching for any known sheep disease.

Mr. Alec. Cameron had settled a little higher up the river and I can remember a tall kind typically Australian bushman proudly riding home accompanied by Mrs. Cameron and their baby daughter Audrey lying on a pillow strapped to a saddle. I call also remember the late Hon. James Cameron,

her lovely garden.

Mr. Hicks predeceased his wife eight years ago. She is survived by their only child—Jessie (Mrs. Ewan McRae), while a niece and nephew were also in her care from their early childhood.

Among her active interests were the Buchan Bush Nursing Centre for which she and Mr. Hicks worked since its inception, and the Gumnut Club which works to support the bush nurse. She was a foundation member of the Buchan branch of the Country Women's Association, and of the local branch of the A.W.N.I.

A staunch supporter of her church, Mrs. Hicks was one of the earliest members of St. Mary's Church of England Guild.

Wreaths from several of the public bodies with which Mrs. Hicks had been connected were among the beautiful floral tributes at the funeral. The deep respect and love which she commanded from all sections of the community were evidenced by the large attendance at the service in the Church of England, Buchan, and later at the Buchan cemetery. Services at both the church and cemetery were conducted by the vicar, Rev. G.A.E. Turner, of Bruthen.

*Bairnsdale Advertiser: 30th April 1953*

former member for Gippsland East in the Legislative Assembly, riding out to inspect the properties.

### No Roads

Then in 1906 came the birth of Mrs. Hicks' only daughter, Jessie—now Mrs. Ewan McRae, of Murrindal. Mrs. Hicks went to Orbost for the birth of her child and when Jessie was a fortnight old, she was brought home on a pillow strapped to a saddle.

This method of transport was necessary because there was no road and, although there was a large area of country suitable for grazing and farming which could have supported a large settlement, no Governmental or other responsible body would attempt to make even a horse and buggy track. The people most responsible for assisting these pioneers were such men as the late John Flynn—afterwards Flynn of the Inland—the Revs. McIlroy, Morris and A. Gearing. I should like to pay my own tribute to these fine men for their good influence on the young people of the outback at that time.

Some years later the **Bush Nursing scheme** was evolved with the blessings of its courageous women riding through the mountains and crossed flooded streams on their errand of mercy.

Then came the itinerant school. No doubt there are many Buchan folk can remember the late Mr. Jack Walsh, who was killed in the 1914-18 war. Jessie McRae, the Davidson children, my sister Eva and myself, received our early education, one week in four. Work was set for the other three weeks and Mrs. Hicks, despite the great amount of work she had to do, found time to tutor us in the work. So well did she teach that she won the commendation of Mr. Akeroyd, the then district inspector of schools, and later to become Inspector-General of Prisons.

About this time, Mrs. Hicks nursed her mother devotedly in a long and severe illness. I can recall the consternation when she accidentally broke her only hypodermic needle and the haste which the messenger was dispatched to gallop to Buchan for a replacement.

### Financial Ruin and Recovery

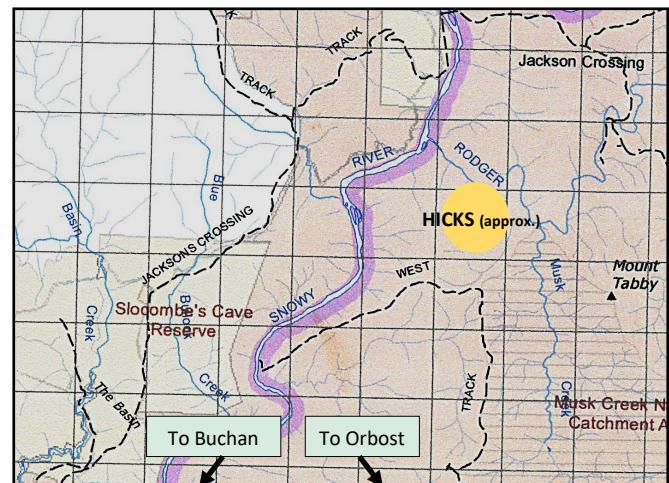
Drought came once again in 1908, and again the cattle were lost. Walter Hicks and his wife were "broke." Most people would have given up, but these people had different ideas.

With the help of Mr. Cottman, a pharmacist of Orbost, they had started an apiary as a hobby. I can remember my uncle saying: "When this drought breaks there will be a lot of bloom on the timber. We'll sell the darned honey."

But the honey had to be carried out, and there was no road. So he cut a road and made a wagon track for 25 miles through the bush; then with the help of his father-in-law, the late Mr. Frederick Godfrey, who was a blacksmith, they made a bullock wagon, and in two years sold enough honey to re-establish his herd of cattle. For some years the Hicks honey topped the market.

### Calamity of Fire

The next calamity was fire. All the fences and



Modern day map of the area.

The **RODGER RIVER** rises below Monkeytop in a remote alpine wilderness area within the Snowy River National Park, and flows generally south, then west, joined by the Yalmy River and three minor tributaries, before reaching its confluence with the Snowy River downstream of Jackson's Crossing in the Shire of East Gippsland. This was a very remote area in which to settle. These days, this land is entirely within the **SNOWY RIVER NATIONAL PARK** and the Hicks name is commemorated at Hicks Campground.

everything except the house, shed, and a few acres in the home paddock were burnt. Her husband was away and Mrs. Hicks fought that fire on her own with what assistance I—then 11 years—and my sister, could give.

Among the great men of the Orbost district I should like to number Dr. Kerr. My uncle contracted double pneumonia, and Mr. Bob Davidson and Mr. Tom Slocombe came to our rescue. Mr. Davidson rode to Orbost taking with him two horses. He tied one at Sardine Creek, the half-way mark, then rode on to the doctor. He guided Dr. Kerr through the darkness with all possible speed, changed horses and arrived just in time. Later the doctor told his patient: "I did not save your life—your wife saved it. She is the best nurse I have ever seen."

### Fighting Rabbits

After the fire, rabbits started to appear in the bush a few miles away so Mr. Hicks obtained netting, hauled it in on his



"Possibly" the Davidson family of "Echo Dell" at Jackson's Crossing on the Snowy River.  
John Flynn collection, nla

bullock wagon and netted 600 acres. Up to the time of his departure from the Rodger no rabbits had appeared to his property—just another instance of his efficiency and foresight.

By 1914, the Rodger was a nice property and Mr. and Mrs. Hicks were gaining some reward for their labour. These were great days.

Other run owners were the Dickson's, Cowell's, Moon's and George Cameron. In the spring all combined to comb the bush for cattle which had been turned out to run wild all through the year.

By 1916, the war had been in progress for two years and I was eighteen, and wished to enlist. This meant that Mr. and Mrs. Hicks, their daughter and my sister would be left to carry on. They did not demur but prior to my enlistment it was suggested that they have a holiday.

They took a fortnight's holiday, the first they had had for thirteen years. It seems incredible in these times.

Not long after, Jessie had a severe illness, and was taken to hospital, the first part of the journey was made by bullock-dray, the latter by horse and buggy.

**A little later Mr. Hicks had an offer of the present property at the Murrindal and tired of the ineptitude of the authorities in ameliorating their road conditions, decided to move nearer to civilisation, and made this beautiful property what it is to-day.**

Some few weeks ago a man named **ROBERT SLOCOMBE**, whose sons, G. Slocombe and T. Slocombe, hold land near Buchan, decided to visit that place with the intention of inspecting some land. He arrived at Buchan on the 27th February, and set out to walk to the Snowy River, a distance of about 18 miles. He broke his journey at Murrindale, and started from there on February 28. This was the last time he was seen alive.

On Sunday, March 2, the two brother set out for Buchan expecting to meet their father, but not finding him there, and knowing he had not arrived at the Snowy River, they became alarmed and organized a search party of some 40 men on horseback. The party searched the whole of the basin country, but it was not until last Thursday that the whereabouts of the missing man was learnt, when his dead body was found by a stockman, in the Snowy River, in a state of decomposition.

It is supposed that Mr. Slocombe lost his way in the dark, or by some mischance in the day time, fell over a cliff into the river.

(*Robert Slocombe was 67 years of age*)

*Bairnsdale Advertiser: 18 March 1890*

On Sunday **MR. AND MRS. SLOCOMBE**, residing 14 miles from Buchan, attempted to cross the Snowy River on horseback, with the intention of visiting a friend, Mr. Hicks, living on the Orbost side of the river. While crossing the stream, Mrs. Slocombe was seized with giddiness and, falling from her horse, she was swept away by the strong current. Her husband attempted to rescue her, but had to let go his hold, or both lives would have been lost, owing to the rocky nature of the river at the spot.

The body of Mrs. Slocombe was recovered shortly afterwards. Mr. Slocombe's father was drowned near the same spot a few years ago.

(*Julia (nee Richmond) was 44 years of age, wife of Thomas Benjamin Slocombe*)

*Leader: 26 November 1904*

## Pioneers' Work in Vain

A few years ago I rode into the Rodger country and it is reverting to the wombat, the possum and the dingo. Had these early settlers had the assistance they were entitled it might to-day support a prosperous community, an asset to the State.

Those times brought out the best in people and the hospitality, the kindness, and the grit found under the bark roofs of the Davidsons, the Slocombes, the Hicks and many other pioneers of that era not always found in the mansions of to-day.

In penning this article I may have omitted many incidents and people associated with that time, but time and space do not allow me to continue. My main desire is to pay tribute to a fine and versatile woman. Mrs. Hicks could meet any emergency and could literally "put her hand to anything."

*As published in the Bairnsdale Advertiser: May 1953*

**Note:** this wonderfully sensitive tribute to the life of Alice Hicks of Roger River was written by Arthur Bishop. Arthur (b.1898 at Rutherglen) and his sister Eva (b.1894) were adopted as young children by Mr and Mrs Hicks following the death of their mother.

**Basin Ranch, Buchan P.O.**—Dear Aunt Connie, - It is a long time since I last wrote to you. We were then living in Bairnsdale, but we have lately sold our home there and come to live near Buchan. It is a very much smaller place, but it is very pretty. A great many tourists visit Buchan during the summer. They come to see the cave, which are very beautiful. We live 10 miles out of Buchan, near the Snowy River. There are a good many dingoes about here, and last week we saw six quite close to the house.

I am learning to ride now, and like it very well. The rabbits are very numerous here, and to try to get rid of the pest, father is having five miles of wire netting erected.

We have a very nice orchard, plenty of grapes, and two large walnut tree. We only get our mail once a week, and we have to ride ten miles over a rough track. It takes a whole day. I miss school very much, as there is none nearer than ten miles. My sister and I were learning music before we left Bairnsdale, and now we have no one to teach us. There is a cave not more than 200 yards from our house. My uncle discovered it, and it is called "Slocombe's Cave."

We all like living here, although it is very much more lonely than where we used to live. I have a sewing machine of my own, and I am learning to work it. I have one sister and two brothers, all younger than myself.

There are some waterfalls near here; they are very pretty after a lot of rain has fallen.

My age is 14 years, 11 months.

- Mabel G. Slocombe [Daughter of George Henry Slocombe]

*Weekly Times (Melbourne): 3rd April 1909*