

## **SECOND CENTENARY FOR TARRA-BULGA NATIONAL PARK: TRIBUTE TO VICTORIA'S FIRST WOMAN RANGER**

Tarra-Bulga National Park is one of Victoria's earliest National Parks, having first been set aside in the early 1900's. Originally, it was two parks – Bulga Park reserved in 1904, and Tarra Valley established in 1909 – but it wasn't until 1986 that they merged to become one park known as Tarra-Bulga National Park. Today the Park is just over 2,000 hectares in size, a far cry from its modest beginnings as 50 acres or 20 hectares (Bulga) and 155 acres or 63 hectares (Tarra Valley).

In 2004 the Centenary of Bulga Park, and the origin of the current National Park, was celebrated through a range of events: a Heritage Picnic Day, Centenary Day & launch of a booklet describing the history of the Park, and a special BBQ to celebrate the 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Friends of Tarra-Bulga National Park Inc., as well as the close of the Centenary Year.

When it came to the Centenary of Tarra Valley some five years later, it was felt that rather than having a range of big events that a focus on the people who were part of the Park would be more appropriate. In particular, it was felt that due recognition needed to be given to the life and work of Kara Healey who lived and worked in Tarra Valley, providing a very strong lead in the life and understanding of the Park. Kara is also recognised as Victoria's first woman ranger and an outstanding naturalist in her own right. Nothing more fitting could be seen as appropriate for the second Centenary celebration in the life of Tarra-Bulga National Park.

Exactly 100 years to the day when Tarra Valley was set aside, many of Kara's descendants gathered to unveil an information panel to recognise her life and work. This article has been written to pay tribute to the achievements of this early ranger and further encourage each of us in our enthusiasm for continuing the work of our pioneers in environmental conservation.

For 10 years across the 1950's, one lady's name became forever attached to the then Tarra Valley National Park. That woman was Karamoana (Kara) Healey – park ranger from 1952 – 1963. Kara's passion for the forest she cared for was reflected in the scientific collecting activities she immersed herself in alongside her more routine work as a park ranger. Her abundant correspondence is a record of the vital role she played as a field collector for the CSIRO and others throughout this period. Kara knew 'her' park like no other. In part, her work today is reflected in the fact that Tarra-Bulga has one of the most comprehensive species records of any national park in Victoria. Allied closely to this legacy is the native forest homestead that she all but gave away in order to protect it from logging when she left the valley in 1963. Today this plot contains some very fine stands of old growth forest protected in Tarra-Bulga National Park.

Kara was born Karamoana Elizabeth Vernon on 23<sup>rd</sup> June 1904 to Mary and William Vernon who were Australians working in New Zealand. Her name "Karamoana" is in honour of her Maori nurse,

the name meaning 'rippling waters'. Kara was the third of seven children. At age two her parents returned to Australia her father continuing in the trade as a blacksmith. While growing up in Mysia (northern Victoria) she gained a scholarship to Bendigo High School boarding at the YMCA there for her later school years. On completion of school Kara accepted a position as teaching assistant at Stuart Mill State School near Clunes. Here she met and married William Stanley (Stan) McGreevy in 1925. Together they had eight children – Dawn, Victor, Wilma, Freda and Gillian, with another 3 who did not survive past infancy (William, Thomas & Evelyn). After the end of World War 2, in which her husband served for a number of years, Kara and the children moved to Toora in south Gippsland, the war years taking a toll on Stan and the relationship. They were divorced in 1948, with Stan dying later in 1958. While living at Toora Kara worked at the shoe factory there, later moving to Yarram to take up work at the Hospital as a cook and some-time visitor to the many patients. Here she met James Michael (Jim) Healey who was a patient at the hospital. Jim was the caretaker (ranger) at Tarra Valley. On their marriage (22/2/1949) Kara moved to live at the park joining in the work of Jim in caring for the park. The house had split paling walls covered by an iron roof. Flattened 4-gallon kerosene tins and hessian made up the inner walls, which were then lined with old newspapers, some of which dated back to 1901. With continuing ill health, Jim decided to retire from his work, and Kara's son, Victor McGreevy, took over the work as caretaker for 18 months from May 1950 to October 1951. Victor decided to go into the priesthood at this time, but was to die in 1960 at the age of 28. On the departure of Victor, Kara then took on the role of caretaker at Tarra Valley Park, a position she held until May 1963, a period of some 12 years. Unfortunately, Jim passed away suddenly in 1952, and, while saddened, Kara decided to continue living on in the 'somewhat primitive' farm-house and continue in the work she described as the 'love of her life'. "I keep myself too busy to brood...I am at home in the bush and I know that there is nothing to fear. That's more than I could say for the city. It's there that I really feel nervous", she once said.

As such, Kara became known as the first woman appointed in Victoria to the position of park caretaker (ranger). Her resourcefulness, learnt from years observing her father in his work in the Blacksmith's trade, toiling through the years of the depression (the family moved and travelled throughout northern Victoria and southern New South Wales continually looking for work), years of caring for the children while Stan was at war (making their own clothes and special gifts of rag dolls), a volunteer at the Military Canteen & visiting patients at the Military Hospital, and part of the Wives & Parents Club, and then growing potatoes and milking cows while at Toora, Kara put to use this same ingenuity in her work as caretaker. Kara's main duties included looking after visitors to the park, collecting parking fees (approximately 10 cents in today's terms) and lighting the fire in the picnic shelter. She was also kept busy sweeping the paths clear of debris left by lyrebirds scratching through the forest undergrowth.

When the official work was done, Kara spent most of the rest of her time collecting specimens of insects, spiders, ferns, grasses, mosses, lichens and fungi. Specimens were sent to many people and organisations, including the Commonwealth Scientific & Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO), the National Museum of Victoria, the University of Melbourne and the National Herbarium. Her work with the CSIRO began in response to an advertisement for voluntary collectors of fungi across Australia to aid them in their research work. By 1961 Kara had collected some 160 different types of fungi for this program. Two were of significance – a previously unidentified fungus that caused yellow straw rot on Mountain Ash that the CSIRO named after her *Poria healeyi*, and another named *Lambertella healeyi* (in her honour) which was growing on another fungus (*Cyttaria gunnii*). These 2

specimens brought her scientific immortality in many ways, and while the fungal world was her real passion, Kara's interests extended across all aspects of the Park's flora and fauna. In total she collected over 500 specimens, notably the fungi as well as some 80 different types of mosses. Neville Walters, one of the CSIRO scientists who received her many specimens, described her as "easily the best" of the 150 or more collectors he had Australia-wide. Neville also commented that "she knew every lyrebird in the park as well as many of the pilot birds, crimson rosellas and yellow robins. She wasn't frightened of the snakes, insects and numerous mammals – nor were they frightened of her." In 1961 Kara wrote:

*"I had a visitor the other day at home – a little Copperhead snake. He came in the front door and went out the back. He just looked at me. I'd been making jam. I saw the movement and thought it was a bird flying through – they often do. You've got to learn to adapt yourself to the conditions you live in. If I think, oh, there's a snake I can't live there, I must kill it, I'd be worried out of my mind if I tried to kill it and failed. I know some snakes only give you half an hour's grace. But I'm not frightened to die."*

Another story tells of how one night she disturbed a gang of "hoons" larking about in the picnic shelter. She crept down the hillside in the dark and yelled – "I've got a gun, if you lads don't get out, I'll shoot" – they went.

Following her retirement Kara turned down lucrative offers from timber companies wishing to buy her 115 acre (46ha) Tarra Valley property, offering £1,000 or more, instead selling it to the Bird Observer's Club "for a song" in order that the property be donated to the park, which occurred in 1962. After meeting Thomas McKean, Kara decided to move into Yarram on her marriage to him in 1963, giving up her work as caretaker. Kara learned to drive at the age of 56, planning to regularly visit the Park. Unfortunately, with little knowledge of engines when the car broke down Kara was unable to visit as she had planned. Thomas became sick, requiring a leg operation in 1983 that left him in a wheelchair (Kara became his carer) and eventually he died in 1986. Kara continued to pursue her other interests: visiting patients at the hospital, a life member of the Yarram Hospital, a life member of the Save the Children's Fund, a member of the Blind Auxiliary, Red Cross, Uniting Church Fellowship and an Elder of the Uniting Church.

With failing health herself, Kara moved into the Heytesbury Lodge Nursing Home in Cobden, in 1995, near to some other members of her family. She last visited the park in 1996, spending time with the current ranger, Craig Campbell, reminiscing about her time at the Park. Craig commented "through her work at Tarra Valley, Kara became acquainted with most of the state's leading naturalists of the day, including former State Governor John Landy, Crosbie Morrison, Ros Garnet, and James Willis, who all corresponded with her and came to visit her on several occasions. She herself became something of a celebrity through several newspaper articles written about her and her work as a ranger at Tarra Valley."

On the occasion of her 100<sup>th</sup> birthday in 2004 (some 4 weeks before the [first] Centenary of Tarra-Bulga National Park), John Landy, Governor of Victoria at that time, wrote in congratulating her on her own Centenary:

*"I remember you very fondly from the days when you were the Ranger in charge of Tarra Valley National Park. I recall spending many hours with you, learning about the trees, the shrubs, the ferns*

*and particularly the fungi. Tarra Valley was a wonderland with mushrooms, toadstools, bracket fungi and coral fungi of so many shapes, colours and textures. It was a naturalist's delight and to have your expert advice was an added bonus."*

Kara passed away on 10<sup>th</sup> June 2006, just short of her 102<sup>nd</sup> birthday and before the centenary of Tarra Valley Park. Kara was buried in Yarram, close to her beloved park. Her granddaughter, Janice Cherry, speaking at her funeral remembered her this way:

*"Gran faced many heartaches and disappointments in her life however she faced them all with an incredible courage, determination and grace and was able to get on with life and make the most of things without a complaint. Gran was not faint hearted. She also had high moral values and a strong sense of justice and fairplay. She was always ready to help anyone in need and could meet someone down on their luck and take them home for a cup of tea regardless of the fact she didn't know who they were. We are so lucky that such a special lady has blessed our lives. Her love of nature, gentleness, strength of character, kindness and devotion and love of her family has touched us all and will continue with us forever."*

*A wise old owl sat up in an oak*

*The more he saw the less he spoke*

*The less he spoke the more he heard*

*Why can't we all be like that bird*

(written by Kara in the autograph book of her granddaughter, Janice Cherry, in 1969)

POST-SCRIPT: The Information Panel outlining the work of Kara Healey, unveiled by 3 of Kara's 4 daughters on the occasion of the recent Centenary of Tarra Valley, is to be found in the Picnic Shelter at the Tarra Valley Picnic Area. The Tarra-Bulga National Park Visitor's Centre at Balook houses many of the original works of Kara Healey – writings, sketches and correspondence – including more detailed information about her life and work. Opening hours are 10am – 4pm weekends and public holidays or by arrangement with the Ranger. The Friends of Tarra-Bulga National Park Inc. have named their ongoing Lyrebird Survey and Photo-Monitoring programs the "Kara Healey Environmental Monitoring Program" in honour of Kara Healey.

- Written by Peter Bryant (President, Friends of Tarra-Bulga National Park Inc.) with assistance from Craig Campbell, current Ranger of Tarra-Bulga National Park.



Kara Healey with some of her collection.



Kara Healey with lyrebird chick in nest (c. 1960).



Kara as Caretaker of Tarra Valley Park. Note the money bag for collecting parking fees, and small round metal badge worn on the jumper identifying the wearer as caretaker of the Park.



Kara in her work clothes.



Kara Healey on the occasion of her last visit to Tarra-Bulga National Park, with current ranger Craig Campbell (February 1996).



Three of Kara Healey's daughters (left to right), Gillian Skeyhill, Wilma Gay and Dawn Reddick, at the unveiling of the information board in their mother's honour.