

The intriguing tale of the orphaned stalagmite - the power of story-telling

John Brush and Regina Roach
Canberra Speleological Society Inc

This is the incredible story of how a large calcite stalagmite that was about to be obliterated at the Wagga Wagga tip in New South Wales came to be there; of how the cave it was from was identified; and of how it is linked to the early history of the Canberra Speleological Society.

In November 2017, an eagle-eyed Wagga resident was dropping off rubbish at the local tip (or the Gregadoo Waste Management Centre as it is more accurately known) and noticed what appeared to be a stalagmite in a heap of broken bricks and concrete. The resident alerted staff and in the nick of time, a loader operator who was about to tidy up the pile was radioed to stop.



*The stalagmite that was retrieved from the Wagga Wagga tip
(John Brush)*

The stalagmite was retrieved and carried with some difficulty to the Manager's office where it sat for a couple of months. As the stalagmite measures more than metre around the base, is about 60cm long and weighs in at 50-60kg, it is not hard to imagine it getting in the way. In a quandary about what to do with it, Greg Pym, the Manager, eventually phoned Yarrangobilly Caves and offered to deliver it there (a 400km, 5-hour round trip). In other words, to pass the problem on to George Bradford.

The stalagmite was presented to George in February and the following month, a brief article and a photo of the handover appeared in the Wagga Council's newsletter.

The story was re-published in a local newspaper, which led to the local ABC radio station phoning Yarrangobilly Caves for more information. Regina Roach gave an interview and speculated that the stalagmite might have been a by-product of 'renovation' works at Yarrangobilly in the late 1960s or early 1970s.

After the interview went to air, Wendy Lockley, a former Wagga resident talked to the radio station and revealed the stalagmite once belonged to her father, the late Jim Webb.

Now Jim Webb was quite a character. For many years he lived in Canberra where he worked as a horticulturalist and botanist and in his spare time indulged in a range of outdoor activities. In the early 1950s he was a member of the Canberra Alpine Club and went skiing and bushwalking and also visited a few caves.

Significantly, in 1953 Jim and five other members of the Alpine Club joined in the search for Brian O'Brien, a Sydney Caver who became lost in East Deep Creek Cave at Yarrangobilly. None of the Alpine Club members had previously visited Yarrangobilly. However, after three days of searching, Jim and two of the other Alpine Club members were successful in finding a cold and hungry O'Brien in a previously unknown part of the cave. By this time the caving bug had bitten, and the following year, Jim, Joe Jennings and several other caving friends in the Alpine Club established the Canberra Speleological Society. One of the first karst areas the newly-formed CSS focussed on was Wee Jasper, where members explored and mapped Dip Cave.

While exploring Dip Cave the cavers came across large accumulations of bat guano and the astute Jim, with his horticultural background, immediately recognised the value of the guano – not only in terms of its potential to fertilise the gardens of Canberra but also as a useful source of pocket money. So, Jim formed a company (Federal Fertilizer Company) and took out a mining lease over the cave.

An old car was positioned beside the 30m vertical Daylight Hole entrance to Dip Cave and a crane attached to the car was used to winch out bags of guano. For several years, Jim's weekends were spent digging guano, bagging it and selling it to Canberra gardeners. Today, the scattered and rusty remains of the car near the Daylight Hole are the only visible reminders of the mining operation at Dip Cave.



The old car that was used to winch guano out of the Daylight Hole of Dip Cave, Wee Jasper. The photo was taken in 1979 and since then, parts of the car have been removed and what remains has been scattered around the area (John Brush)

However, there are some timbers in nearby Church Cave which was also mined.

As noted above, Jim was quite a character and he had a prankish sense of humour, a trait shared with several other CSS members of the era such as Joe Jennings and Harry Black. There are stories of a CSIRO fire training exercise where carbide was hidden in a bonfire (more water = more fire) and of a hydrogen-filled balloon posing as Sputnik in 1956 - but I digress.

In her interview with ABC radio, Wendy Lockley said that during the course of her father's mining operations, he came across several broken stalagmites in the guano and one that particularly grabbed his attention was winched out of the cave and given a new home in their backyard in Canberra. The stalagmite apparently became a treasured family possession, as it was moved with the family from house to house around Canberra.

In 1984, Jim and his wife moved to Wagga to be closer to Wendy and her family. The stalagmite went with them.



Rob Scorse and Denis Marsh, members of the Kosciuszko Speleological Reference Group, inspecting the stalagmite (John Brush)

After Jim and his wife moved into an aged-care unit, Wendy's family became custodians of the stalagmite and continued the family tradition by placing it in their own backyard.

Sadly, Jim passed away aged 86, in July 2012. Exactly five years later, Wendy and her husband decided to downsize and move back to Canberra. Having no place to store the large stalagmite in their new home, they faced a difficult decision and decided to leave the stalagmite in the backyard when they sold their house in Wagga.

Wendy said on air she later heard from friends that the new owners had completely cleared the backyard and that she was upset to hear there was no longer any sign of the stalagmite.

When she heard Regina's interview, her feelings of "great guilt" were eased by news of the stalagmite's retrieval from the tip and its subsequent journey to the Visitor Centre at Yarrangobilly.

What will now happen to the stalagmite? Wendy indicated on air that given Jim's early association with Yarrangobilly, it would be appropriate for it to be displayed there. However, there is little display space in the Visitor Centre and the stalagmite has been temporarily consigned to a dark corner of the staff tearoom and it only sees the light of day when annoying speleologists, intrigued about where it might have come from, ask George to carry it outside so that it can be photographed.

George did have a vision of using the stalagmite in an interpretive display. However, now that its origins are known, will Yarrangobilly be so keen on keeping it? Should it be returned to Wee Jasper? At the present time, CSS has yet to mount a search in Dip Cave to see if we can discover exactly where the stalagmite was once attached. Even if we do, should it be replanted there? Should it be displayed elsewhere in the Wee Jasper Valley?

Such questions cannot yet be answered.



Yarrangobilly Manager, George Bradford, returns the stalagmite to the safety of the Yarrangobilly Visitor Centre (John Brush)