

# FAREWELL TO THE WOMBAT

- Mia Thurgate

I doubt there would be more than a handful of ACKMA members that haven't meet or heard of the Wombat (aka Ernst Holland). After all, he has left behind quite a legacy. Speaking to him earlier tonight, I discovered that if it wasn't for Ernie, there might not be an ACKMA. Apparently, Ernie attended the ASF management conference at Jenolan in 1972. After offering the opinion that "the ASF had the right concept, but weren't getting to the right audience", a motley crew of people got together at Yarrangobilly, formed ACKMA and nominated Ernie as the first president. The rest, as they say is history.

From that point onwards, Ernie became a permanent fixture of ACKMA, and served on the executive right up until the recent AGM at Buchan this year. Flicking back through old conference proceedings, I noticed that Ernie presented or was a co-author of one paper at every conference since 1985. The last conference at Naracoorte was a shining example of his style. He hosted a workshop on 'Developing Standards for Tourist Cave Development' and ran the event like an auction. Participants made bids to have their ideas heard and the pace was fast and furious! The guide exchange program was another Holland original and one that I hope to revive in the near future (or I'll never hear the end of it)!

It was with mixed feelings that those of us who worked with Ernie over the years began preparations for his retirement party at Jenolan in early July. We would surely miss him, but a break from the frenetic activity that always surrounded him seemed quite appealing. After persuading him that a party on top of Lucas Rocks wasn't a great idea (imagine hoards of revellers plunging to their doom as they slipped on ice-covered rocks), we settled on the fire shed as the venue.

For his last day at work, Ernie planned to spend the day showing caves at Jenolan while dressed in his uniform from 20 years ago. We'll never know if the uniform still fits as the reserve was closed on that day and Ernie didn't make it. The night before the heavens opened and around 15 cm of snow was dumped around Jenolan. Fortunately the road was cleared later that day, so the party was on!

Around 120 partygoers made it to Jenolan, and after they had eaten their fill, and a few beers, wines and the like had been consumed, the frivolities began. Andrew Fletcher, General Manager and Trust Board member, Richard Mackay presented the 'formal' speeches for the

evening. Nice things were said and a few jokes were told (including something about a 'karst of thousands'). Ernie was presented with a framed set of historic photos of Jenolan as a momento, and his wife Elaine was given a huge bunch of flowers in recognition of her long-suffering support.

It was then time for the 'unofficial' presentations. With the help of the kids at the party we unveiled a 'This is Your Life' photo collection that included everything from baby photos to more recent escapades. (Kent, I might be persuaded to part with a few of them for a price). We later presented these to Ernie in a folder, and apparently the family are still giggling over some of the captions we came up with.

There are many tales, tall and true, that involve the wombat, and a small handpicked crew delivered the best of these to the crowd. Steve Maclean and John Callaghan told us what the guides got up to in the early days, Mike Chalker spoke of his long association with Ernie and their various escapades, and Andy Spate gave a very lively version of the Flipper story. Other staff contributions included a wombat trap baited with Green Ginger Wine (Ernie sent his grandkids in to retrieve the booty) and a Sooty Owl (rubber of course) on a spit.

The presentations had been going on for quite a while by this time, so to finish things off, we asked people with gifts to come forward (expecting this would only take a few minutes). Half an hour later, Ernie had been inundated with dozens of gifts and many more impromptu speeches. I'm sure he was overwhelmed and exhausted and ready to party by this stage. Just goes to show that Ernie had an impact on a lot of people.

With the formalities finally over, everyone sat down and really got into the spirit of things. John Callaghan announced that it was the 'best party ever held at Jenolan'. When I left at around two in the morning, the crowd had dwindled considerably. Rumor has it that the party didn't end until dawn, and that the Wombeyan crew was amongst the last to leave (let this be a warning to those intending to go to next year's ACKMA conference)!

All in all it was a fun night and a fitting way to see off one of the legends of ACKMA and Australian caving. Many people helped to make the party the success it was. Thanks to Glenda Pollard, Faye Christopher, Lea Wilkin, the staff at Jenolan and to the Trust for their efforts.