

## A WHITE CHRISTMAS IN JULY - IN QUEENSLAND!

Reminders of Australia's antarctic past can be found in abundant fossils and the few remnants of flora such the Antarctic Beech which still grow in Queensland's border ranges. They are a record of a time when Australia was part of the super-continent Gondwana. About 80 million years ago, Australia split from Gondwana and commenced drifting north, towards warmer climes at approximate half the speed that hair grows.

In addition to our fossil record and flora, our weather also reminds us of an antarctic heritage when cold fronts, or cold pools of antartic air emerge from deep within the Southern Ocean to sweep over eastern Australia. The winter of 1984 provided just such an event with blizzards, snow and ice descending on Queensland, prompting a rush of visitors to Queensland's very own snowfields.

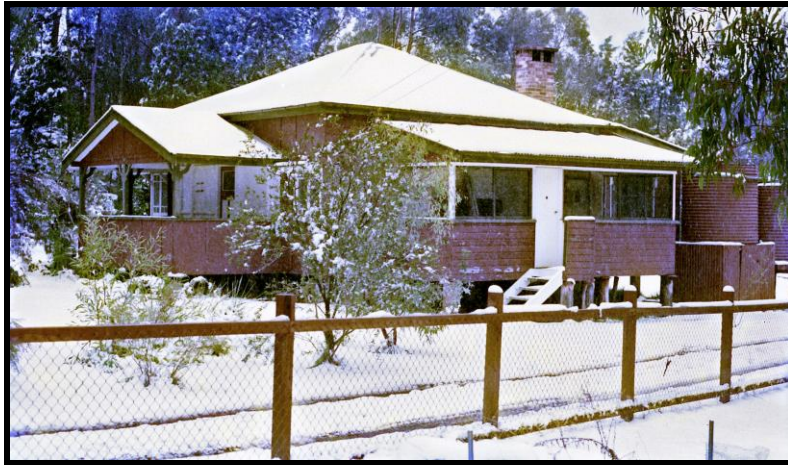


Girraween National Park 1984, Queensland, Australia - Photo Credit: Fred and Ulrike Mannietta

The severe cold outbreak of July 1984 commenced in the early morning of Tuesday July 3<sup>rd</sup> when a cold front, extending from a deep low-pressure system south of Tasmania, moved across the south of the State. This front was followed by a blast of cold air emanating from borders of Antarctica. The day began with early morning snowfalls stretching from border districts, through Toowoomba to the hinterland of the Sunshine Coast. The heaviest falls, up to 60 centimetres according to some reports occurred thirteen kilometres south east of Stanthorpe on the Eukey plateau. By late on Tuesday evening many roads in the Stanthorpe and Warwick regions were impassable, with conditions north of Warwick, according to police, "like a blizzard". The higher parts of southern Queensland were transformed into a winter wonderland

"It's just like a Christmas scene" commented stranded bowler Mrs Pat Collins as she looked out of her motel window at the falling snow. Mrs Collins and four other bowlers from Warwick were visiting Tenterfield when the biggest cold outbreak since 1900 surged into Queensland. With their match cancelled and roads closed by ice and snow, the five ladies took refuge in a motel and played cards as blizzards swept through the countryside between Tenterfield and Warwick. Further north, in Brisbane, residents on the top floor of Lennons hotel watched snow drifting against their apartment windows

while at Laidley, shire chairman Ernie Kowaltzke, out inspecting his pumpkin crop at the foot of Mt Zahn took shelter from a light snow shower.



The Rangers residence at the entrance of Girraween, south of Stanthorpe on the following day. Photo courtesy of Ulrike and Siegfried Manietta

Early on Wednesday morning, I heard by radio that snow had been falling on the Southern Downs for most of previous day. As it was school holidays, I decided to drive to Stanthorpe, with my son Justin and hopefully watch snow falling above Queensland's very own snowline. Our hopes were high and the day cool, but sunny as we headed South on the Mount Lindsay Highway. An hour out from Brisbane, we passed the vast bulk of the 1356-metre high Mount Barney, but there was no sign of snow. Still hopeful, we turned west towards the small town of Killarney with little notion of what lay in store for us.

Thirty minutes later we had our first sight of snow, glistening in the late morning sun high up to our right on Killarney heights. This was not the first time snow had visited Killarney. On the 5<sup>th</sup> August 1923, residents looked out on the snow capped peak of Backhouse Mountain and were "inclined to believe that the snow that fell that afternoon was the heaviest ever experienced". The Courier Mail commented, "The ranges to the north of Killarney, Hawthorne's Knob, Backhouse Mountain and Mount Brosnan were left dazzling in the late afternoon sun, the farmlands on the mountainside transformed from dark green to beautiful white. The scrubs on the ranges were supporting a heavy mantle of snow, and the sunlight played in multitudinous colours on the snow which covered the ground in many places".

It was time to make a decision. Would we drive up to the snowfields of Killarney, or press on to Stanthorpe? The latter seemed the best course as towards the south-west, low, dense clouds were hanging above the Granite Belt providing, perhaps, the best opportunity to witness falling snow in Queensland.

Twenty minutes later we turned off the Mount Lindsay Highway and climbed the 300 meters rise up to Stanthorpe. After crossing an abandoned railway line, we joined the New England Highway at Thulimbah (elevation 920 ms) and encountered the first drifts of snow lying in shady patches beside the road. It was snow - real snow, snow you could make into snowballs or a snowman. After a brief play and with great excitement we headed for Stanthorpe.

It was now early afternoon and although a cold 2-3degrees Centigrade, much of the morning's snow had melted in the area we were passing through. A bit disappointing, however, nothing could detract from the extraordinary sight of the many snowmen that lined the road. I had seen and build many snowmen myself as a boy in England, but never had I witnessed the remarkable talent that sculpted these amazing and diverse works of art. Each snow character reflected the personality of its creators, and humour was definitely the theme for the day.

We soon discovered that we were not the only snow chasers to drive up to the Granite Belt that day. Stanthorpe was overflowing with sightseers. That morning, two visitors from Brisbane had skied the slopes of Pint Pot creek on the outskirts of town, while a dozen others camped in the snow at Girraween National Park. "Long convoys of cars jammed the New England Highway as families made an extraordinary, lemming- like rush to watch the snow fall", commented the Courier Mail. "They streamed into Stanthorpe's take away food shops, brought out the town's entire supply of camera film and pies and heavily booked available accommodation". One inspired visitor, from far north Queensland was so keen to see "the Queensland snow season", he chartered a plane to Brisbane and then a taxi to Stanthorpe for the day. A local Motel operator said, "I wish the snow would last for two months", while others commented, "if Stanthorpe could order snow, then let it snow".



Snow covered boulders in Girraween National Park. Photo courtesy of Ulrike and Siegfried Manietta

Being well past two o'clock and getting hungry, we quickly found a warm and not too crowded café in which to have a late lunch. The café was a buzz of excitement, everybody talking about their trip to the snow or the great snowstorm of the previous night. One group of visitors who chanced upon the snow when travelling to the Granite Belt to buy the local wines laughed at the prospects of finding their wine already chilled. Locals recounted stories of antarctic blizzards, being snowed in or rescued from a stranded car. There was even vague talk of a Yeti or Abominable Snowman seen prowling the rugged granite monoliths of the Girraween national park in the blizzard. No doubt a local with a vivid imagination and notion to promote the tourist trade.

With lunch finished, we left the warm press of the café, climbed back in the car and continued south down the New England Highway towards Ballandean. On every side there were large expanses of snow, the remains of the total cover that blanketed the ground earlier in the day and on Tuesday – the New England Highway is aptly named.

Reaching Glen Aplin at four o'clock, with dusk falling it was time to turn towards home. We were a little disappointed that we had not experienced falling snow, but the day had been marvellous otherwise.

Then, just north of Stanthorpe the world changed. Flakes of snow started curling in towards the car as we drove along, settling in crusty white patches on the windscreen – at last, falling snow.

With the snow getting heavier, we turned off the highway, pulled up beside some open fields near Applethorpe and jumped out of the car. This was the experience we had come to the Granite Belt for, to stand in a field of antarctic white, snow falling all about us, a biting south-wester tugging at our scarves and pressing against our coats. Thank goodness we remembered to grab some gloves before leaving home that morning. It was a white Christmas – in July – in Queensland.