

# VICTORIA'S HERITAGE

## ZUMSTEIN'S CROSSING, GRAMPAINS NATIONAL PARK

by Daniel Catrice, circa 1995

*At Zumstein's Crossing in the Grampians National Park, three pisé cottages overlook the picturesque MacKenzie River. Built by Walter Zumstein in the 1930s, the cottages provided accommodation for a generation of holiday-makers. The cottages are also some of the few surviving pisé (or rammed earth) buildings in Victoria. They demonstrate Zumstein's skill as a builder, his keen sense of improvisation, and his unyielding capacity to endure and achieve.*



Wally Zumstein's original house, circa 1920s. Photograph by Stan Parfett, courtesy of DSE.

Walter Ernest Zumstein was born in Melbourne in July 1885, the second son of Swiss-born Herman Zumstein and his English wife Emily. Educated at Caulfield Grammar, he was forced to abandon hope of a university education when his father, an importer of drapery and furnishings, suffered several business losses. Walter worked briefly in a shipping office, then travelled to Gippsland where he learned bee-keeping. In 1906, he was employed by the firm W.J. & F. Barnes to manage a bee range in the Grampians. It was Walter's task to establish the hives, relying on bush tracks for the supply of materials and provisions and trusting in the knowledge and bush skills he had acquired in Gippsland.

Conditions in the forest were harsh and the Barnes' were stern taskmasters. In 1910, Zumstein resigned his position and applied to the State Forest Department for his own bee range on the eastern bank of the MacKenzie River. Zumstein cleared the site and established his hives which he transported to the Crossing with the aid of a wheelbarrow. In March 1911, Zumstein sought permission to establish a residence in a corner of his lease. A weatherboard and stone cottage (now

demolished) was completed in the following year. The weatherboards were stained with linseed oil and the interior was lined with paper and hessian. As a builder, Zumstein demonstrated a keen appreciation for improvised materials. He later used this skill to good effect in the construction of the pisé cottages.

In 1915, at the age of twenty-nine, Zumstein enlisted as a private in the Australian Imperial Force (A.I.F.). He embarked for overseas service with the 5th Battalion, landing on Gallipoli in May 1915. In the bitter conditions Walter developed enteric fever. He was evacuated to Mudros and thence to the County of London War Hospital. On leave in Scotland he met Jean Brooks. The pair were married on Anzac Day, 1916.

Walter returned to Melbourne with his wife in September 1919. He was discharged from the A.I.F. and by November had returned to his bee range and cottage. During the 1920s, Walter and Jean worked together to develop the area as a tourist destination, planting the European trees that are a feature of the Crossing.

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In 1930, Zumstein commenced construction of the first of the pisé cottages, the 'Red' Shack (now demolished), to provide holiday accommodation for tourists. After 1934, he built the cottages which remain on the site today - the 'Green', 'Blue' and 'Orange' Shacks. Zumstein identified each cottage by the colour of the painted timber lintels over the windows and doors. Jean Zumstein was responsible for all of the internal painting and the interior decoration.

The sequence of construction - 'Green', then 'Blue' and 'Orange' - was determined by the availability of money and building materials. Zumstein first collected second-hand materials, including some doors and windows from the Lutheran Church in Horsham, then constructed the walls of the cottages incorporating these materials.

During the 1930s, there was renewed interest in pisé construction. Pisé, or rammed earth construction, is a method of building walls using compressed soil. The soil is placed into timber formwork and compacted using a hand held rammer. When the soil has been compacted the formwork is removed and shifted along the wall for the next section of construction. Pisé is a particularly suitable form of construction where building sites are remote or funds are limited. It is also considered to be superior to mud brick with respect to weather resistance due to its high density and hardness.

The construction process was laborious and time-consuming. Large excavations into the hillside were dug by hand and all the excavated material was removed by wheelbarrow. The area contained large granite boulders. Two boulders, obviously too difficult to remove, remain a prominent feature in two of the cottages. One is located in a corner of the 'Blue' Shack and another is located in a corner of the 'Orange' Shack.

The potential of the Grampians as a tourist destination was recognised in 1917 when the

Field Naturalists Club of Victoria and the Government Tourist Bureau combined to promote the natural attractions of the Grampians through annual springtime excursions. The first tourist road, between Halls Gap and Mount Victory, was completed in 1923 and in the following year the road through the Mirranatwa Gap to Dunkeld was commenced. By 1931 roads had been constructed between Halls Gap and the principal town in the region. The Grampians was also a popular destination for bushwalkers. The publication of several guides to 'hiking' in Victoria promoted a new enthusiasm and interest in the pastime.

Walter Zumstein benefited from the popularity of the Grampians and the growing enthusiasm for nature. In the early 1930s, he opened a walking track to the Fish Falls with the aid of unemployed workers. During 1935 he commenced excavation for a concrete swimming pool and on completion charged visitors six pence for a swim. Later, he was granted an additional quarter acre of land for the construction of a tennis court. So popular was the resort that it was common for hundreds of campers to converge on the area for the Christmas holidays. Walter supplied campers with milk and honey and transported the mail in an ageing Model T Ford.

After the Second World War, Zumstein asked the Forests Commission of Victoria to take over the licence for the four cottages in return for £3,500 for improvements. He proposed that the cottages be used to house migrants employed as forest workers. Although unwilling to acquire the cottages, the Commission gave its permission for the licence to be transferred to an approved purchaser. The transfer of licences proceeded slowly because Walter was concerned that the area be properly maintained. 'As this is the northern entrance to the Grampians', he said, 'it must, in the future require strict supervision'.

Walter finally sold the licences to families that had been associated with the area for several decades. One family had camped at the

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Crossing since the 1920s and had helped cart materials for the construction of the cottages.

The sale of the three pisé cottages in 1958 paid for an overseas trip for Walter and his wife to visit their daughter in the United States. The couple returned to the Crossing in 1959, then moved to Horsham. Walter died at the Wimmera Base Hospital on October 17, 1963. His body was cremated and his ashes scattered at the Crossing.

*Zumsteins Crossing is 22 km from Halls Gap or 53 km from Horsham. For more information, contact Brambuk the National Park and Cultural Centre at Halls Gap .*