

THOMAS FARMER, great grandfather of *Land for Wildlife* member Ray Farmer, selected land in the Boddington area in the late 1850's. Thomas Farmer and George Blechynden had camped for two nights on the banks of the Hotham River on their journey south looking for suitable land. Whilst George settled further south in Boyup Brook, Thomas returned to the fertile banks of the Hotham River.

He selected 100 acres on either side of the river, built a wattle and daub hut and started clearing the land to grow wheat for the family and pasture for their animals. The land chosen was very fertile and lies within the only "greenstone belt" in the southwest section of the Yilgarn block known as the Saddleback Group. Here the iron-rich basalt rocks have weathered to form a very strong crumbly chocolate soil, 3-4 feet deep. The selection was also adjacent to a stone quarry used by the aboriginal people for making spear tips and axe heads.

"The old field" as the 100 acres is known today, had very little timber and was covered in Grass Trees (*Xanthorrhoea* sp). A post and split rail fence was built to enclose the area and gradually the fertile soils

THE WAY WE WERE

A BOODIE RAT WALL



Ray Farmer and the remains of a dry-stone wall built to keep boodie rats out of his great grandfather's wheat crop.

were cleared. They produced an average of 8 bags of wheat to the acre for the first 12 years without the addition of any animal manures. That is if you managed to harvest the crop!

Boodie rats and tammar wallabies also chose to feed from the area. During the first years a member of the family would stay up at night and scare the animals off with a loud gunshot, however in the interest of a good nights sleep for all, a more permanent solution needed to be found.

The plentiful rocks in the area lent themselves to the building of a dry-stone wall by piling rocks up to the second rail in the post and rail fence. Included in this dry-stone wall are discarded "core stones" from the nearby quarry.

The boodies and tammars would graze up to the stone wall, then travel along it rather than "hop the fence". It also provided an effective break to bushfires, ".....more than one bushfire has been kept out of the cornfield by means of this wall". (Inquirer, August 1887).

The post and split rail fence has long since gone and all that remains are the piled stones to remind us of a time when small mammals roamed the area.

Avril Baxter

Acknowledgements: Ray Farmer and Becoming Boddington. Ferrell J. Shire of Boddington 1992.

DEEP beneath the broom bush shrublands of Western Australia is one of the world's more extraordinary plants. A fully subterranean orchid! Known since the 1920s when the waxy white and maroon flowers were uncovered by ploughing near Corrigin, the orchid (*Rhizanthella gardneri*) has eluded all but the most avid of observers. Without green leaves, no surface growth and with flowers buried up to 5cm underground it takes some effort, usually on all fours, to uncover the exquisite flowering head of this remarkable plant.

From the time of the first discovery of the orchid, scientists pondered how this plant could possibly survive without light and growing in such demanding conditions. Kings Park and University of Western Australia scientists started work on the plant in 1980 to try and unravel how the plant grows, what pollinates an

FLORA

UNLOCKING THE DARK SECRETS OF THE WESTERN AUSTRALIAN UNDERGROUND ORCHID

Kingsley Dixon

underground flower and how to germinate the species for ensuring its long term conservation. Kings Park has successfully germinated seed and is now growing a number of plants in association with the plant partner that the orchid needs to ensure a supply of carbohydrate and other nutrients. Not surprisingly the orchid appears to only grow on the root system of the broom honeymyrtle (*Melaleuca uncinata*) one of the most common shrubs in the wheatbelt. Flowering is expected in May 2004 if all the plants continue to grow at their present rate.

If you have the broom honeymyrtle on a remnant site on your farm it might be worth having a look for the orchid next May-June when it flowers. Just gently scrape away the top layer of leaf litter and a few mms of soil and if there is an orchid you will see the distinctive glistening, waxy white flowers. Sounds easy? Well it is important to remember that on average it takes about 8 person-hours to locate an underground orchid in a new location! If you locate an orchid you must not further disturb it as they are specially protected by Law. Contact me at Kings Park and take a photograph. We would be happy to hear of any new finds.

Kingsley Dixon is Director, Science at Kings Park and Botanic Garden. He can be contacted by email on: kdixon@kpbp.wa.gov.au