



Gentleman explorer

writer *Jarab Weinreich*

photographs courtesy of *Jenny McLelland*

At the dawn of the 20th century, our island state was a wilderness largely unexplored by Europeans, a wild land of rugged beauty dominated by an overwhelming sense of isolation – so near, yet so far beyond the reach of the ordinary individual. Enter Fred Smithies . . .

Explorer, mountaineer and pioneer in every sense of the word, Frederick Smithies once explained that, denied the opportunity to travel the globe, he became determined to explore every inch of his corner of it. Smithies combined a respectable, if unremarkable, career in insurance with an extraordinary second life as a gentleman explorer and as a wilderness photographer before the term was known. Seemingly fearless and driven by curiosity, Smithies united communities and thrilled early 20th century Tasmania with his lantern slides and astonishing photography.

At the dawn of the 20th century, our island state was a wilderness largely unexplored by Europeans, a wild land of rugged beauty dominated by an overwhelming sense of isolation – so near, yet so far beyond the reach of the ordinary individual. It was into this largely untouched land that Frederick Smithies was born, in Ulverstone on August 16,

1885, the youngest child of Wesley Witt and Selina (nee Huxtable) Smithies. The family lived in Ulverstone until Fred, as he was commonly known, was seven, when a house fire prompted a move to Beltana, now part of Lindisfarne, Hobart.

It was here that Smithies spent most of his childhood, attending school and delivering newspapers for pocket money. According to various sources, he developed his love of bushwalking climbing Mount Wellington. That is not verified, but we can be sure that a love and appreciation for the natural world manifested itself early in his life.

For the moment, however, the gentleman explorer in him would have to wait while he sought employment.

Smithies began his career in 1902 when he was accepted into the South British Insurance Company in Launceston as a junior clerk. Ten years later, he transferred to the Atlas Assurance

opposite Fred Smithies on top of rock formation, Cradle Mountain, c1935

Company as manager of its Launceston branch. The Atlas Company was still a small concern and Fred's position was a part-time job.

In 1912, the year the Titanic sank and the year of the North Mount Lyell Mine disaster, he married Ida Heyward, a fellow member of the Art Society, at a ceremony in Hobart. Sadly, Ida died in 1928, aged 46.

By 1924 Smithies was living in Trevallyn, with views over the Tamar and the mountains beyond. As Launceston bustled around him, however, he had other things on his active mind. He used an Indian Scout motorcycle for commuting, and recognised its potential as a tool of exploration. The culmination of more than 12 months of planning was a pioneering trip to Zeehan via Waratah and Corinna. Zeehan was accessible only by rail. The few walking tracks through the wilderness were impassable to any kind of horse-drawn vehicle.

Smithies left Launceston on Saturday, February 16, 1924, with his friend and fellow adventurer Bill King. They carried the most basic survival equipment aboard their near-identical Indian Scout motorcycles. Smithies also took his camera, and was able to capture sights scarcely seen before.

Waratah was reached on Sunday, where final preparations were made. "Tanks were filled up, loads strapped on, and two little business-like Indian Scout machines were ready to face the unknown," Smithies later wrote.

As they left Waratah, he recalled that: "Opinions, both encouraging and discouraging – mostly the latter – were freely offered by local residents on our chances of getting through. Then, I think we were for the most part regarded as a pair of lunatics, who would be returning by the way we came in a few days."

Fred and Bill rode into the unknown, stopping often to cut through the dense undergrowth and haul the bikes over countless fallen logs. They travelled by raft down the Pieman River and emerged in Zeehan 14 days after their departure from Launceston.

Upon their return to civilisation, the two men were heroes, and Smithies literally wrote himself into the history books when his extensive account of the largely trouble-free expedition was published in the Launceston *Weekly Courier*. He lavished praise on the "little Indian Scout machines", and hoped that one day the "beautiful little section of Tasmania will be opened up and properly appreciated by thousands".

This was not Fred Smithies' first expedition, nor was it his most audacious, but it was his first motorised escapade and also the first properly documented trip, both in the photographic souvenirs and in the form of Smithies' distinctive prose.

In the months and years following Ida's death, Smithies had occupied himself with his other great love, bushwalking. George and Florence Perrin were early naturalists, and had been exploring Tasmania's mountains since at least 1907. Smithies first met the Perrins in the early 1920s, and in 1925 they had accompanied Fred on his remarkable trek from Adamsfield over the Spires Range and on to the peak of the Prince of Wales Range. Perhaps the most famous photograph of Fred Smithies is that of him perched triumphantly on the peak of the Prince

Fred and Jean Smithies, mid-1930s





of Wales Range, surveying the uncharted wilderness of the West Coast beyond.

On October 8, 1930, Smithies married Jean Perrin, the eldest child of George and Florence. It was a fitting union – Jean had known the bush since childhood and shared Smithies’ love of the outdoors. Their first child, David, was born in 1931, followed by Margaret and Anthony in 1938 and Jennifer in 1946.

Despite his love of motorcycles, a graduation to four wheels seemed inevitable as availability slowly lowered car prices. Smithies acquired a Model T Ford, and in 1929 bought Ford’s latest product, the Model A. A popular vehicle for the period, it was reliable and robust, inexpensive to buy and run, and far easier to use than its predecessor. It was the obvious choice. The little dark green tourer, nicknamed “Lizzie”, would later become synonymous with Smithies’ unique style of exploration.

In early 1932, shortly before the completion of the West Coast Road, Smithies put Lizzie to the ultimate test, adding “intrepid motorist” to the growing list of unofficial titles bestowed upon him. The mission was to drive from Derwent Bridge to



top Early skiing trip, c1930

middle Great Lake area, 1932

above Skiing trip to the Great Lake

Queenstown, taking the little Ford over terrain that would beat many modern off-roaders.

When he finally “bowled into Queenstown”, to use his own words, the locals could scarcely believe what they were seeing. There were fewer than a dozen cars in Queenstown, and the lack

of roads to and from the isolated community rendered them virtually useless.

This was about to change – completion of the West Coast Road made it only 257 kilometres from Hobart to Queenstown. However, it was still about 321 from Launceston and 482 from Burnie. Clearly, there was a major link missing, and despite considerable pressure from the public, the government wasn’t prepared to spend large sums of money on what it saw as an impossibly difficult exercise. Smithies, never a man to give in easily, took it upon himself to prove the feasibility of a roadway. In late 1932, he drove from the Great Lake to Bronte before a road had even been surveyed.

A wonderful photograph exists, in the pages of JG Branagan’s 1984 biography, of Lizzie being dragged through mud on the “missing link” by a horse, with Jean Smithies pushing. They were delayed by punctures again for several hours in an area of sparse plains, later named Smithies Flat, but the trip was completed with relative ease and, having proven that it was viable, work on a road began soon after. It would be named Missing Link Road.

The achievements of Fred Smithies were formally acknowledged in 1946 when King George VI bestowed upon him an OBE in recognition of his selfless service to the Tasmanian community. At home, those achievements were recognised daily by countless people whose lives he’d enhanced.

below and middle The new Ben Lomond Road, 1953

bottom A rest stop on the Ben Lomond Road, 1954



Lizzie, the Model A Ford, bound for restoration



Lizzie on show at the National Automobile Museum of Tasmania, Launceston photo Dave Groves

Deciding the nature of Frederick Smithies' ultimate legacy is not a task to be undertaken lightly, not least because he contributed so much in so many ways. Surely, however, Missing Link Road, the life-line of the West Coast, ranks highly.

As old age approached, Smithies refused to slow down. He remained physically fitter than many men half his age. In 1962 he retired from his position as manager of the Launceston branch of the Atlas Assurance Company, a post he'd held for 50 years. Now in his 70s, Smithies gave up carrying heavy packs, but continued bushwalking. In 1972, aged 87, he resigned as treasurer of the Launceston Art Society after 60 years.

Smithies spent his later years at The Grange, his St Leonards property, and on caravanning trips on the mainland with Jean. He celebrated his 90th birthday at Lightning Ridge in New South Wales, surrounded by his family.

Smithies remained in good health until he was hospitalised, aged 94, on October 13, 1979,

and passed away peacefully. Thus ended the remarkable life of a Tasmanian legend, a man who, for all his triumphs, remained resolutely modest.

Following Fred Smithies' death, Lizzie, the little Model A Ford, remained in the family. After a full restoration, the car was loaned to the National Automobile Museum of Tasmania in Launceston, where she remains on permanent display. ☞



photo Dave Groves

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