A pioneer conservationist
Romeo Watkins Lahey MBE, ME (1887-1968)

Talk given to the Lamington Natural History Association Incorporated at the Environmental Study Centre, Binna Burra, on 13th March 1999 by Shirley Lahey. Copyright provisions cover the text. I am indebted to my cousins Alison Drake and Ann Neale, daughters of Romeo and Sybil Lahey, for personal insights, and help with the text.

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Romeo Lahey was a complex character, involved in his lifetime in a number of diverse projects both business and private. Many of these projects were not dealt with singly but, with tremendous strength of purpose and boundless energy, carried on simultaneously. However in my talk today I am going to concentrate on three aspects, namely the influences on Lahey as a young man; some personal background to Romeo's role in the beginnings of Lamington National Park and Binna Burra; and lastly the Lahey family's role in the building of the roads from Canungra that lead towards O'Reilly's Green Mountains and Binna Burra. Probably these subjects are of most interest to you and, by being specific, my task of selecting material for this talk about my uncle is made easier. (He was uncle Rome to me but for now he will be Romeo or I will use his initials RWL.)

When young, Romeo was described as husky but the older ones amongst us remember him as a short, wiry, energetic man fired with the passions of his convictions regarding the care of the countryside he loved so well. It came as a surprise to some that he was not a loner coming and going from Binna Burra but one of seven sons of a large, united family who worked together, with a wife who supported him in his ideals, and a family of three. To set the scene I will go back to Romeo's young days before there was a lodge at Binna Burra, or even a Lamington National Park, back further than 1911 when he joined forces with Robert M. Collins who began the campaign to have this area around us reserved as early as 1896, to when the government of the day encouraged land clearance and called for desperately needed timber to build houses for the growing Queensland population.

This gives me the opportunity to correct a couple of matters where writers and speakers in the past have tended to get the wrong end of the stick. Briefly, one relates to the stated apparent conflict between being a sawmiller and a conservationist, and the other, the source of the idea for building graded walking tracks. These ideas came about from the sawmilling industry, firstly when as a lad Romeo watched the timber-fellers work according to his father's and uncles' instructions (now covered by the term "selective logging"), and secondly the methods used in Romeo's time by the bullockies as their teams hauled the logs down to Laheys' tramway in the valleys around Canungra. More on these two matters anon.

RWL was born at Pimpama on 2 June 1887, the fourth child of David and Jane Lahey. Romeo's grandfather had died in 1878 leaving the Pimpama arrowroot farm to David and his brother, and the Waterford sugarmill and small sawmill to David's other three brothers. At Waterford the sons cut the pine that was required for the cases in which arrowroot was transported, the Laheys' operation being from grower, to processor, to marketer. Clearing land and growing and processing arrowroot was hard work, sometimes for little reward, and some of the

sons were drawn to being timbermillers and merchants. The pine logs sawn in the little Waterford mill were bought from a settler on the Upper Coomera, also known as Pine Creek, who persuaded the Laheys to look at the stands of hoop pine there. It was decided by four of the brothers and one sister to lease or buy land in and around Canungra where in 1884 David Lahey designed and built a sawmill that was to develop into Queensland's, and possibly Australia's, largest softwood mill. The remaining brother had struck out on his own but the others ran a family business for the rest of their working lives with only David continuing until 1901 to run the Pimpama arrowroot operation in conjunction with the timber business. They originally traded as Lahey Brothers but over the years there were changes in the registered name, at one time including the name of their nephew "Willy" Nicklin based in the Brisbane office, but most often referred to just as Laheys. To transport their logs the Laheys built roads, bridges and a 3'6" gauge tramway. At the same time they persistently lobbied the government for a railway that would link Canungra with the existing line to Beaudesert. Romeo grew up no stranger to putting pressure on governments.

In the next generation the sons of only two of the Lahey brothers carried on the timber business, one family at Beaudesert, their brother at Brooweena, and David Lahey and his sons at Canungra, and Corinda in Brisbane, with Willy Nicklin's elder son remaining in the industry. We, in the next generation, are fortunate to have letters, notes and an account that David Lahey wrote which revealed his ideas as to how the forests should be logged, how some areas should be left untouched and other areas planted with seedling pine trees. At times David, who described his temperament as "fiery", was at loggerheads with his brothers but despite the differences of opinions they remained closely knit and respectful of one another.

I am telling you this for Romeo was very much his father's son, and David's ideas, though enlarged upon and improved, were followed by Romeo. Those two generations, descended from farmers with strong Protestant beliefs, loved and understood the land and they treated it with care and what they perceived as being for the common good. Here lies the germ of the philosophy that led to Romeo being described as a pioneer conservationist. Over the years the firm of Laheys cut a huge amount of mostly hoop pine and milled it at Canungra, Beaudesert and Hillview but with men using axes and crosscut saws to fell the trees, and teams of bullocks to transport the logs, there was not the wholesale destruction of the forests that we see today with chainsaws, or the ball and chain method. With the government encouraging land clearance, gradually dairy farmers were moving up the valleys. It was apparent that this settlement would progress up the steep slopes to the mountain tops. Those who loved not only the trees but all native flora, could see that later generations would not be able to enjoy the pristine beauty they had known. Love of trees was a strong feeling in the Lahey clan. Judith Wright wrote in a 1963 article that Romeo's father encouraged an appreciation of trees for their beauty as well as their use.

RWL's feelings about trees were contained in his paper titled *Some reasons why national parks should be established in Queensland, with special reference to Lamington National Park*, read to the Royal Geographical Society of Australasia, Queensland on 6 October 1915. On page 69 of the printed version he wrote: "Only a very stolid,

soulless sort of human creature can go unmoved among big trees. In hours of sorrow and trouble men and women turn to the soothing and comforting solitude of the scrub, with its sheltering silence and protection." At the time of the lecture Queensland had few national parks with Lamington, gazetted only months before, being far and away the largest of the nine, but Romeo had many well thought out reasons why there needed to be more national parks. It was a characteristic of his to ensure he knew thoroughly the ground on which his arguments and ideas were based.

Romeo Lahey left the Brisbane Grammar School in 1903 after passing the Junior examination. His parents had times of prosperity and others of adversity and from what Romeo wrote late in life funds were not available for him to further his education at that time. He began his working life as a clerk at the AMP Society, subsequently studying as a private student until his matriculation in 1909 which qualified him for entry into the Faculty of Arts at the University of Sydney. There was no university in Queensland then. After one year of Arts he switched to the Science Department of Engineering, and his Bachelor of Engineering degree was conferred in 1914 after a deferred examination.

University geology excursions heightened Romeo's interest in land forms, particularly in the nearby Blue Mountains. The Laheys, like others, were prodigious walkers in the days when horses and railways were otherwise relied on for transport. Romeo's vacations were spent exploring the ranges south of Canungra that he came to know so well. Sometimes he was accompanied by one of his brothers, other times a friend. An account of one such hike details how they walked from the Oxenford railway station to the Lower Coomera, and on to Canungra. From there the two young men set out for the border, with food for six days, a compass and other necessities. They availed themselves of a ride to the end of the tramway and then walked up the Coomera valley and so to Mount Merino. (I have here a copy of this story which was published in the *Queenslander* on 9 September 1911 with RWL using the *nom de plume* of "Wanderer".) Romeo and a Canungra friend had attempted to reach the border two years earlier but were blocked by an impassable gorge. A few others also made unsuccessful attempts. Romeo wrote of the area that there was no habitation and all the information obtainable from government maps was "a big blank".

After many setbacks the two attained their goal. The only way they knew they had reached the border was the sheer drop into New South Wales. With youthful enthusiasm Romeo declared: "If you want to see a view, get on top of Mt Merino, wait till the sun sets, then die, for there is nothing more to see, except perhaps the sun rise. If you don't believe me, go and see for yourself." On the trek he collected some china-blue lobsters he had not seen before, and described the plant life. Specimens collected by Romeo then and later, such as the live lobsters, led to meetings and friendships with various government and university scientists. One botanical find was the discovery of a variety of the *Pararistolochia*, commonly called pipe-flower vine, so important in the life cycle of the Richmond birdwing butterfly. Romeo gave a specimen to his friend, the botanist Cyril White, who showed it to the government botanist F.M. Bailey. The variety, which grows only in the McPherson Range area, was named *laheyana*. Another discovery which was a first in Queensland was made in the border ranges. Although the eastern pygmy or dormouse possum

was known in coastal rainforest from New South Wales to Tasmania Romeo's find of a live specimen of the *Cercartetus nanus*, to give it its scientific name, was of interest.

Some finds were accidental such as one recorded in his diary for 5 June 1933 when the National Parks Association of Queensland camped on Mount Roberts. The diary entries were succinct as there was so little time for writing daily entries. This one notes that while looking for Miss Hancock's suitcase at the foot of the cliffs RWL found the spherulites there. (In the early 1940s Arthur Groom took some lodge guests, myself included, to see this evidence of volcanic activity below where Tony's and Connie's house is now.) Nothing was recorded as to the fate of Miss Hancock's suitcase. Pack horses and campers carried the gear over the four-mile, rough track between the road's end and the campsite, this being in the days before the building of the lodge was begun, and before the Christmas 1933 camp.

Romeo was spending so much time on his growing interest in the idea of following up R.M. Collins's plan for a national park in the McPherson Range that almost every student year he had to sit at least one deferred examination. He said he haunted the Fisher and Mitchell Libraries in Sydney, and wrote to the USA for books, all to further his knowledge of national parks. The years of World War I intervened but engineering studies were resumed after the armistice, first at the University of London's town planning course where he won the prestigious Lever Prize in 1919, and then in 1921 when he obtained his master's degree from Sydney University, the subject of his thesis "The survey, design and layout of a model suburb on modern town planning lines", the suburb being Fig Tree Pocket.

To provide business openings for his seven sons RWL's father David had founded a company in 1910 called Brisbane Timbers Limited and he commenced building a sawmill at Corinda. Romeo was a university student then but later he became one of the directors of the company. His father and three uncles were still running their country mills and city business. When Romeo returned from his university studies he was based at Canungra and had a part-time job as shire engineer involved with roadbuilding. The Laheys owned large tracts of land around Canungra and knew other landholders in the district. Among these were the Curtis, Delpratt and Collins families, all keen to see that some land was given protection under the State Forests and National Parks Act enacted in 1906, as they could see how the landscape was changing. As a boy Romeo remembered R.M. Collins coming to see the Laheys at Pimpama when Collins was visiting electors in his seat of Logan. Collins, inspired by what he had learned of Yellowstone National Park while travelling in the USA, began interesting others in the concept. He presented a paper to the Queensland branch of the Royal Geographical Society of Australasia in 1896 regarding the scenic and tourist possibilities of part of the border ranges, the core area that later interested RWL. In 1911 Romeo asked Collins if he could continue the campaign begun by Collins for this national park in the McPherson Range. By this time Collins was in frail health and he died two years later. Romeo's first letter to the government regarding a large national park was sent just weeks after his twenty-fourth birthday. He was young to be taking on such a campaign but he was to devote the rest of his life to the national park cause.

Arthur Groom's book *One mountain after another* and J. Keith Jarrott's *History of Lamington National Park* give a clear account of how the fight for today's Lamington National Park came to fruition when the district's member of parliament, the Honourable J.G. Appel, challenged Romeo Lahey to prove that the electors of Tamborine and Beaudesert wanted the national park. After years of writing letters to various ministers Romeo then proceeded to gather more than five hundred signatures on a petition, his five-year battle culminating with the government declaring 47,000 acres as a national park. This area was 5,000 acres short of his proposal. He was ahead of his time for he had suggested that the park be called by the Aboriginal name Woonoongoora but Lamington, for a previous governor, was chosen. As well Romeo urged the Forestry Department to call features of the park by Wangerriburra names, not the names of politicians.

The campaign of tactics and persuasion that Romeo mounted for a much larger national park than Collins envisaged has to be seen in context to fully appreciate the difficulties. You know the details of how Romeo took photos in the form of glass plates, gave lectures and showed his lantern slides of rainforest and waterfalls, winning over the electors. Most landowners could well have opposed any plan for such a reservation, especially at this time when many were enlisting to serve in World War I and their thoughts were elsewhere.

Five days before the 1915 gazettal of Lamington National Park Romeo, who had just had his twenty-eighth birthday, enlisted in the army and the following year sailed for the war zone where he saw action, and was wounded, in France. Shortly after returning Romeo married Alice Sybil Delpratt on 13 February 1920. He had courted Sybil before going overseas. She was the daughter of Joseph Henry and Ada Delpratt of Tambourine House and the goddaughter of R.M. Collins. The walk between Canungra and Tambourine House was very familiar to Romeo!

His practical experience of sawmilling at this stage of his life was minimal so the stories of how he accommodated the conflicting views of being a sawmiller and a conservationist are a bit out of whack. In any case it is my belief that it was Romeo's very observations of sawmilling that made him understand the necessity for national parks. And so far as the family sawmilling business goes, the father and sons were all working partners but Romeo's role was in the engineering field. Laheys Limited sold their timber empire at the end of 1920 and the Romeo Lahey family then lived for a few years in Brisbane. When Brisbane Timbers Limited bought the Canungra operation in 1923 Romeo was appointed "director of railways, road and other professional engineering and leading director at Canungra". For the next ten years the family lived there and what a momentous ten years they were for Romeo in his business and private life.

After World War I motorized transport developed with the T model Ford then in mass production. New roads were built and tracks were upgraded so that cars could use them, and people were moving about the countryside in a way not possible earlier. There was public pressure for easier access to Lamington National Park. In the Canungra district the Laheys became noted for their roadbuilding and in 1919 were involved in the proposed Anzac Memorial Road from Brisbane, via Canungra to Cowling's property on Beechmont. Laheys Limited was prepared to give £5000 towards the cost of the road, a generous gift. For various reasons the plans for this road fell through but public

pressure continued for a road either to Mount Roberts or from Kerry to the O'Reillys' selections.

In 1920 the government decided to build a road suitable for cars from Canungra to Upper Beechmont. Laheys Limited cleared and formed this road and Romeo was the engineer. They gave £1500 towards its cost, and sixteen local residents contributed £1650. The inaccessibility that had protected Lamington National Park in the past was beginning to vanish. The O'Reilly family with its dairy farm now within the park boundary was finding that visitors wanted accommodation while they explored the surrounds, so in 1925 they built a guesthouse that opened the following year. Romeo could see that the time was ripe to educate the public about the benefits of national parks and provide lodge accommodation that was dedicated to this education.

He had had this concept from about the time the park was gazetted. He had looked at Mount Roberts from other surrounding vantage points and decided this high point was the ideal site for a lodge. To that end he tried to buy the Mount Roberts property, now Binna Burra, from George D. Rankin in 1920 to be held until he could form a company. However Rankin would not sell. Romeo kept the site in mind as the years passed. Thinking ahead he engaged some ex-servicemen in 1920 to clear the old cedar track from Illinbah towards Mount Roberts as an approach to the park. To interest visitors in the rainforest he took them out in a T model Ford converted to run on the family's railway which gave access to this track. He had seen to it that pristine scrub bordered this part of the line.

It was in December 1927 that Arthur Groom, who had his twenty-third birthday that month, was introduced to the rainforest of the McPherson Range when he took his first holiday at O'Reilly's guesthouse. In the next years Arthur, a sales representative and freelance journalist, took photographs which were published with articles he wrote about Lamington National Park. In 1929 Arthur also was struck with the idea of Mount Roberts being a marvellous site for a guesthouse and tried to interest the O'Reilly men in it. Arthur wrote "If only some wealthy person could be induced to provide access and build a tourist centre!" Well Romeo, with his eye on the same site, had the means to build access but he was not a wealthy person.

Romeo and Arthur knew of one another but it was not until 1929 that they met. Different in temperament, age and background but with similar ideals, the two became firm friends and worked together successfully.

Romeo had decided to form a National Parks Association, the first in Australia, and with the help of friends and supporters called a public meeting on 15 April 1930 in a room at the new City Hall which had opened the previous week. So the NPAQ was formed with the governor Sir John Goodwin agreeing to be patron. RWL was elected president, Archbishop James Duhig and Professor E.J. Goddard vice-presidents, Arthur Groom secretary and George Barker treasurer, all honorary positions. In the month before this public meeting Romeo offered the government 212 acres of his land near Egg Rock to add to Lamington National Park, the first of several gifts of land.

I might interpose here a list of some of the things Romeo was doing at

this time, quite apart from national park matters:
1. As Brisbane Timbers Limited's engineer he was overseeing the building of a private road he had surveyed in 1926. It ran from outside Canungra, up Mount Cainbable, to within four miles of O'Reilly's guesthouse.
2. The following year thousands of seedling pine trees he had raised as part of a reafforestation plan were planted on land the company owned just outside Canungra called Lawyer Cane.
3. Romeo was advocating the Lahey Scheme for taking timber from the Cardwell Range and building a road there.
4. He was involved in an ambitious new Lahey company called Pacific Timbers Limited to fell timber in Fiji, bring the logs to Australia and to build another sawmill beside the existing one at Corinda. Employees were moved about between Canungra and Corinda, one such man being brought to Corinda in 1926 along with the company's draught-horse Dick and a scoop. A pond was formed and here the logs were to be floated prior to milling. The man was Bill Muller known to Binna Burra guests as "old Bill". Another Lahey employee who became a Binna Burra identity was Gus Kouskos who was a leading hand working on the Cainbable road.

Laheys Road, as it came to be called, was designed with a constant gradient of one in twenty-two so that heavily laden timber trucks did not have to rely on their brakes, motor transport then being in its primitive stage. Earlier Romeo had learned the lesson of safe grades from his father's roadbuilding in the days of bullock teams which could not always take the direct route but had to zigzag across gullies. The necessity for so many bends on the Cainbable road has since been outmoded by technology and reliable brakes. However he applied the contour technique when he cut the first graded tracks at Lamington National Park to avoid soil disturbance caused by run-offs in heavy rain, and to make walking easier and more pleasurable.

Romeo spoke of his father and uncles as being "tigers for work" but he was not exactly a slouch himself. At the time the Lahey family must have felt nothing would stop them but they had not reckoned on the great depression that began after the collapse of the New York Stock Exchange in October 1929. By 1931 Brisbane Timbers Limited was in serious financial trouble despite all the hard work.

Romeo pressed on with matters close to his heart in a way that was breathtaking. The Queensland parliament passed the Native Plants Protection Act of 1930 and the appointment of honorary rangers under this act began with RWL being the first, his certificate being dated 10 September 1931. His tree-planting continued, the group of *Grevillea robusta* (silky oaks) opposite the Canungra Information Centre dating from this year. Romeo was looking at other possibilities for the site of a guesthouse though Lahey and Groom were still keen to get an option over Rankin's Mount Roberts land which Romeo had tried to buy twelve years earlier. In October 1932 Romeo's diary mentioned taking Groom to a site for a boarding-house on Mount Cainbable. The following month his diary recorded that the two men walked from Illinbah up through Cowling's to Rankin's block, today's Binna Burra, where they camped. The following day they walked out to the border, back to Rankin's, down the Coomera and along the cedar track back to RWL's car at Illinbah. Today most hikers would consider that day's walk to be a two-day one.

Following a visit made by Lahey and Groom in December 1932 George Rankin wrote to RWL confirming that just under 178 acres was under offer to purchase for £20 per acre. Romeo later wrote: "It was at the time of the depression...but in case someone [else] should buy it, it was worth risking £1 for the option." Shortly afterwards a friend of the Laheys, surveyor W.M. L'Estrange, suggested the name of Binna Burra. Thanks to the generosity of Mr Rankin the period for paying off this land was extended and it was August 1946 before the land was paid off. Romeo's diary records that within days of securing the option he was typing the prospectus for a limited liability company called Queensland Holiday Resorts Limited. Much later Romeo wrote that he "persuaded [Arthur] to go to Binna Burra..." Romeo's daughter Alison remembers Arthur Groom, who then lived at Wynnum, coming to their home at Canungra when this decision was made. "It was wonderful" Alison's mother later recalled of Arthur's agreement to go to Binna Burra. The wording of the original prospectus included that Arthur Groom's "energetic services have been secured for a period of three years".

To interest potential shareholders Lahey and Groom began by taking parties camping on the property. Many campers were NPAQ members and it was mainly through this core of supporters becoming shareholders that money was raised for a lodge. The company was formed in 1933 with its main object "to provide tourist facilities and accommodation in beauty spots throughout the State of Queensland, and as far as possible to assist in preserving such in their natural state for future generations in accordance with the ideals of the National Parks Association of Queensland". As Romeo's son David pointed out later, it was "an extraordinary thing, that a corporate body should state as its objectives those of a mere association". David stated that "Binna Burra has never been an ordinary company, it has the status of a company but it is a fellowship of nature lovers."

The first directors were Dr E.O. Marks, P.Lewis Day (the principal of Underhill Day and Co. Ltd, Arthur's employer), both friends of Romeo's, Roy G. Groom (a distant relative of Arthur's), R.W. Lahey and A. Groom. Romeo and Arthur were to be joint managers, the former construction manager and the latter resident manager. The whole board pulled together to make the dream a reality, helped by the support of the local community. Lodge bookings were made by R.G. Groom and Company staff who handled the office work, and Roy's son T.R."Reg" Groom was company secretary. The solicitors were Henderson and Lahey, Gordon Lahey being Romeo's cousin. For years all the work done by Reg Groom and Gordon Lahey and their employees was done either free of charge or for very little charge. The 1930s were difficult times but the goodwill shown to all those struggling to establish the lodge was enormous. It was by no means a one-man show.

In the prospectus part of the estimated income was calculated on an average of twenty lodge guests paying a tariff of £3 3s. per week, with shareholders given 10 per cent discount and members of the NPAQ who were not shareholders given 5 per cent discount. There were no funds to reimburse the two joint managers so they received one thousand deferred shares of £1 "as full consideration for investigation work and preliminary expenses incurred". Arthur had to give up the secretaryship of the NPAQ for he was to work on selling

shares and was to be paid 5 per cent commission on all contributing shares allotted, while Romeo continued to work with his men on the road at weekends at his own expense. It was about the end of 1933 that the Romeo Lahey family moved to Brisbane to live. RWL handed over the option that he held to the company which was registered on 1 March 1934. He wrote that they "hoped for the best".

The camp that is considered the beginning of Binna Burra began on 16 December 1933. The previous month Romeo's diary records that Arthur was clearing the camp site while he chased around getting canvas from which to make bunks, arranged with Captain Airey to send up the mainsail from the tall ship the Laheys owned at that time, moored in Sydney Harbour, to use as shelter, plus tents and food. Arthur was in charge of the camp and Romeo, Sybil and their three children were among the campers who braved cyclonic rain and wind. Despite the setbacks caused by the weather the camp was a success and another was planned for Easter 1934 when it was hoped to have one cabin built.

Romeo proposed the design for the slab cabins (called huts in the early days) which were to be built from timber on the property. He wrote: "I had determined to make the buildings of the best of our forefathers. I had seen them in use in the old days but the other directors had not, and the same thing applied to the public, and this would be a lasting memory." At the 21 February 1934 board meeting his designs for the dining room and the cabins were approved. Just eight days earlier it was recorded that RWL presented a contour plan of the camp which he had prepared and that Queensland Holiday Resorts Limited had been given verbal permission by the Forestry Department to cut walking tracks to various view points in the park. These graded tracks later became the models for government-built ones. In his late years Romeo wrote that he had "pioneered the tracks for 5 miles", later taking over "the supervision and the layout of the tracks for 3 miles more...I, with Bill's help, pioneered the track to the Coomera Falls...Bellbird Lookout, Nixon's Creek, the White Caves, and the Aboriginal Cave."

There is no way to measure the time and effort Lahey and Groom and the other directors and willing volunteers put into the founding of Binna Burra, each contributing what was available to them. Arthur's contribution was youthful energy, personality, hard work and an unswerving belief in the cause the National Parks Association and Queensland Holiday Resorts Limited stood for. He was twenty-nine and had lived in Brisbane only eight years when the company was registered. Times were hard, Arthur had no financial backing behind him and had had the sadness of his first wife dying in 1932, four months after their marriage.

Beginning in 1916 Romeo's surviving cheque butts reveal much of his life and interests. He was a director of a successful family timber business well known in southeast Queensland, with wide-ranging contacts. Now in 1934 some of the misfortunes in the family timber business were to be part of Romeo's contribution to Binna Burra and were its material gain. Some hardworking employees of Brisbane Timbers Limited went with him to help build the lodge and the road, taking with them horses and gear. Romeo paid for two disused buildings in Canungra which were transported to form the nucleus of the resort, the bull wheel and other ironwork for the flying fox, and

the men's wages. When the tramway was torn up the bell from one of Laheys' locos became the dinner bell. Rosewood tables were installed in the dining room and other valuable timber owned by Laheys used elsewhere. And that isn't the full list of what Romeo gave.

In the past I have been asked about the history of the rosewood planks. One story is that they were being sent to the Chicago Exposition but only got as far as Tasmania. From my research I think the reason for the shipment may have followed a suggestion that Romeo's uncle Tom Lahey made in his report on his USA trip in 1913. He urged the company to send "exhibits of some of the most ornamental of our Queensland timbers" to an exposition in the USA to be held in 1915 that was probably the Panama Pacific International Exhibition in San Francisco. Doubtless World War I upset shipping arrangements and the rosewood remained in Australia.

Another story of a table relates to a letter dated 20 December 1937 from the Queensland Forest Service to Queensland Holiday Resorts Limited. In it approval was given to Mr R.W. Lahey "to hew a table top from a Cedar tree blown down below the track to Split Rock in the Coomera catchment, about half a mile from the boundary at Binna Burra". The letter continued that the table top would remain the property of the service but that there would be no objection to its being left at Binna Burra until the department desired to transfer it elsewhere. I wonder where that table top is now!

By 1937 the company was in its fourth year of operation and was in need of more capital to improve transport conditions and build more accommodation. The last section of the road to the dump was described as "a trial to the majority of drivers" but the Main Roads Commission was about to construct this section. A second prospectus was prepared and more shares were offered to the public. Two more directors had joined the board, Dr Gifford Croll in 1936 and George D. Rankin in 1937, and Reg Groom was appointed in 1938. The hard work was by no means behind the board but year by year the lodge was being improved and the guest numbers increased. As the popular and dynamic resident manager, Arthur left his stamp on the lodge and was very much the public face of the company. To some extent Arthur and Binna Burra became synonymous. There should be no misconception that Arthur was a lone hand and entirely responsible for Binna Burra's existence as this does a disservice to the other directors, workers and supporters without whom the lodge might have remained nothing more than a good idea. Certainly the lodge would not be as it is without the substantial contribution of Arthur and his family but let us not forget the others who were involved.

In January 1936 Arthur married Marjorie Dunstan and they moved into their unfinished home where we are gathered today. Their three sons were born in the following years but neither they, nor Marjorie, saw much of Arthur who was working incredibly long hours at the lodge, seven days a week, and this toll increased during the years of World War II. Romeo rejoined the army in 1940 which removed him from Binna Burra for many years and ended his term as joint manager of the lodge. In 1943 the company paid its loyal shareholders their first dividend. Arthur's marriage to Marjorie did not survive the strains placed upon it, and divorce followed in 1949. Arthur subsequently married Isla Madge who worked in the lodge office and they had a daughter. Arthur was in ill health and in 1953 he died having pushed himself beyond

bounds. He was just short of being forty-nine. Fittingly Romeo arranged for and worked on the monument to Arthur here.

Romeo, seventeen years older than Arthur, outlived him. The road up Mount Cainbable which he had designed was sold by Brisbane Timbers Limited in 1940 to the Main Roads Commission. The sale represented a huge loss to the Laheys but the O'Reilly family now had a road to their property after years of difficulty with access just as had occurred at Binna Burra. After the war RWL was a founder of the Save the Trees campaign and was vice-president of that body. He continued to devote himself to securing further areas as national parks and was a Binna Burra director until 1960 after an earlier seven-year break due to a policy disagreement. He was president of NPAQ from its formation to 1961, thirty-one and a half years.

In 1960 Romeo was honoured with an MBE for his services to the national park idea. A cairn with a plaque on the road to O'Reilly's was dedicated by the government in 1967 and after his death a shelter shed was built in 1970 on a knoll now known as Kamarun Lookout where there is also an official commemorative plaque. Both are on lands given by Romeo as additions to Lamington National Park.

The wives and families of both Lahey and Groom were deprived of that greatest of all gifts, that of shared time, for the two men worked with such single-mindedness that everything else in their lives was sacrificed. Material success might have eluded them but they left us with immeasurable riches. Romeo died in 1968 aged eighty-one, having given more than sixty of those years to the national park ideal.

S. Noakes copy

A pioneer conservationist
Romeo Watkins Lahey MBE, ME (1887-1968)

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