

ONE CAPE, many water rats



The two ladies in the photograph are Mary Hutchins (left) and Caroline Hinchley (right). They are Ronda's maternal and paternal grandmothers respectively. Mrs Hutchins, the mother of the cape's first owner, Elsie Hinchley (née Hutchins), is wearing the cape. Photo courtesy of Ronda Thomas

... IN THE HINCHEY FAMILY COLLECTION

A water rat skin cape recently acquired by the National Museum of Australia allows us to explore 1940s Australia. This rare and beautiful garment provides a glimpse of life on the home front during World War II, the Australian fashion scene at that time, and the economic use of native fauna. Before we delve into the social and economic histories reflected by the cape, allow me to introduce the object itself.

Pelts from over fifty water rats were used to make the cape. They are expertly arranged to show off both the dark grey-black of a water rat's back and the colourful orange of the belly fur. It is lined with deep purple rayon, and is secured to the body using a ribbon and two eye and hook fasteners. A single pocket is discreetly tucked into the cape's lining. The cape is 55cm (or about 22 inches) long.

The cape was kindly donated to the museum by Ronda Thomas. She described how it was originally made for her mother, Mrs Elsie Eileen Hinchley (née Hutchins), sometime in the early 1940s. Mrs Hinchley lived with her husband George Lester and their young family in Narrandera, New South Wales. She wore the cape on special occasions such as balls, church dinners, and weddings in the Narrandera district, as well as on trips to Sydney. Ronda also recalled playing dress-ups with the cape as a child. After Mrs Hinchley passed away in 1961 the cape stayed in the family home with Mr Hinchley until his death in 1984. At that time Ronda's eldest brother Robert Bruce, also of Narrandera, took the cape, but gave it to Ronda in 2006. It now rests in the National Historical Collection's Hinchley Family collection.

Families sometimes have multiple traditions about the origin of their objects, and the cape is a case in point. Talking to Ronda I soon discovered that there were two stories

recalling how the pelts for the cape were obtained. One or both might be true. The first is that Ronda's 'Uncle V', as he was called, caught water rats in his Griffith property's irrigation canals. The second story is supplied by Ronda's brother Robert Bruce Hinchley, who recalled catching water rats with their father in Bundiderry Creek in Narrandera in the early 1940s. To do this they converted jam tins into traps by pushing the lid of the tin half way in and baiting it with a bit of fish oil or a sardine. The tins would be suspended on string just on or slightly below the water line. He believes that the cape is made up of these furs. We may never know which of these stories represents the origin of the pelts, and it is intriguing how the past can become clouded within one generation.

The craftsmanship visible in the cape naturally prompts us to ponder who made it. Since it has no trade marks or other labels which could identify the maker, I again turned to Ronda's knowledge of her family history for assistance. She believed the cape was made by a Wagga Wagga furrier in the 1940s. My research revealed that the Schultz Tannery was the only furrier operating in Wagga Wagga at that time, so I concluded that it was highly probable that it was made there.

William Adolf Schultz, from a German family of furriers, tanners, and dyers, established the tannery as a backyard business in Wagga Wagga in about 1930. Schultz eventually launched the tannery as a commercial venture, and profited from the American military presence at nearby Kapooka during World War II, churning out coats and rugs of native animals for the soldiers. William made the coats while his wife, Anne Hood, employed dressmakers to make the linings. The tannery focused on rug manufacture after the war but eventually closed.

The cape reflects the wider social context in which it was made and used. Fur garments were found in the closet of many fashionable ladies throughout the first half of the twentieth century. While furs from exotic species were popular, there was also a demand for native furs, and the water rat made an ideal candidate. The species, *Hydromys chrysogaster*, lives in permanent fresh or brackish water habitats. They typically live in burrows along the banks of rivers and lakes, as well as in irrigation channels. Their pelt is well adapted for their aquatic existence as it is water repellent, thick, soft, and lustrous, making an attractive combination for fur garments.

To supply demand for furs, water rats were trapped in considerable numbers throughout the 1930s and 1940s. In 1931 water rat skins were fetching four shillings each. After the outbreak of World War II the Commonwealth prohibited the importation of all fur skins to save on foreign exchange and shipping space. This resulted in a shortage of American muskrat furs. As trapping of water rats intensified to meet the demand for fur the value of water rat skins rose, reaching 124 shillings per dozen in 1941 and 300 shillings per dozen in June 1947.

The market was altered in June 1942 when the Australian government introduced rationing to help cope with wartime shortages. Footwear and clothing, including fur garments, were no exception. The only way to purchase these items was by using a rations book: 112 coupons per year were allocated for clothing and footwear. If a woman purchased a two-piece



The water-rat skin cape in the Hinchley Family collection. Photo: Lannon Harley

costume, dress, raincoat/overcoat, pyjamas, one pair of shoes and stockings she would have used her yearly allowance. Rationing of clothing remained in place until 1948.

The coupon value of clothing was not based on its 'quality' or value but rather its durability, relative necessity, utility, and the amount of material used. Under this system a fur cape was relatively expensive. According to the Australian coupon scale of January 1943, a woman's fur cape (defined as a garment no longer than twenty-eight inches) cost twenty coupons, or just under one-fifth of the annual allowance. However, our water rat cape may have cost the Hinchley family only a fraction of this coupon value because they were able to supply the pelts. While the government was encouraging people to make new garments from old, trapping and supply of water rats was another example of resourcefulness at a time when luxury products were scarce and coupon-expensive.

Trapping water rats was encouraged locally. Many farmers in the Murray and Murrumbidgee districts blamed the burrowing behaviour of water rats for the collapse of their

irrigation canals, and sought to eradicate the perceived pest. No doubt some converted the captured water rats into garments, and this may have been what Ronda's Uncle V was up to on his property in Griffith.

With abundant trapping activity it is not surprising that water rat populations were in decline during the first half of the twentieth century. As the implications of prolonged and continued trapping became clear, each state began introducing legislation that afforded protection to water rats. In 1948 New South Wales introduced the *Fauna Protection Act*, prohibiting the killing of water rats, thus ending the production of capes and cloaks. Today the cape in the Museum's collection is a rare item, irreplaceable under current wildlife conservation laws, that records a past economic and social life.

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