The Mystery of the Twin Chimneys: Australian Folkways Unveiled

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Introduction

While traveling south on the Monaro Highway out of Canberra, the author enjoyed the brilliance of a cool September afternoon in Australia. Having traversed by auto over 3600 miles of the Australian countryside, the US professor continued on his trek, interviewing numerous Australian university professors concerning qualitative research methods. Little did he know that, in only a few short minutes, circumstances would propel him on a quest to understand the mystery of the twin chimneys.

Suddenly, off to the left of the highway, he noticed two chimneys standing side by side, attached to a small, clapboard ranch home. The nondescript home appeared deserted and in disrepair. It was, however, the architecture of the twin chimneys that caught his eye. “Why would someone build two, complete brick chimney structures side-by-side in the same room?” he asked himself. Without hesitation, the curious academician turned left off of the main highway, guided his rental car across a set of abandoned railroad tracks, and drove back up a gravel road to investigate further. The single, bothersome question gnawed at his qualitative soul: “Why?

After a few minutes of navigating the winding, dusty road through the Australian farmland, the communication professor stopped his car in front of the small, domestic structure. The two chimneys stood there, in defiance of time and weather, emanating charm and mystery. The warm,
red brick facade could not hide the mystifying reality that two complete
chimney structures had been built in the wall of one, seemingly small
room of the little house. Even more intriguing, the builder had placed a
small glass window in one of the chimney towers. The overpowering
question came again quite naturally to the social scientist: “Why? Why
did someone, years before this moment, spend so much time, energy and
resources building two complete chimneys into the wall of one, small
Australian country home?”

**The Quest Begins**

The author snapped a picture in the fading evening light, stood a
little longer in the fresh evening Australian air, and then turned back to
his journey over the Snowy Mountains toward Melbourne. He had to
catch a plane. As he continued his trek, however, he could not rid
himself of the plaguing question, “Why?”

After traversing the mountains, the professor stopped in a small
village called Corryong to take advantage of the clean public restrooms
and seek some information from the local information station. (In
Australia, the author found that the public restrooms seemed always
clean and the information stations always ready to divulge a plethora of
cultural secrets!).

Entering the information building, the Yank was greeted by a
smiling, female volunteer. Producing his digital camera, the author ask,
“Would you look at this picture and explain to me why this Australian
house has two chimneys side by side?” Amused by the question, the information volunteer, later to be introduced as Lorna, looked at the picture and began making several suggestions as to why an Australian farmer might have had two chimneys in the same room side by side. All of the responses, however, seemed more like speculation. Everyone knows what social scientists do with mere speculation. The researcher needed to know more. After a long discussion, the American and the Australian agreed to stay in touch via e-mail communication in order to seek a suitable solution to the mystery of the twin chimneys.

**Questions From the Quest**

Upon returning to the United States, the communication studies professor began showing the picture of the twin chimneys to his students in various classes. He shared the photo with his colleagues heralding from many and various disciplines. Each student and every faculty seemed to have varied explanations or guesses as to why someone would build two chimneys in the same room, on the same side of the house. Yet, nothing seemed to make sense. No one knew for sure.

Ultimately, the professor refined his questions into a series of five:

1. For what reasons did the Australian have two chimneys (two hearths) in the same room, on the same side of the house?
2. What purposes did each chimney serve?
3. Do other Australian homes have similar architecture?
4. How did such a cultural practice originate?
5. What purpose did the small window pane, included in the chimney tower brick work, serve?
These questions, generated on that clear Australian day, prompted another Australian journey one year later in which the author made amazing discoveries about some unique developments of rural Australian cultural practices in heating, cooking, and architectural design. This presentation and paper demonstrate, both in narrative and in photographic record, some explanations and information concerning the mystery of the twin chimneys.

**In the Classroom**

The professor realized that he held in his digital record of the twin chimneys a mighty tool for perking the curiosity and questions of his undergraduate students (not to mention the colleagues who were also puzzled by the unusual architectural design of the chimneys). Before taking the second journey to Australia, the author queried class after class as to the reasons and suggestions that students might give as to why the twin chimneys existed. From the American perspective, students guessed that Australians might do laundry, bake bread, make pizzas, broil fish, or roast pig in the combination hearth and chimney. Naturally, Americans are fondly aware of the old-fashioned hearth for heating an old home or log cabin. It was the second hearth that caused the confusion.

By asking these questions to students, the professor was able to:

1. Encourage interest in international research
2. Provide a discussion platform for intercultural and cross-cultural themes
3. Engage students in investigation of differences and similarities in cultural activities such as meal preparation, domestic heating, home life and other aspects of domestic living
4. Facilitate a *compare and contrast* exercise between the Australian and the US cultures
5. Promote the use of qualitative research methods and techniques including various forms of data collection, analysis and dissemination
6. Encourage thoughts about the use of metaphor, symbols, and architectural design as a means of conveying message

**A Review of Literature (of sorts)**

Little information about the design or construction of Australian twin chimneys exists. The Australians know about the two chimney arrangement, but seem to take the entire subject for granted. In fact, the author realized that, although this construction is highly unusual to an American, such heating and cooking arrangements are common in the Australian countryside (at least in Victoria and New South Wales). Margaret E. Walker, in her article entitled *An Author Dreams About Stoves*, writes about her life-time adventures involving wood stoves and Australian cooking (2005).

At about the age of twelve I began to experiment with the wood stove oven, and this opened an exciting new vista to me. Getting the wood and lighting the stove were no trouble, I had seen my mother do it many times before, and it meant I could add baking to my formidable list of kitchen skills. The silver painted stove was made of cast iron, had a fire box at the top, and when lit with kindling and paper it could really roar, and put our pretty fair heat. It was only
necessary then to add a piece or two of larger wood, close the flue a little and the heat for the oven could be pretty well controlled. When we were much younger this same stove provided enough heat to warm us, whilst I took my evening bath in a tin tub in front of the hearth, then climbed out dripping wet to be enclosed in a warm towel that had been hung under the mantelpiece in readiness. Then in would pop the next child for their bath, the water having been topped up from a kettle singing on the hob.

I loved cooking in the old wood stove though, as it was so easy to create enough heat for baking and I can't ever remember burning very much food, so we really had quite a few treats that we would not otherwise have had.

Marriage in 1960 brought with it a home of my own, and my very own stove. It was back to an old faithful wood stove, but it kept the high ceiling kitchen warm in winter, as well as providing a means of preparing slow food such as Baked Beans, boiled corned beef, apricot jam and the preserves in the old fashioned rectangular preserving pan. With its ability for drying damp nappies brought in from the clothesline, and for airing off the towels and sheets, it was a multi-purpose piece of equipment. All the stove required in return for faithful service, was an occasional painting on the front with silver paint, and for the hot plates at the top to be painted over with black lead. Our home may have been humble but we had the essentials, warmth, shelter and food.

In 1987 we bought a disused farm, once part of mining lease, in the Adelaide Hills near a little village called Kanmantoo (an aboriginal name I think). The farmhouse had not been inhabited (by people, that is) for about twenty years. It had four main stone rooms, in amazingly sound condition, with a lean-to at the rear that housed the laundry and bathroom that were badly in need of re-building. The kitchen must have been very modern for its day with built-in cupboards and wonderful enamel fronted, St. George slow combustion wood stove, with two ovens, one for cooking and one for warming. It was with a real sense of adventure that I cleaned out this ancient creature, and lit it up for the first time. To my utter amazement it went like a charm!

Wood burning stoves have always played a large part in my life, every since as a small child I helped my grandmother make pasties and cook them in her little cream
and green enamel fronted wood stove. I have just loved the washing, cutting and general preparation of ingredients, the slow wonderful smell of cooking food, and the pleasure that others take from the finished dishes. The old wood stove was central to all of this.

Although this article demonstrates the central importance of the wood stove’s impact on the Australian family life, the question remains unanswered as to why two chimneys were deemed necessary to begin with. A second journey by the author to Australia would hold the key in providing deeper insights into the grand theme question: “Why two chimneys in the same room?”

Reality Revealed

The author returned to Australia on a second journey for the expressed purpose of seeking out the answer to the twin chimneys question. Through prior arrangements, the writer met with the information volunteer he originally met in Corryong on the first Australian trip. Lorna and her husband Jack greeted the professor at the airport at Melbourne. The professor and the couple, through focused e-mail exchanges, had chartered a course that would take them through the Australian countryside to discover the truth about twin chimneys and ultimately arriving at the same, non-descript home discovered by the professor off the Manaro highway months before.

The trio began their adventure immediately and later that day the author discovered the first clue as to the use and function
of the double chimney system. At domestic ruins in Oxely, the writer realized that, as many students had suggested, one of the chimney structures was used for cooking and the other for heating. Yet, this idea alone seems duplicative unless one realizes that the first hearth held only the traditional open fire place for log burning. This provides ample heat for the room (or rooms) but for cooking, one must used iron skillets, pots, or Dutch ovens. The author saw the second hearth allowed the homeowner to place the cast iron cook stove back into the second hearth for proper ventilation and smoke removal. This initial clue prompted additional questions:

1. Why did the wood stove technology develop differently in Australia as compared to the United States? (US wood stoves were traditionally \textit{stand-alones} complete with cast iron legs, vent pipe (flue) with decorative trim much like a piece of furniture. The Australian \textit{set-backs} seemed non-descript and mostly functional).
2. Were the Australian wood stoves actually manufactured in Australia or imported?
3. Did the architectural design of the twin chimneys originate in Australia or was the idea imported from another country, such as England?
4. Was this a regional phenomena or country-wide?
5. Was this a rural phenomena or also evident in the Australian cities, also?

\textbf{Secrets Unveiled}

The next interesting evidence of this cultural anomaly surfaced at the ruins of an old Australian, one-room school house. Constructed of brick, the remains of the chimney system offered up clues that the large, centrally placed traditional fireplace hearth had provided heat for the children and school teacher, while the
chimney off to the side (somewhat smaller) was used for cooking simple meals for or by the children. In any case, in all the US pioneer and frontier schools visited previously by the author (and there have been many!), none demonstrated the same cultural tendencies as this ruins site.

Leaving the lowlands, the trio traveled up into the Australian hill-country to a small community named Rosewood in New South Wales. There, with smoke puffing from the chimney top, was a set of the twin chimneys in use. Demonstrating no restraint, the author exited the car with deep seated curiosity and walked up to the door of the Australian wood framed house and knocked vigorously. A middle-aged woman answered the knock and, surprise, bewilderment and amazement showing on her face, heard the accent of a Yank on her doorstep for the first time in her life.

The professor said, “Excuse the intrusion, but I can’t help but notice that you have two chimneys that I assume stand side by side in your kitchen. Furthermore, I see by the smoke rising from the one chimney that you have a fire on. I am from Ohio University in the United States and I am doing research on these types of chimneys. I wonder if you would allow me to come in your home for a few minutes to take pictures of the hearths in your kitchen to show my friends and colleagues, not only here in Australia but around the world?”
The woman, named Beryl McVean, carefully surveyed the professor for a few moments. She then replied, “The kitchen’s a bit messy but I guess if you want, you can come inside.” This author must admit his surprise felt at this moment. The American accent must have been all the proof she needed for she turned away, walking toward the kitchen, leaving the door open for the researchers’ entrance into solving the puzzle of these twin chimneys. The author motioned for his two companions (who were a little skeptical that entrance would be allowed) and all three social investigators entered the McVean house at Rosewood, NSW.

Beryl began answering questions. “I’ve lived here with my family for forty years. The hearth on the left we use to burn our trash in the summer and burn wood for heat in the winter. The chimney here on the right holds the Raeburn slow combustion wood burning stove. It has a griddle and a water heater on it too. It takes me about 20 minutes each morning to split up the firewood I use to open up the stove.”

Beryl had a kitchen table square in the middle of the room. Evidence suggested that she used this table for food preparation. The wood cook stove set back into the hearth opening and gave off a delightfully comfortable heat for the small room. She offered us sweet cakes that she had just taken from the stove. We gratefully accepted the treat created on the stove in front of us.
She continued, “A man by the name of Ernie King built these chimneys for us. He built many here in Rosewood. The little window pane gives light for the top of the stove. I guess Ernie didn’t think I’d need to cook after dark. Besides, we had no electricity then.”

Beryl shows off her Raeburn slow combustion wood stove. (Beyrl McVean, Rosewood, NSW, Australia)

After this wonderful experience, the author and his companions said goodbyes and headed off seeking more information. Several more twin chimney constructions were identified in places including Tumbarumba, NSW; Adelong, NSW;
Tumut, NSW; and in Kiandra and Adaminaby, NSW. Most displayed the small window pane included for lighting and most were of similar twin chimney construction. Construction materials varied but most showed evidence of being constructed at the same time, not separately, or at different time periods. Construction time period for the chimneys seemed to fall in the early 1900’s.

The adventurers continued, moving ever closer to the final destination of the original frame house that the professor sighted just outside of Canberra on that cool, Australian afternoon. That one glance over to the left of the Monaro highway and that one digital photo had started the entire project.

Soon the team passed into a region between Williamsdale and Michelago (not far from the Australian Capital Territory). There, across the highway and across the high Aussie grasses, stood the small frame farmhouse just like the professor remembered. Indeed, aside from the stout set of chimneys, the house seemed unremarkable. The clay bricks, rusty red from hand molded clay, shone in the afternoon sun.

Having previous experience, the writer instructed Jack, the driver, to turn onto Kelly’s Road, the dusty gravel road leading back to the house site. The car stopped, the team exited and all three approached the simple house. There, standing in the bright sunshine, stood the house with the twin chimneys and the small
window pane in the left side of the construction. Navigating over the rubble toward the back of the house, the three explorers realized that the back door was ajar, giving the group entrance. The professor realized his dream as he entered the home that had plagued his curious mind for months. There, in the afternoon sun afforded by the window pane in the bricks, were the two hearths: one with an old, traditional fireplace and the other with the combustion wood burning stove that filled the mouth of the hearth. The professor stood for many minutes taking in the moment. He had arrived and solved the mystery of the twin chimneys.

Danny Byrne’s house located off the Monaro Highway on Kelly Rd.
The General Truth

After numerous photo opportunities, the research trio begrudgingly left the Byrne house and traveled to nearby Michelago for an impromptu focus group on twin chimneys. Purely by coincidence, several residents of the area were gathered at the general store and graciously consented to the request by the professor for a session of questions so that he might better understand the unique features, design, and use of the Australian twin chimneys. The focus group held in that old general store proved fruitful. Among the participants were Cheryl Kenyan, Michael Lees (Danny Byrne’s nephew) and several other knowledgeable residents of the area. The focus group confirmed that:

1. Bricks for the chimneys were generally fired right on the spot and Australians tended to do this together as a social event (much like the old-time US custom of barn raisings).
2. It took two days to fire enough bricks for two sets of chimneys. The bricks were generally wire cut.
3. The kitchen wood stove provided cooking, baking, and frying facilities along with a hot water boiler for multiple household uses. The kitchen area served as the family gathering place and dining area.
4. Most of the twin chimney edifices were constructed between the 1850’s to the 1940’s and were generally built before electricity came to the region.

After an enjoyable discussion, the professor and his companions reluctantly said goodbyes and headed back to Corryong. In only a few days, the writer had discovered an unusual
cultural truth about the past in Australia. These twin chimneys reflected a cultural adaptation by a rugged and enterprising culture. Making the transition from the hearth to the hot plate, the Aussies inserted their wood burning combustion stoves back into the familiar space of the hearth with windows added for light.

As Jack and Lorna drove the professor back toward Melbourne to catch his flight out of Australia, Lorna pronounced triumphantly, “We’ve one more stop to make before we drop you off!” The rolling hillsides of lovely Australia slipped by until Jack drove the car into a small village named Omeo, located in Victoria. Terry Peterson, a local and excellent artist, had painted a beautiful picture of the Cullagan’s place, featuring a collection of four chimneys. The picture made the professor marvel and when Lorna purchased it for this writer, he was admittedly much moved. The painting hangs on the wall of the professor’s office even now and is always a conversation piece when students and colleagues alike survey the painting and then ask, ‘Why does that house have two chimneys side-by-side like that?’ Side-by-side indeed. What a wonderful question for someone to ask!

**Summary**

Little doubt remains that the twin chimney phenomena occurs throughout the rural areas of the Australian states of New South Wales and Victoria. More research is needed to confirm that
this heating and cooking technology emerged nation-wide. From the warm memories (pun completely intended!) recounted by the many informants during this research project, no doubt exists that these hearths and woodstoves played a tremendous roll in the daily lives of numerous Australian families for nearly 100 years. For Beryl McVean the impact of the hearth and wood stove combination continues to sustain life and provide comfort. The list of results of this two-part research journey includes:

1. The twin chimney concept emerged in the 1850’s and survived in the Australian rural country culture until electricity came on the scene (circa 1940’s).
2. The Australian transition from wood hearth cooking to wood stove stayed within the confines of the hearth. The US counterpart moved out of the hearth, onto legs, using a free standing flew pipe instead of the more traditional brick chimney.
3. The twin chimney arrangement in the kitchen provided heat for the family while the meals were being cooked and thereby the kitchen became a place of congregation, communication and focus for the Australian family.
4. The ingenious inlayed window pane in the chimney flue provided natural light for the cook, cascading across the entire surface of the wood stove.
5. Informants declared that the inset wood stove served three important functions for the family: (a) heat for the room, (b) cooking facilities, and (c) hot water for multiple uses.
6. The inset wood stove and hearth fire often became an impromptu laundry area. The coals were used in antique irons to press clothes and the twin heat sources dried clothes after washings or wet from heavy rains.
7. Wood is plentiful in these locations so fuel was never a problem to fire both the hearth and the inset wood stove.
8. The clay bricks used in construction held heat naturally so that the fire was felt throughout the chimneys making the house much warmer.
9. The clay brick chimney was much safer than the US pipe flue.
10. The twin chimney concept is unique to Australia and therefore emerges as a unique Australian folkway.

The author left Australia, his two good friends, and the twin chimneys. Yet, in many ways, all three abide in his heart.

Thus is the case of the mystery of the twin chimneys.

The author stands in front of Danny Byrne’s house on Kelly Road (The window pane offers natural light for the wood stove)
Outside of the McVean house in Rosewood, Australia
(Note the two window configuration in the chimney)
Riley’s Ride Fire

Gather together
For a tale from the shire,
Of sweet paddock grasses
And the Riley’s Ride Fire.
Come hear the tale
Of the Snowy Tradition.
Some speak of others,
I’ll give my rendition.
Over the mountains
In a valley so rare,
The Corryong Folk
Gather with care.
They’re quick to remember
A man of the past
Who’s ride in the mountain
Made his legend last.
Gallop and go
The horses they race,
Competition and mates
They keep at the pace.
The Corryong People
And Aussies in number
Make Riley’s Ride
With reverence and thunder.
Neither mud nor the branches
Hinder the run
As steed and the rider
Will both see it done.
Soon up ahead,
Roaring and bright,
The fire at Tom Groggins
Lights up the night.
Flames dance with shadows,
The present with past,
As ancient, bold spirits
Weave spells they will cast.
The fire burns much brighter
   Than others you see
As horse and the rider
   Relive history.
Here in the mountains
Where legends still live
A man and a stallion
   Are willing to give
A glimpse into secrets
In flickering firelight
As Old Riley himself
Appears in the night.
Come feel the power
Of Riley’s Ride Fire
Learn of the secrets
And pride of this shire.

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