

# The MODESTA Story

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It all began in December 1962 — “Dear Mr R. . . . I find *Bulbinella* from lowland Westland differs considerably etc. . . . We could use some more material”. This very diplomatically stated. “Yours etc., L.B.M.” A copy was sent to the N.Z. Forest Service, Hokitika. The reply dated January 1963 stated that some rangers had reported the presence of *Bulbinella* on a trip in the Paparoa Range, route supplied (about 8 miles) but no further details. Two years later another letter arrived unexpectedly giving details of a ‘spectacular’ display of *Chrysobactron* in the headwaters of the Arahura River. This information was duly channelled to the correct authority (L.B.M.)

A small notice was displayed in the Greymouth Public Library giving details of *Bulbinella*, to which I received one reply — from a man in Runanga. This turned out to be the wild *white*-flowered onion plant.

A letter dated November 1963 from L.B.M. mentions” . . . Thank you for keeping watch for *Bulbinella*, records enclosed”.

In the meantime about late October 1963 I met a Mr Clarke from Blackball, who seemed to recall seeing something like *Bulbinella* along the Croesus track not far from Blackball. So off I went on another “You can’t miss it” wild goose chase. Croesus track is an old dray road going up to the quartz mine on the Paparoa Range. My old car managed to penetrate through feet-high gorse and a dilapidated bridge until blocked by a large slip, where by precarious manoeuvres it was turned around. This was about two miles up the track. On the way back I poked around a few likely looking spots until I reached the Blackball rubbish dump near the start of the track. It was beyond this evil looking moraine of old iron and glass etc. that I saw the last likely spot, but discretion held me back. Nature being what it is I decided to look on the other side of the track for a private place behind the gorse bushes. I had only gone a few yards when suddenly I was trampling on a golden mass. I had found MODESTA! This was later to become the type locality of *Bulbinella modesta*. In amongst manuka, gorse, rushes and sedges was what looked like a *Bulbinella*, but one different from any I had seen before; a frail-looking plant with leaves almost prostrate and a thin stem carrying golden flowers in a much looser arrangement than is usual. A few plants were dug up and sent to L.B.M., and one potted up and displayed in the Public Library. Within hours I received a message “Mr Christie of Atarau (five miles from Blackball) — we have some growing behind our house — would you like a few plants?”

"Yes, please". Next day the plants arrived — yes this was MODESTA and another parcel sent to L.B.M.

Shortly after L.B.M. writes "Dear Mr R. Thank you for two exciting parcels of *Bulbinella* . . . I would very much like to have fruiting plants later . . . P.S. I much enjoyed your dramatic account."

A trip up the Moonlight Creek behind Atarau for a few days not long after found MODESTA in a swampy clearing.

In late December 1963 I returned to the rubbish dump for fruiting plants.

L.B.M. 6 January 1964, "Dear Mr R. Thank you for fruiting *Bulbinella* . . . if by chance . . . when capsules are splitting . . ." Also enclosed was a booklet on orchids — the open season for orchid hunting was well under way. L.B.M. 16 January 1964, "Dear Mr R. Many thanks . . . if you happen . . . waving field of ripe seeds". 18 January 1964 — collecting seeds at rubbish dump.

There followed a lull except that in the 1964—65 season I collected a number of plants and took them over to Christchurch. Some were given to the Botanical Gardens, one or two to a good friend for planting around a pond at the base of his rock garden, and one to a lady whose garden was full of rarities from all over the world. She subscribed to various botanical expeditions and received seeds of plants that had never been described by Kew and always had a collector's number instead of a specific epithet. I told her that MODESTA was not in anybody else's collection, and so could claim a place in her garden.

November 1965 saw me returning from a trip to Mt Augustus in search of *Astelia subulata* when I stopped and climbed up onto Caroline Terrace just south of Westport and found, yes, MODESTA.

A week later I was up the Grey Valley about 10 miles beyond Atarau and found some more MODESTA in the Craigieburn pakihi.

Christmas 1965 and I was going up Mt Augustus again when just above the old coal-mining township of Stockton I saw a flash of gold above the bank — MODESTA again. That was the year of the "White Xmas" and I was lucky to survive being frozen solid.

A month later I found MODESTA growing near the big dam south of Charleston and in December 1966 I saw it again, this time further up the Grey Valley at Mawheraiti.

In February 1966 L.B.M. sent me a copy of her monumental work on *Bulbinella* "To I.R. with thanks for expert assistance".

Here ends the MODESTA story with the exception of the climax or anticlimax, depending on which way you look at it. L.B.M. told me that *Bulbinella modesta* was so named because of its modest

dimensions, and for having been collected by a modest person.

Early this year I went to Christchurch to absorb a periodical dose of sophistication and came upon a new structure in the botanical gardens known as the Alpine House. On entering I was dazzled by a pot of gold and then by four more. Five superb pots full of my MODESTA. My heart glowed with pride and then I remembered. Modest person be hanged — another West Coast legend exploded.

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Photo: R. J. Chincock.

*Bulbophyllum tuberculatum* on rimu branch, associated with *Pyrrhosia serpens* and lichens. Note *B. pygmaeum* bottom centre.