

"Reminiscences of a Wild Horse Muster"

By Prince Wood

Article from the Official Souvenir of the "Back to Grenfell" event 18-23 March 1924

I have been asked to give an account of the methods adopted in mustering wild horses in the early days. When gold was discovered at Grenfell, there were hundreds of wild horses all over the country; beautiful animals they were, very different from the general run of horses of the present day, being a fine, upstanding lot, and all being practically the progeny of imported stallions. The latter were brought to the stations by various owners and turned adrift with choice and well-bred mares. They had the whole country to depasture on, as there were no fences in those days—with the exception of small horse paddocks - the grass being feet high, and waving like a crop of oats. One can easily imagine how the young stock would grow and develop under those conditions, and how wild they would become. To see them tearing through the bush with their satin skins glistening in the sunlight was a picture.

Mustering to brand the young stock was an annual affair. Each station would have its yearly round up, and all the crack horsemen from far and wide would gather at a station homestead for the event, due notice having been sent round some days previously. Each station would send along a number of quiet horses to make up a herd of "tailors." The stockmen would be mounted on picked horses with plenty of pace and endurance - great rivalry existed amongst the stockmen as to the ownership of the best horses.

The muster generally lasted a week, and after it was completed the colts would be yard-drafted to their respective owners, whose ultimate object was to send drafts to Melbourne for sale, that being the best market. Good prices, ranging from £15 to £20 per head, were obtained, the ages of these colts being anything from 5 to 10 years. Many of them had never seen the inside of a stock-yard from the day they were branded. Of course, there were hundreds of clean skins in the bush, and these, by virtue of the station upon which they were yarded, were regarded as the property of that station.

It was a common occurrence for aged colts to be sold in Melbourne and a week after to be seen back on the run, the homing instinct with them being very pronounced.

I remember one big muster at Brundah. I was the youngest horseman there, but being a very light weight, was always mounted on one of the fastest horses, this being essential to keep pace with the leaders of the wild mob, and turn them into the "tailors." All hands met at the station on a given morning, and an early start would be made. The "tailors," numbering a hundred or more, were driven slowly out on the run, to a given position, and there held by a certain number of men, whilst the balance went out scouting in different directions, to turn the wild ones to the mob to "tailors." The wild horses, after being run a few miles, would make for any other horses which they sighted. So when they were turned towards the "tailors," the men in charge of the latter, seeing them coming, would crouch on their horses behind trees, so as not to be seen by the approaching mob. As soon as the wild ones joined up with the "tailors," the horsemen, keeping out wide from the "tailors," would then ride round and round them, slowly closing up to a certain distance, till all the mob steadied down. With each fresh mob being driven in, the same tactics would be observed. Every horseman when going out in the morning led a spare horse, which was tied to a tree close to where the "tailors" were stationed. These horses were used later in the day, as half a day's hard riding was enough for any one horse. At this muster to which I am referring by four o'clock (at a rough estimate) about 1,000 horses had been put together. It was then time to start moving them towards the stock-yards, some five miles distant. It was necessary to be very careful in moving them steadily along, the riders moving with them, and being posted all round, a couple more riders in front to steady the leaders, as if once they got a swing on, and began to make pace, nothing would stop

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them in their wild rush. In this instance, when about two miles from the yards, and following an old track, the leaders broke into a canter and gradually improved the pace to a racing gallop. The thunder of the hoofs hammering the ground behind them simply maddened the leaders, with the result it was a wild stampede up along that old road. Tom Hope and I were out in front. Tom's horse began to feel the strain of the pace. I happened to be riding one of his horses that day, a horse called Jacky Narrang—and what a beauty he was, with undoubted pace. Tom made a final run up close to me, told me his horse was tiring, shouted for me to keep straight in front of the horses on along the track, and go right through the gates of the big receiving yard, as the horses would follow. I did this, the horses following me, and as soon as I got through the gate I wheeled sharply to one side; the horses charged madly on to the opposite side of the yard (which covered an area of about four acres), and crushed against the fence with such force that several panels were broken down (and this was a six-rail, iron-bark fence). Many horses were knocked down, others fell over them; about fifty were crippled. The mob had such a swing on they went through the gap in the fence and raced straight on for the Yambrya Mountains, and notwithstanding the efforts of all the horsemen, they only succeeded in cutting off and holding about four hundred of the tail of the mob. All the best, being out in the lead, were lost for the time being but the next day would be found back on their special grazing ground; and so each day the muster would be carried on.

Many of those men who took part at the muster have since joined the Great Majority, and what a class of horsemen they were, not only as bush riders, but equally as good rough riders - no better ever straddled the pig skin. I can recall the names of many of them, Jack Wood, Tom and Alick Mylecharane, Jim Memory, Harry and Jack Mitton (no better horsemen ever lived than these two), represented Brundah, Eugene and Willie Watt, Sam Glass, J. Cowal, Tom and Billy Hope from Bumbaldry, Jimmy Daley, Pat O'Malley, Bob Adams, Bill Bristow, Ted and H. Judd from Arramagong way, Jimmy Hennessy, Hadcroft, Billy Tyrell from Goolagong side. And what a grand picture these men made, all ideal horsemen, and all dressed in the regular stockman's turnout, coatless, white moleskin pants, Wellington boots, cabbage tree hats, stockwhip coiled over their shoulders, and mounted on beautiful horses whose skins shone like bright gold. Ah, those were the days when there were good horses and horsemen.

In later years with the influx of the diggers, the wild horses were pushed back, so that fewer numbers were to be found in the immediate vicinity of the diggings, many that remained, were exceptionally good animals.

The system adopted to get them, was by trapping, This was done by erecting strong yards in suitable positions, building wings out half a mile or so up to the gate. Then the men would go out mounted on good horses, and endeavour to yard the wild ones. Sometimes with a good run a few colts would be yarded, but it was a gruelling game on the saddle horses, and as the wild ones were continually being chased, they got very cunning and would run over a man to dodge past the ends of the wings.

The last men in the district to adopt this means of securing horses, were Harry and Jack Mitton, with yards on Flinty ridges and Lively's Mount. Jack and Jimmy Stein, had yards under the Weddin. The Bernies had their yards under Crowther Mount. Any of these men could, I am sure, entertain by the hour with their experiences in running wild horses.

For thrilling excitement there was nothing to equal wild horses running, as owing to the thick timber, and logs hidden in the long grass, there always was an element of danger to the horsemen.

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