

BEEF CATTLE AND A HISTORY OF THE MURRAY GREYS

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When William Wyse drove a mob of cattle belonging to Charles Hotson Ebdon south to the pastures of Hume's River at Mungabareena in November 1835, he was indeed making history. He and his party were the first of a long line of beef cattlemen to make the fertile pastures of this mighty stream famous in the ensuing years.

The long drought from 1835 to 1844, coupled with the favourable report of the district by Hume and Hovell earlier, prompted cattlemen from north of the Murrumbidgee to take up runs in the Ovens, Mitta and Murray Valleys between 1835 and 1839.

The Upper Murray, as it came to be known, has been noteworthy both for the cattle bred within its own limits and for those it has fattened from up to 1000 miles away. The energetic Wyse, Ebdon and the Huons of Belvoir and Wodonga had extended their territories to Bonegilla, Baranduda and Barnawatha and to the valleys of the Mitta and Kiewa rivers to the south. In the following years, the family of Mrs William Mitchell extended further out and up the Murray to Bringenbrong, Khancoban and Indi.

Robert Brown moved down river to Collendina, at the junction with the Ovens. John Dight took up Bungowannah (heaving bullock backs) 12 miles down from Albury. In 1836, Redfern and Alexander claimed Thologolong (plain with a creek in it) to the east.

Another cattle family early on the scene were the Hores whose name is remembered in a Wodonga street. John Hore took up Bungil in 1837 and with other members of the family. expanded their claims to large areas on either side of the river. About 1870, John sold all the stations except Cumberoona; but the tradition was carried on by Pat and others noted for their herds of large Durhams (later Beef Shorthorns).

Burrowye and Guy's Forest beyond Thologolong, were settled by Don Macleod. Ten years later, this passed to William and Hugh Scott, nephews of Sir Walter Scott, who in those times held 14,000 acres of lease carrying 1000 cattle. Years later still, portion of this run was to become "The Glen" under the Gadd family, of whom we shall hear more. As early as 1836, Rev Joseph Docker succeeded George Faithful and his brothers at Bontherambo (a wooded plain). The Dockers have continued to breed and fatten cattle there.

While Wyse and his friends were extending their holdings out into the neighbouring valleys, John Morrice, David Mackenzie and Robert Wylde had taken up Kergunyah, with a heifer station at Woomargama (the wild cherry). In 1839, William Fury Baker laid claim to 31,000 acres along Black Dog Creek (now Chiltern) with an estimated capacity of 1000 cattle.

The warlike aboriginal tribes of the Upper Murray caused frequent heavy losses of both stock and human lives.

Early lines of beef cattle followed the British breeds of Herefords (introduced first in 1826) and Devons or Durhams, later known as the English or Scottish Shorthorns. The only poll breed for many decades was the black Aberdeen Angus from Scotland, introduced in the mid 1800's.

From 1850 to 1860, the population of Victoria increased by about six times, while that of NSW more than doubled, swelling the demand for beef products much faster than the supply. South Australian markets also developed rapidly while Western Australia drew further supplies through Adelaide. Queensland was easily the largest beef cattle producer but her major supplies from

western areas had difficulty in reaching coastal markets in anything but poor condition for many years.

STOCK ROUTES

Thus in the 1860's, Western Queenslanders opened up a back door to the beef markets of the south. Great mobs of young store cattle were overlanded some 1000 miles and more, to meet the enormous demand centred on the Wodonga market.

From as far as Longreach in the central west, these mobs headed southwards, some 200 miles down the course of the Warrego River into NSW to join the Darling near Bourke; then south again up the Bogan to the present town of Parkes. Crossing the Lachlan near Forbes, they passed Lake Cowell up the Bland close to Temora, then west of Junee and across the 'Bidgee below Wagga. From The Rock, they picked up the Doodle Cooma Swamp at Henty, then down the Billabong Creek west of Culcairn as far as Walbundrie, then south again to cross the Murray at Howlong.

A second beef road from Queensland also joined the Bogan via the Barwon and tributaries.

Before leaving their home territory, the cattle had to have reached their "two tooth" stage, to have been dipped against ticks, lice and infection, marked and fire branded. But the drover was also on guard against cattle duffers, wild dogs and all the natural hazards of fire, flood, famine and disease.

The route from Queensland to the Murray took approximately six months - a period required for Victorian entry. It also gave growing cattle a chance to fill out to advanced store condition by 18 to 20 months. Mobs numbered from 800 to 1500, each in the charge of a boss drover and his outfit.

Conditions improved with mechanisation. Markets called for a younger beast, more rapidly brought to butchers' requirements. Queensland's communication links improved too. Supplies of store cattle to southern markets dried up and Brahman (tick resistant) breeds were introduced. Meanwhile, those who fattened cattle along the Murray were also breeding replacements.

THE MURRAY GREYS

Although it was only in 1962 that the Murray Grey Society was formed and the breed registered, these grey cattle had been bred for many years on "Thologolong," the property of the Sutherland family. In 1932 Mrs. Keith Sutherland purchased the only eight greys in existence from her father-in-law's estate and began breeding seriously. Until then "Thologolong" had run only pure bred Angus (black hornless).

However, in 1940 a grey bull calf was sold to a partnership of three Gadd brothers and this eventually passed to one of them, Mervyn, at "The Glen." He then bred up a herd of grey cattle using Angus females. These greys always seemed to thrive better than the others so Mervyn decided to concentrate on them.

The females were culled and three more "Thologolong" bulls were bought at intervals which all had different Angus sires. Both male and female progeny retained complete hornlessness and an unbroken grey colour.

As the steers began to appear in the fat cattle market, they gained popularity with the butchers. By 1950 grey steers were topping the fat cattle markets, and other cattlemen also started using grey bulls. They bought them not only from "The Glen" but also from the Sutherlands.

In 1962, a meeting was called by the Royal Agricultural Society of Victoria which attracted 45 cattlemen who formed a Murray Grey Society. The name was chosen because the breed originated in the Murray River valley. It was decided that only Angus females would be used as base stock. In the initial inspections all cattle were permanently branded or tattooed. The first inspections for registration were carried out in March and April 1963 by Messrs Frank Hood and

Bennie Dent. The first Herd Book was published in 1965. By 1969 the membership had risen and finances improved enough to warrant a full time inspector for the Herd Book.

Brisbane admitted Murray Greys into their schedule in 1969. Adelaide and Perth followed and Sydney in 1970. The publication of the Society's journal "Murray Grey World" was instituted in 1971 and in 1974 the Society moved its headquarters from Melbourne to Albury.

International Recognition

Murray Greys were imported by New Zealand cattle breeders from 1971. Canada was next, their consignment being directly involved in the first air-lift of cattle across the Pacific Ocean.

In 1973 a sales delegation of three from the Society went to the United States and the United Kingdom and UK sales resulted the next year. Quarantine regulations prevented imports to the US until recently.

Four bulls were donated by the Society to Fiji. An Australian Prime Minister presented a bull to China. Two heifers and two bulls were sent to the Peking Trade Fair, afterwards to be used in China.

Russia sought contact with the Society and sent a delegation here, but a suspected outbreak of blue tongue in Northern Australia put a temporary ban on the export of all Australian cattle.

The Society continued to grow. In 1983, a new system of registration was implemented - the Female Inventory System.

In the early years some very high prices were paid but these later became more realistic. Dalgety held a Murray Grey stud stock sale in Wodonga in 1967 which became an annual event. Out of this grew the Murray Grey National Show and Sale. Members from both the Sutherland and Gadd families became well known judges. At the 1969 Melbourne Show the breed won the coveted Borthwick Trophy, the most prestigious award in Australia, for three fat steers. These carcasses were then shipped to England to compete at Smithfield, the most important meat display in the UK and to win their class again. They have repeated this success many times since.

Wodonga saleyards have continued to grow and improve their efficiency so that today they are one of the major cattle selling centres in Australia. The Upper Murray continues to supply large numbers of Herefords, Angus, Shorthorns and Murray Greys to this centre. However, most cattle are transported now and we no longer encounter mobs of cattle five chains wide by eight miles long spread-eagled across the highway

Glossary

A Station: A large sheep or cattle property.

Cattleduffer: One who steals cattle, usually altering the brand.

Store Cattle: Growing but not yet fattened, without regard to age.

Advanced Store: The final stage of growth before fattening.

Two-Tooth: Cattle aged about a year old lose their two front "milk" teeth for their first two permanent teeth.

Aged: Fully mature, ie at about four years old.

Marked: Ear marked and the owner's fire brand applied All males castrated except those bulls reserved for breeding.

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