

Calling in the high plains herds

Picture: RAY KENNEDY



Could that really be a blue sky in April? Yes, and it stayed all day. Could that be sunshine? Yes. These are rare and euphoric things for a mountain cattlemen's muster on the Bogong High Plains. April is a cold and dirty month. The horsemen go out in enormous coats that reach to their shins.

But not this week. Most of the riders set out from their mountain huts in bare arms and open shirts, and they had a jaunty air, as if they were going into a schoolboy fray.

Every year, the cattle families gather at Pretty Valley, above Falls Creek, to muster the herds they have left on the high country pastures throughout the summer. It is a gripping spectacle.

If you position yourself on one of the rises around Pretty Valley, you see the action unfold as if you were watching a movie in panorama. First, a group of men ride in from the north, driving before them the cattle they have collected on the way.

Lahey at Large

JOHN LAHEY



Perhaps 10 minutes pass. Then you spy a group coming from the east, so small in the distance that they do not look like anything except a grey mass inching forward. You get the same impression of a group suddenly visible in the west: tiny figures blurred into the landscape and moving slowly . . . slowly . . .

Meanwhile, the first two herds are welded into one, waiting for the third to arrive. Look! Someone points. Away in the distance is a fourth herd, just little blobs bobbing on the grass.

At the point where the herds are being merged, no man or beast is ever still. Dogs run around the outskirts, men wheel their horses this way and that, stockwhips crack and cattle try to make a break, but few manage it. The herd must be kept intact.

The third herd arrives and becomes one with the first two. Every Hereford and Angus in Pretty Valley is bellowing. Then the fourth herd comes in. Everything is in place for the drama. Into that mob the cattlemen will dash and weave to pick their animals by the evidence of earmarks.

Two things are happening at once: the herd is being kept where it is, and it is being split into groups. How this happens, a layman will not know. Perhaps the cattlemen use telepathy.

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Coming down from the high country: Terry Arundle, of Myrtleford, watches over some of the cattle mustered at Pretty Valley.



Warming his hands by the fire, Mr Wally Ryder, 73, is still the boss as he and his men relax after mustering cattle in the high country near Falls Creek.

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You will see three or four riders dash into the swirling mob from different directions, and you will swear that they must collide, but no; each knows where he is going, and each brings out one or two Herefords with the earmarks he seeks. In ones, twos and threes, the cattle are cut out and pointed in different directions. They drift off.

They have been shown some sanity in this confusion, and they grasp it. They have no wish to return to the herd. They will just keep walking.

At various times, the mass of cattle and men come apart, as if this is a war game and each side is regrouping by agreement. Instantly, they come together again. A movie would give this tactic wonderful sound effects of crashing trumpets and shuddering violins.

The action never stops. Nor can it be predicted. You think that a man is going to veer left, but he confounds you by turning his horse on a 50-cent piece and cantering 80 metres. You realise then that he spotted something more challenging: three earmarks instead of one. And all the time, other men are performing incredible feats.

This is a breathtaking demonstration of courage, skill, mateship, rawness, intelligence and derring-do. Everything else is mentally cast aside. The rest of the world can go its own effete way. You can imagine men shouting, "Up-the-lot-of-yers!" as other horsemen probably did at the Wells of Beersheba.

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More cattle are cut out, and with docile steps they follow those already moving away, until all at once, you notice that the one big herd has become four. What happens now has been traditional for more years than anyone can remember. The men sit their horses quietly and gather in a tight circle to talk.

Once, when some mountain families might not see others from one muster to the next, this must have been a cherished social occasion. The men poke gentle mullock at each other, and swap gossip and news of cattle prices and talk about their horses and the weather.

The cutting out of the herds has taken two hours. The men talk for 10 minutes. Then they wheel and call their dogs and furl their whips, and as slowly as they arrived they move off in the direction of their huts or of home.

Twelve families put 4000 cattle on the Bogong plains this season, and the earmarks numbered more than 20. This week's musters were not large, because some families took their herds away early for cattle sales. About 2000 Herefords and Aberdeen Angus remained.

Before this week's muster, most had been picked up easily on their owners' leaseholds and were already fenced in at the yards of mountain huts, others

were in the gullies beyond the ridges, and others were in the scrub. All would be picked up within days.

All through the muster, if you watched from the heights above the herd, you could easily make out the dignified figure of Wally Ryder, 73, a horseman of renown, the patriarch of the high plains. On his grey horse, Trapper, he weaved and dashed with the rest of them.

Mr Ryder is the idol of many young men, who would give anything to ride on the Pretty Valley muster with him. One young man named Colin Broughton, who turned 18 yesterday, came down from the Strathbogie Ranges to see him last year and to ask if he could ride with him this April. Mr Ryder liked his initiative, and said yes. Colin Broughton will tell the tale of the 1987 muster until he is an old man.

Mr Ryder went through the muster with a song in his heart. His only child, Harry, now 28, has not ridden since an accident to his leg at the age of 12. It seemed as if the great Ryder mustering tradition, spanning five generations, would vanish. Last November, Harry Ryder and his wife Sue had a son, Adam Walter.

Adam Walter Ryder, five months old, attended his first muster this week. He sat in the utility with his father while his mother and his grandfather cut out the Ryder stock. The old gentleman was so happy he could hardly let Adam out of his arms later on.