



Mountain cattlemen versus chairborn bureaucrats

Jim Commins, president of the
local branch of the Mountain
Cattlemen's Association of Victoria,
has spent a lifetime working the
land and building up a quality herd
of Hereford cattle. Many hardships
have been overcome along the way,
but now Jim and fellow graziers face
another battle with conservationists
who want to evict cattle from the
mountain runs.
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Mountain cattleman faces another threat

By Heather Osborn

JIM Commins of Ensay is a man who is held in high regard by his neighbors and fellow cattlemen, not only for the quality Herefords that he and his family rear, but also for his ongoing contribution to the welfare of members of the Mountain Cattleman's Association of Victoria.

One needs only to spend a little time with Jim, to quickly understand that his fair minded, unassuming manner and his depth of knowledge about the country, are just two of the reasons behind his election as Omeo branch president of the MCAV, a position he has held since the association's inception in 1969, along with a 10 year term as Victorian president.

Like many of the long established graziers in the area, Jim's lifetime has been spent building a sound cattle and sheep farming enterprise.

Many hardships have been faced along the way, not the least of which was the early battle with thousands of rabbits in the undeveloped country as he worked to make the land productive.

By contrast his early ancestors made their way in very different walks of life. Jim's great grandfather, who came from Cornwall, being one of the early settlers (known as the Canterbury Pilgrims) in the Christchurch area of New Zealand in the late 1840's. He then moved to the Port Phillip colony in Victoria in 1850, shortly after taking a position as a clerk in the newly formed legislative council.



Coming home

His two eldest sons were sent back to England for their education and Jim's grandfather Charles, returned to Australia as a lawyer, setting up practice in Warragul.

Charles married Eleanor Hunter, daughter of James Hunter, a pioneer of the Mansfield district, who, with brother Alec, was first to successfully negotiate the mountains from the north east to Gippsland.

Charles and Eleanor moved to Bairnsdale where Jim's father James Lilburn Commins was reared.

After serving in the first world war in the light horse (including the 3rd brigade's battle at Gallipoli), James took up a soldier settlement block of 640 acres on the former Ensay Station which was subdivided for the purpose.

He married Sarah Maberly — Margetts, daughter of Edmund Margetts who had Bindi Station.

It was on the Ensay block that Jim and his brothers Philip and Charles, in working with their father, gained the experience that was essential to livelihood in that sometimes harsh environment.

Further acreage was added with both sheep and cattle run and from about 1930, the Commins family began to take stock to the Nunniong mountain run in association with the Duke family who had held a licence for the area since the early 1920's.

It was about 1890, after Duffy's land Act, that mountain grazing areas were made available to those who wished to take up a licence — 10,000 acres being the average size in the Omeo region, down to 2000 to 3000 acres on the Bogong High Plains where there is less rough country.

The Nunniong licence was ultimately transferred to the Commins family.



Commins cattle grazing the Nunniong run.

In 1949, Jim and Philip branched out on their own and purchased an undeveloped block. Jim's recently acquired knowledge of working with machinery during World War 2, being a great asset when they acquired a bulldozer to rid the property of rabbit harbors and for general work in pasture improvement.

During those tough early years, over 6000 rabbits were skinned and many thousands more were poisoned or bulldozed.

In 1953, Philip was killed in an accident, leaving Jim to carry on.

Initially, stock comprised opportunity cattle of mixed breeds, until Jim was able to secure Hereford breeders of proven lines from neighboring graziers. Bulls from Laurie Platt's Lowanna Stud compounded a sound line of hardy, productive cattle with aires since then coming from Benambra, Cobungo and Glendook studs.

Gradually the hard work paid off with stock numbers on the increase, Jim meanwhile marrying Norma Dale and raising a family of three, a daughter Ann, who now resides in Melbourne, and two sons Bruce and Chris, each now married and operating different farms, all in the family partnership.

The Commins now join about 450 Hereford females each year, retaining approximately 100 heifers annually for replacements.

Calves are weaned before the annual sales so that they are well settled and ready to grow on, a fact which feedlotter and other graziers appreciate and are prepared to pay a premium for Commins Herefords consistently out perform other stock in the Chariton feedlot and are keenly sought by those buyers at the annual Omeo-Benambra sales.

Cows are taken up to the mountain run at Nunniong, which Jim shares with brother Charles, for summer and are brought home for calving.

The majority of cattle on the run, in fact set out for home of their own accord at the first onset of rough weather and would no doubt make the 30 km. journey unattended were it not for the fences encountered along the way.

Mustering therefore consists of two to three weeks of riding to pick up the small mobs of stragglers, which if missed, would face severe stress through calving in the mountains during winter.

The task of mustering requires a deep understanding of the bush, an ability to "remember landmarks, not get lost and read natural signs that indicate all manner of things from the near presence of cattle to a coming change in the weather."

How many times have lost persons been rescued from the bush by mountain cattlemen like Clive Hodge and the Lovicks of Mansfield to name just two, whose rapport with the mountains and sixth sense, places them to advantage in such missions.

It is therefore incomprehensible to these people that over recent years the movement by so called conservationists in interfering with management of the mountain cattle runs, poses a threat to the livelihood of those who have worked them, in some cases for 100 years.

Among the major issues being contested is the conservationists' claim that cattle are responsible for damage to native pasture species in alpine grazing areas.

However as the annual renewal fee for licences is based on the number of head grazed, fees have been progressively increasing in line with more stock run as a direct result of improvements, which is in complete contradiction to the claims made!

In a situation such as Jim's, the Nunniong run is naturally bordered by gorges and escarpments on the northern and western boundaries, but 18 km of fencing has been erected on the other boundaries to keep stock in the designated areas.

Jim believes that government departments don't recognise the input of mountain cattlemen and that the Conservation Council of Victoria and the Australian Conservation Foundation are unduly influenced by radicals and advised by some botanists who may have degrees in specialised fields but have no practical knowledge of the situation as a whole.

Jim has carefully researched the effects of areas of NSW which have been closed to grazing in the name of national parks only to be devastated by the ravages of uncontrollable fires. He and fellow cattlemen know the benefits of grazing to keep the

mountains clean and reduce the fire risk and also that pastures proliferate under such management in sharp contrast to the trial plots which have been fenced and maintained for comparison. In such plots the grasses become thickly matted impeding the penetration of light and inhibiting regrowth.

Jim quotes an instance recently when he was on his way to the cattlemen's meeting at Bogong and stopped to show a visitor one of the trial plots. It was early in the morning and the tops of their boots and trousers were saturated with the wet grass but after removing matted grass from the surface of the plot, he pulled out some dry

undergrowth and set a match to it — it burned vigorously!!

Many other arguments about why cattle should be removed from the mountain leases have been patiently refuted by the cattlemen, but in vain it would seem with the recent issue of eviction notices to several licensees.

The battle is now on to have those decisions reversed, not only for the families who have worked in harmony with the land to make their living, but also for the good of the environment itself.

In Jim's case the Nunniong run is not under immediate threat and his family can be thankful that he maintained a substantial interest in sheep, although that requires a considerable labor input, but a flock of between 6000 and 7000 Merinos is kept.

It is self replacing with 2000 ewes joined annually, Banavie blood rams from Wallaloo Park being responsible for the large framed, well covered sheep that carry stylish wool.

But a cattleman loves his cattle and without the Nunniong run, Jim and his family's cattle numbers would be slashed to negligible, while many of his friends' farming enterprises will become unviable.

Coping with the unpredictable elements of nature and being prepared to give and take comes naturally to Jim in his work with the land that he has nurtured to make a living from.

But now, he and others like him must go on fighting with radicals and "chairborn" bureaucrats who he says it seems, "don't want to be confused by the facts" in the battle to maintain the mountains as they have been for decades before the invasion of officialdom!



JIM and his daughter-in-law Jeanette, working together in the family partnership.