



# Down from the hills for a high old time



The  
WRIGHT  
ROAD

THEY have come down from Victoria's high country with their Akubras and crumpled Drizabones, grumpy about the Greenies but determined to have a good time for a couple of days.

Such as riding their horses hard, cracking their whips in a way which just about nobody else in the world can, drinking beer, eating steaks and sandwiches and swiping at the bush flies.

There are hundreds of them and their friends camped along the shallow Ovens River near Myrtleford in north-eastern Victoria, a colorful encampment reminiscent of one of Cecil B. De Mille's big screen films.

I refer to last weekend's annual get-together of the Mountain Cattlemen's Association of Victoria on the fawn-hilled property of Mr Max Blair, a giant in jeans, and his whip-cracking wife, Leanne.

We arrive at the camp site after a liver-dislodging drive across a three kilometre stretch of paddock and straightaway think we are in a shooting gallery. Everybody including little girls, is practising whip-cracking, some using two whips, some doing the tricky "double-handed crossover" or the "drum roll."

This is in preparation for the big two-day sports program.

On an instrument-packed trailer, country swinger Lazy Harry is working his way through a ballad which cleverly sums up the issue which is worrying the high country cattlemen: Will the government side with the Greenies who claim the cattlemen are damaging the high country environment?

(Lazy Harry proves not to be so lazy.)

LEFT: Adam Ryder, 3, from Tawonga, tests his balance at the mountain cattlemen's annual get-together near Myrtleford.

BELOW: Steve Nott passes the Bowman's Forest campsite on his epic trek. INSET: Steve after four years in the saddle.

He sings all Saturday night and up to three o'clock on Sunday morning.)

Well the show literally gets cracking and the ladies' whip cracking championship is won by 13-year-old Tanith Blair, almost as lean as her whips. Her mother, Leanne is second.

A "sideshow" is then provided by 62-year-old Albert Campbell, of Bunyip, who begins demonstrating the art of whip-plaiting, using a vice attached to the tow bar of his car.

Such is Albert's slick performance that he is soon surrounded by hundreds of intrigued spectators and more than an hour passes before they decide to look at something else or go to the bar.

Albert tells me that he had a heart attack 17 years ago when he was breaking in horses and the doctors said he would never work again.

"So I took up making whips as a hobby. I sold 139 last year at between \$60 and \$80 a throw. Today I've already sold eight."

The men begin competing in the whip-cracking and the eardrums snap under the continual volley of "shots."

Then dear old Mick Walsh, formerly of Mitta Mitta, goes on to the centre court to crack a 24 feet long whip.

Mick, 78, has been cracking whips since the Horsemen of Apocalypse were on the go and the big crowd falls silent as he begins to whirl the great whip.

He muffs it! The whip doesn't crack!



Instead it entwines itself around Mick's slender frame like it's a crazed boa-constrictor.

But old Mick is undeterred. He begins afresh and this time there is a devastating crack, followed by a roar of applause.

Watching all this is a Burke-and-Wills type character by the name of Steve Nott, of Merrygoen near Dubbo in NSW.

Steve, 37, has just spent four years in the saddle riding around Australia.

Steve is a registered psychiatric nurse who decided to get away from it all and ride to the furthestmost points of the continent.

Firstly, he cantered over to Byron Bay in northern NSW which is the easternmost point of Aussie, then up to the top of Cape York Peninsula, then to Western Australia to Steep Point. Then to disaster!

Steve headed down to Wilson's Promontory to reach the southern tip of Australia.

But when he got to the National Park, he was informed he couldn't take his horse any further because it would "upset the environment." So he had to leave his faithful nag and hoof his way through the scrub to the sea.

Present at the get-together was an attractive lady by the name of Lynette Treasure, great-grand-daughter of Emmanuel Treasure one of the pioneer settlers on the Dargo High plains.

Emmanuel's folks transported him up there from Harrietville — strapped to a pack horse!

Also at the gathering was big Lou

Liebermann, State Member for Benambra. Liberal Lou said that the swinging whips kept making him wonder how the Thomastown by-election was going.

So the show went on through Saturday night, the masses being fed by some 60 volunteers from the nearby Whorouly Recreation Reserve committee, the great containers of cold cans being constantly stocked.

(Whorouly is having its own "Wacky Sports Day" on February 25 so this was good practice for the committee members.)

On Sunday came the much-awaited event — the Stockman's Cup — run over a course of "rough and broken ground" including a stretch of the stony-bedded Ovens River and a steep haul up the hills, a distance of a couple of miles.

A magic sight as the horses hit the river, the more so when they climbed a "farther hill" and were silhouetted against the overcast sky.

They thundered down the hill into the straight and first past the post was Tony Faithfull of Omeo.

When he came up to be presented with his trophy, Tony was out of breath; but his horse wouldn't have blown out a candle.

"Well," puffed Tony, "this is the sixth time I've ridden in the Cup. I've come second four times and third once."

"When I get back to Omeo, there'll be a big, fat bloke there who won't be able to call me 'bridesmaid' no more."

— GEOFFREY WRIGHT

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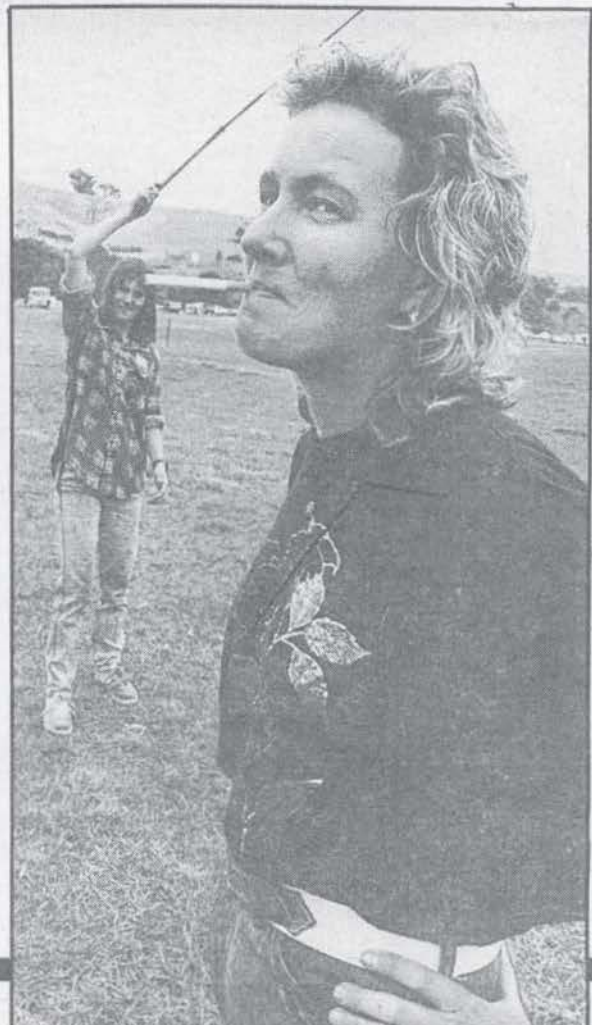
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Pictures: MARK GRIFFIN

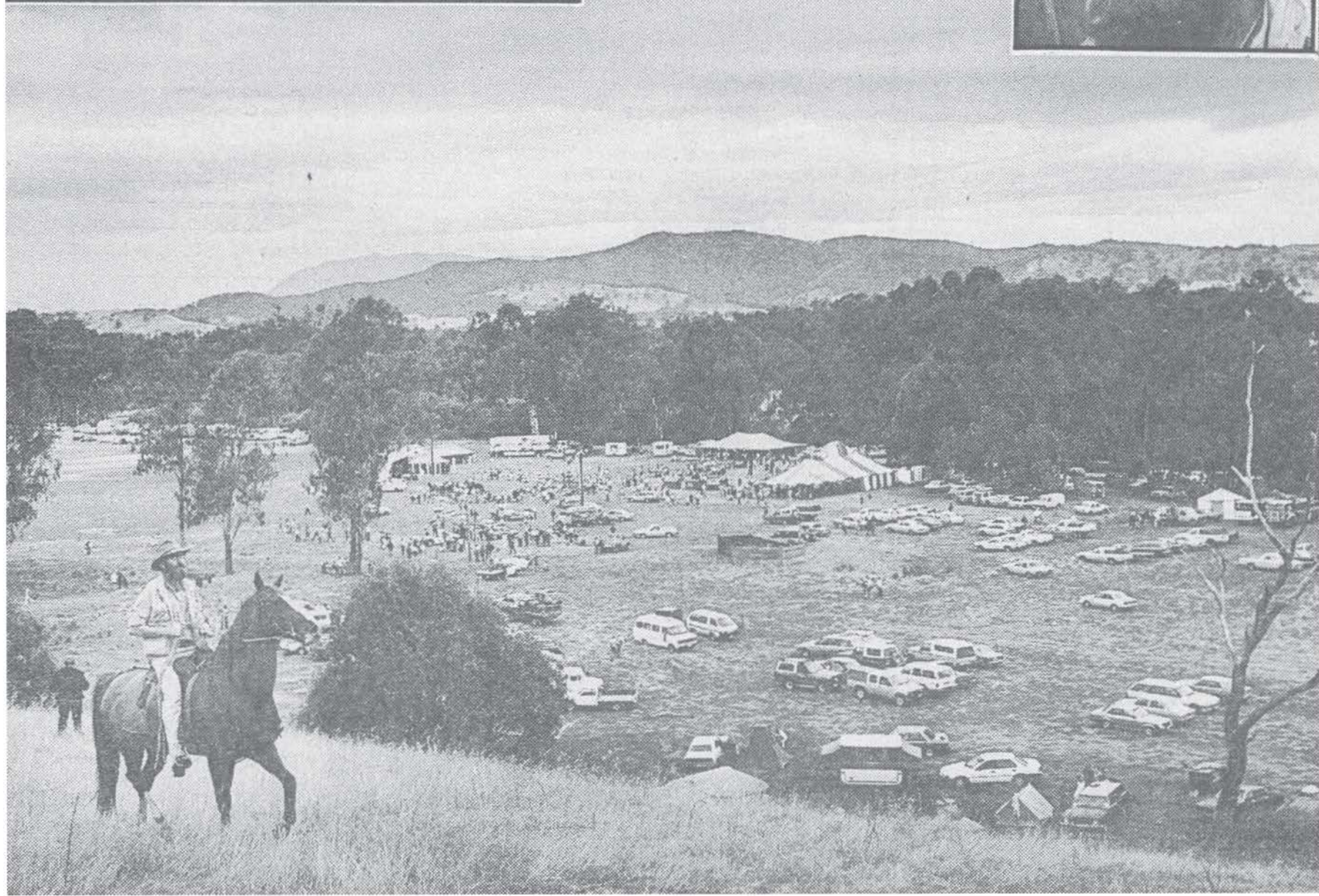


RIGHT: Tanith Blair, 13, lines up a cigarette in  
mum Leanne's mouth.



**LEFT:** Adam Hyder, 3, from Tawonga, tests his balance at the mountain cattlemen's annual get-together near Myrtleford.

**BELOW:** Steve Nott passes the Bowman's Forest campsite on his epic trek. **INSET:** Steve after four years in the saddle.





Tom Smith, of Bruthen, on the way to winning the open whipcracking, takes the top off a beer bottle.

Pictures: MARK GRIFFIN