

By ERIC
PAGE

PUSHING

It takes four days to push the cattle up on to the high plains around King Billy.

That's where the summer grass grows green and lush under the snow gums. Up there on the tops where the world begins.

The old cows in the mob have no trouble finding their way. Some have made the trip for the last ten years.

They know when it is time to start the annual trek. When the sun turns the grass brown in their paddocks back in Merrig, near Mansfield.

Jack Lovick is the boss man and he keeps his riders on their toes.

The first stretch is easy. Along the track past Timber-top and over into the vanished township of Howqua, where Jack's grandfather tried to make his fortune searching for gold that wasn't there.

HORNS

The cattle dogs yap crazily and dodge the sharp horns as the 300 beasts are steadily pushed through dense sapling bush along the banks of the river.

It's hard yakka keeping the mob together. The riders twist, weave and duck low to avoid branches that will drag them off their horses.

Mingling with the bloody oaths of the cowboys are the shrill cries of young women taking part in the big drive.

Under their bush hats and Dryabone long coats, the girls are unrecognisable as typists, physiotherapists, schoolgirls and housewives.

In the last three hours the teeming rain has turned them into rag dolls and at the end of the day they will pour the rainwater out of their sodden boots.

They are not the only strangers. There's a local cop taking a spot of leave, a farmer finding excitement in exploring new countryside, a soldier who talks about polishing boots, a town planner who can't stop drinking tea and a charming old lady from Yarrawonga who knows a lot about horses.

PAYING

They have all come along as paying guests at \$30 a day and are thrilled to bits.

To them this is the great Australian experience. A chance to be on a cattle drive, to canter through the bush on horseback, to sleep under the stars and to ride out to where the wind blows free over the high plains. God's country. Make no mistake about that.

"A few cattle will be lost on the way up," says Jack, "but they will get there eventually even if we don't go looking for them."

The stop that night is a cattleman's hut by the river. Jack built it. Anyone can use it. It's very rough accommodation.

Massive fires are lit to dry out and everyone gathers

THE MOB UP TO GOD'S HIGH COUNTRY



Cattlemen Charlie (left) and Jack Lovick... the high country is their kingdom for summer grazing.

Over the final ridge, the cattle reach the snow gums and the lush green alpine grass.



goes to bed winning about \$125.

They all love to talk. "Punchy" is rabbiting on about his mongrel bitch that can pluck the feathers out of an emu's bottom on the run. Sen will crack another gag and top that one with a tale about her wonderful dogs.

Charlie is good for a yarn about the trout he will catch for dinner next day. Once caught 42 in two hours. No sweat. Little beauties they were. In the headwaters of the Macalister River.

Someone cracks a joke about Robert's hat. Says it makes him look like a roofing nail with legs on.

They have not lost the art of conversation even though they live and work together day in, day out.

Mid-morning and everyone is ready for the day's ride out to the Howitt Plains past Magdala and Hell's Window. Another two days' riding will take them under the shoulder of Mount Clear, then to the Jamieson Hut and the run home via Howqua.

The horses are in great shape and can be trusted over even the most exposed sections of the track. It can be hairy at times when there seems to be no earth below you.

Jack knows it is safe and that's all that counts.

He gets a little angry about people who bring city horses into the mountains.

FOOLHARDY

"It's foolhardy for them to do it," he says. "They bring them in by floats and the horses can't handle this type of country and neither can their owners."

"In 1980 one group lost three horses overnight. They found one, but the other two were never sighted again."

"In addition to that two horses died — one of them fell down a river bank and broke its neck."

"In 40 years we have never lost a horse in the mountains. All ours are mountain stock and bred for this type of work."

The Lovicks are one of 100 families who have summer grazing rights on the uplands. It is a lifestyle that goes back to the 1880s and a tradition they cherish.

Where else but on the high plains can a man breathe freely in the best air in Australia?



Jack Lovick leads his party across the flat summit of Mount Lovick, named after his family. The trailriders are paying guests.

around them like so many steaming dim sims.

The four-wheel-drives arrived first and Glenda, wife of Charlie who is son of Jack, has the beef stew bubbling over the "kitchen" fire.

Glenda can split a log of wood better than most men — and most of them are content to sit back and watch her. She and drover Sen Weir call themselves mountain women for a laugh, but it is near the truth.

Glenda drives one of the supply trucks and is the camp cook. The meat is great. Home killed back at Merrig and kept in an outside cool box that works off super-frozen ice for 21 days without replenishing.

"We run 600 head of Herefords and we pick out the best of the bunch for our meat," says Jack. "That's why the steaks are so good."

Nobody is up at the crack of dawn. It's a lazy start. Nobody rushes about. Eggs and bacon cooked on an old plough disc that goes wherever we go.

Catch your own horse in the corral if you know which one is which. Then hit the steep trail up to The Bluff.

The riders who have never ridden before are shown how to stand up in the saddle to ease the burden on their mounts. Half way up the track one of the trucks has to put on snow chains to get a purchase on the slippery mud.

The damp air is suddenly perfumed as the group rides through a patch of wild hops, a burst of brilliant yellow in a forest of dun colored woolly butt gums.

The cattle are ahead and have to scramble over boulders before reaching their next resting place at the Bluff Hut.

All around the views are opening up, but better is yet to come from the summit of Mount Lovick, named after Jack's pioneering grandfather.

It must be nice to have a mountain named after you.

Jack points out the peaks. That's the back of Buller. Stirling. Cobler with Buffalo in

the distance. Over there is Speculation and Mount Buggy. The King River rises in that valley between them. And over to the right is the Crosscut Saw.

He doesn't need to look. He could name them all with his eyes closed. For this is his backyard and there is not a gully, a bluff nor a stream he doesn't know.

He has been riding this country all his life and yet never tires of its beauty.

"We will be going up there tomorrow," he says and points to a peak on a range away towards the Dargo high country. "That's King Billy One and that over there is King Billy Two."

"King Billy was a rogue bull that used to live up here all the year round. Cattlemen would try to catch him and bring him down at the end of the summer, but King Billy was always too clever for them and would double back."

In the Lovick Hut just below the summit, Jack sits and

yarns. He could fill a book. Everybody is interested in the work he did for the film crew making "The Man From Snowy River." The long beard he grew for the part has still not been shaved off.

Someone asks him about the 15-day safari later in the summer. Right across the tops to Dargo. Jack rides into the pub there on horseback. Been doing it for so many years now that it has become a tradition.

The trip costs the same — \$30 a day all found, bring your own sleeping bag and booze. He has another Foster's out of the ice-box before hitting the sack.

He doesn't talk much about his rescue work, but he is the man they call on to organise the search parties when people are lost in this great wilderness. It is no place for amateurs.

Outside a table has been set up by a gigantic fire for a game of cards under the light of a pressure lamp. It goes on until about 2.30 and Charlie