

In praise of mountain cattlemen

RECENT publicity over high country cattle grazing has prompted well known Kilmore horseman, Reg Rayner, to reminisce over his association with the mountain cattlemen, which extends over 30 years.

In his own words, Mr Rayner provides an insight into life in the high country.

"From the mid-1970s, my son David and I rode all over the high country, usually in January, when snow was still evident on mountain tops (especially Bogong), with a group of riders, and transport for supplies and horse fodder and tents. Each ride was over seven days and invariably different each year.

In common with our companions, we used our own horses, well-conditioned and of the right size and strength.

Over time, we rode over the entire mountain area. From Wandiligong and Harrierville, near Bright, we climbed mountains and over the razor-back ridges to Hotham and the Dargo High Plains, including areas such as Talbotville, where early miners' huts have since rotted away; even Dog's Grave, high in the mountains, where rests a cattle dog under polished granite and a headstone.

With the Mt Hotham area as a base camp, we rode over Bogong and south-east to Limestone and Omeo, also over Mt Howitt, through the Wannangatta Valley, not forgetting Mounts Stirling, Cobbler, Speculation and Licola.

Much has been said and written about the mountain cattlemen — adverse publicity from the 'Greenies' and all manner of claims, very often from elitists who have little knowledge of the high country, nor know of pioneer mountain families and their incredible hardships and endurance.

'Bung' Harris, for instance, drove 1000 Herefords from Tabulam on the Queensland border, covering some 1300 miles over five months.

Supported by four young drovers and 23 horses, every beast was pushed through virgin bush, rivers and mountain ranges and not one head was lost. The drive saw the herd safely in Bairnsdale.

HORSES LOST

During a 1980 ride that embraced Mt Stirling (out of Merrigig), David and I lost our mounts overnight. They had been well secured, yet someone caused them to escape into the bush.

David and I hired a light plane and covered the periphery area. However, the mountain growth was so dense that the horses were never found, except one belonging to another member of our party.

Most of the cattlemen knew our horses and admired their quality. I am lastingly grateful for local support, with the offer of mountain-bred horses and transport. I rode the area for weeks.

The advice of the cattlemen was simple: they agreed that if the horses were above the snowline,

the winter and the first snows would encourage them to descend the mountains, where they would be identified.

The horses were rugged, our name and phone number was on each of them; evidently they were stolen out of the area.

The following year, we gathered at the famous Hunt Club Hotel at Merrigig. We were later than usual and when we asked for twenty-plus steaks, the kitchen was closed.

However, we were offered the use of a large BBQ — we got our steak and salad and, of course, a few beers.

On another annual ride, we had just arrived at the same hotel when the heavens delivered a torrential downpour.

A cattleman, whom we really did not know well, asked: "Where do you fellows propose to camp tonight?", we replied, "Mount Howitt." No hope, we were told, the road is under repair and it is impassable. Visibility was poor and it was cold.

Many members suggested we should take our horses and floats and return home. Meanwhile, the friendly cattleman introduced us to a little guy with red hair. "I'm Meggsie", he explained, "and I can help you."

It turned out that he was the caretaker of Timbertop, Geelong Grammar's retreat. Meggsie said, "The boys are all on holiday and I can offer you beds, tea and coffee, a fire and showers and, by the way, yards and water for your horses." Meggsie took off with over 20 of our party behind him.

RIDE THROUGH MELBOURNE

In 1984, when I was president of a local area equestrian trailriding club, the high country cattlemen invited my group to take part in the first ride through Melbourne to State Parliament. Our group was made up of 14 members and close to 300 mountain cattlemen and women.

We assembled at Wirth's Park (now covered by the Rod Laver Stadium) and, as the cattlemen arrived, we expected high drama. One grizzled old man was asked, "Has your horse been in city traffic? If not, do you think he'll play up?"

The man replied, "He's never been out of Omeo. I know what you're saying, but there'll be so much to shy at and he won't be any trouble."

I was keeping an eye on the old guy; we crossed Princes Bridge and as my horse was about to cross the Flinders and Swanston streets tramlines, it reared for a few seconds.

When he dropped down, a very large crowd cheered. They must have imagined I was practising a stunt. The old guy said, "I'd cut his tucker back



Riding high: Kilmore horseman Reg Rayner (right) and son David on two of their most trusted steeds.

if I were you!"

I noticed the late Jack Lovick from Merrigig on the ride, with his twin grandsons in deep canvas bags, one on each side of the saddle. Another man had a pillow over the pommel of his saddle to support his Kelpie mate.

That ride, among others — the Bendigo Easter Horse Parade, Melbourne Royal Show — are all rides David and I have joined.

These mountain cattlemen have not abused their government high country leases. Those who wax lyrical over the Kosciusko National Park know nothing about the effects of non-grazing.

My son has ridden from Brown Mountain in that park to Omeo. Experienced cattlemen have noted

the proliferation of weeds and growing brumby herds, which they are forbidden to muster, cull or tame.

Of course, cattle eat grass and equally they may eat wildflowers, but grazing reduces fire danger, and lack of cropping will doubtless ensure more weed manifestation.

Grass keeps renewing itself, as do wild flowers.

On some rides, I have been in the company of Americans who are envious of the quality and body weight of cattle that graze in the high country.

Austrian and Swiss cattlemen are allowed to graze alpine regions for a longer duration than our high country cattlemen, unfettered by short-sighted do-gooders."