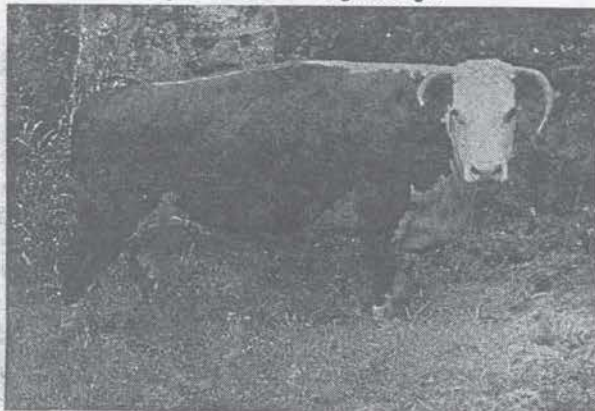


MOUNTAIN CATTLE WALK TO SURVIVE

Weekly Times editor, J. Balfour Brown



Old 326—described as a "whale of a cow" by her owner—got through on courage. Left behind twice on the track she caught up with the herd through the night.



One of the leaders—an active cow capable of taking steep rises on the trot.

The tradition of grazing cattle in the summer months on alpine leases goes back a long way in Victoria—about 120 years.

Mountain cattle have to walk to stay alive. . . . With improved pastures, smaller paddocks, and road transport taking over even in places like North Queensland and the Northern Territory, it is often said that cattle are losing mobility and that with this loss comes problems of fertility and food conversion.

In this story we follow one herd of mountain cattle all the way up from the home farm to the mountains—foot by foot and mile by mile.

We learn what "walking ability" in cattle really means.

The G. and H. Stoney herd of Herefords starts its climb from the home property, Minto Park, near Merrig.

It is a fairly typical herd of mountain cattle. Nearly every one of the 3 to 9 year old cows in the 200 going up this year (cut from 300 because of the late season) is the daughter of a cow which has made the trip and the heritable factor (going back for several generations) is a big part of the story.

The Howqua track to the Bluff may well be the most difficult one left in the mountains. It is now possible to take supplies by vehicle around the long way on logging roads and jeep tracks but the cattle for the most part have still to walk up the narrow gorges of the Howqua, over rocky outcrops where for long stretches they must go single file and where they must make over 14 crossings of the fast-flowing, ice-cold river.

For Graeme and Helen Stoney the cattle drive is an annual tradition.

As always it is accomplished not with professional drovers but with family, friends and neighbors helping out in much the same way that hay making used to be done before the days of big machinery and contractors.

It is not so much a wild west rough-riding style of driving cattle but more a trek in the style of the Scottish highlands. Some of the work has to be done on foot with the horse being led or even left with reins on the ground while the drover has to climb over rocks and trees to push the cattle on.

Whips are not carried, mainly because in the places where they would come in handy the bush is too thick to swing them, with the cattle pushing through what is a mountain to tunnels through the dense undergrowth.

We have an advantage here in that Graeme Stoney 34, is an active member of both the Sirebank and Victorian Commercial Hereford Breeders recording groups. The cattle are tagged and we can observe the behavior of individuals on the drive.

Day 1: Nine miles, 1180 ft. to 1700 ft.

It starts at the homestead with the herd being driven along lanes and fenced stock routes about

nine miles. It is a fairly easy day with no attempt at pushing the cattle which sort themselves out into lead groups and tail enders. They will stay in these groups for the entire drive.

The calves range from 5 months to 6 months and the size of the calf and corresponding amount of milk being carried by the cow is a factor in the position the cows take up. Those with bigger calves tend to walk faster and stay well up but this is not axiomatic. Some cows with big calves are only happy in the middle or end of the line while some with small calves go to the leading bunch. At night the cattle are held in a fenced off section of a grassed stock route.

Day 2: 17 miles, 1700 ft. to 1800 ft. over a spur range of 3000 ft.

The hardest day and the longest. It turns out to be the first really hot day in December.

Much of the travelling is over a logging road which normally would make things easier but today it is exposed to the full heat of the sun.

The cattle start at daylight and go well until about mid-day. The destination is a grassy flat known as the "Seven Mile" down on the river where the logging road reverts to the century old Howqua track.

With the heat oppressive in the afternoon it becomes obvious that not all the cattle are going to make it. By three o'clock several of the tail enders are simply dropping on the road. Others up ahead are standing in groups looking for shade and muddy ponds of water left from rain the previous day.

Several things start to go wrong. One cow takes a dive over the edge of the road with her calf and disappears in thick tussock and blackberry thickets.

She will be the only cow and calf in the herd not to finally make the high country but she is not necessarily lost. She will join up with other cattle run by this particular leaseholder in this particular area and will almost certainly be picked up on the way back in the autumn.

Graeme Stoney decides to go on with the lead bunch, about 30, to the "Seven Mile." If they can be got there the remainder, knowing the leaders are ahead, will come on in the cool of the night.

This is just what does happen. Graeme Stoney, who has been doing this sort of thing since he was a boy, says over the campfire that while he never likes leaving cattle short of the planned night camp it is useless trying to push them when they just will not go.

No amount of shouting, dogs or whips will make cattle move when they are exhausted. Heat, not distance, is what stops them.

Strange cattle could not be left but those know the way up and the way down also. Some will come back of their own accord when the first snow falls in.

The Stoney cattle have always been Herefords and were originally cattle put together as good

types for this country. Over the years various stud bulls have been used and this blood includes Delatite, Koolomurt, Yarram Park, Ohio and lately with A.I. South Buh-long, and the British Freetown Vindicator and Broadway Wonder.

"We are still looking for the complete answer and I think that is what breeding is—a continuing process of trying to achieve an ideal which is always just ahead of you," he says.

By the end of Day 2 the leaders and tailenders can be identified and a check of the records will be made at the end of the drive.

The absolute tailender is cow 326—a large heavy cow.

There seem to be two alternating leaders.

Cow 224 is almost as large as 326 but is a bold walker and frequently heads out several yards with her head held high. But she then drops back and gives way to cow 240 who seems the most consistent lead taker.

Not a pretty cow she walks with a head down action and breaks into a trot readily and takes steep pinches on the run. Her calf, which is large, has the same jogging action.

Day 3: Nine miles, 1800 ft. to 2400 ft.

The floor of the How-

qua gorge is a brilliant mass of green and white clover, tea-tree, yellowed tussock, while water splashing over boulders and trout rising in still pools between the crossings.

The track winds along the floor, over the crossings of the river and precipitously up the banks.

By now the herd has formed itself into four or five groups with riders each taking one of them.

Graeme Stoney says the tea-tree, which can whip in the eyes of horses and riders, comes and goes over the years. The blackberry is a constant, every encroaching threat and in his view is the biggest single problem facing the future of the mountains regardless of the grazing issue, or anything else. There is too much of it to spray and some areas, notably the valley of the lower Howqua, are now impassable.

The big increase in blackberry seems to have come in the past 10 years when the seasons seem to have become wetter and later. St John's Wort, brilliant green and with yellow flowers, is common but appears like tea-tree, to be fairly static.

Continued Page 6



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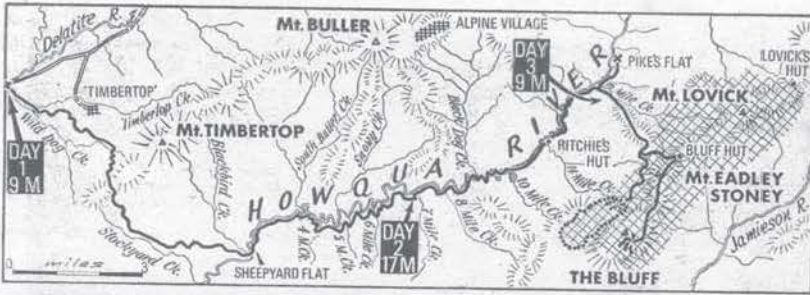
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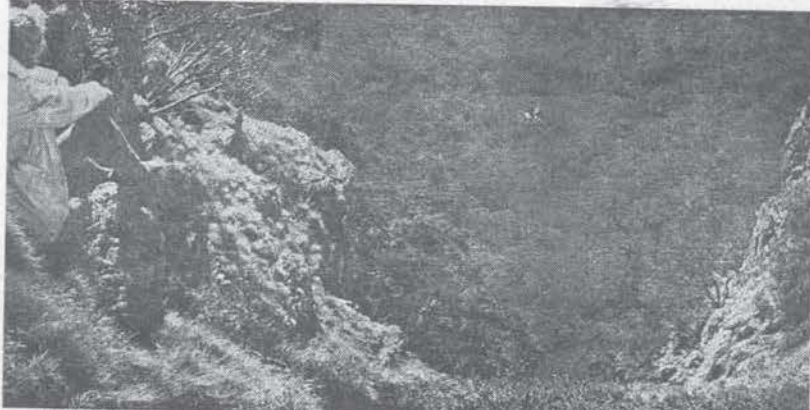
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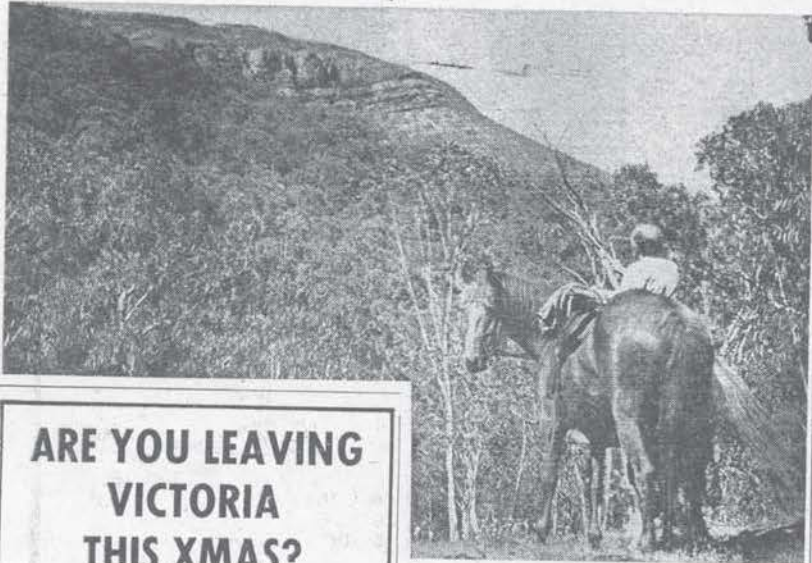
The track crosses the turbulent Howqua River fourteen times. Squared section on map (left) shows extent of grazing lease. Dotted line indicates Blowhole Creek area.



Noel Stoney on the edge of The Blowhole separating The Bluff proper and Mt Eadley Stoney. Legend has it that cows were pushed down this fissure to escape being snowed in on the plateau.



Graeme Stoney bringing up stragglers.



The Bluff, snow covered in winter, towers above mountain ash on the final stage of the drive. One group of cattle went right to the top; the remainder to Blowhole Creek under the mountain's right extremity.

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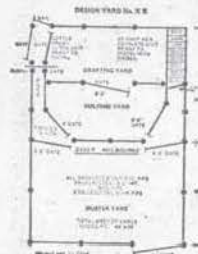
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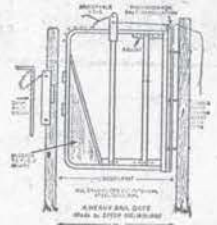
Instinct takes them on in single file through tunnels of tea tree undergrowth.

Bob Steer says:

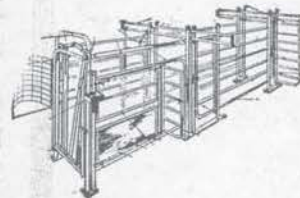
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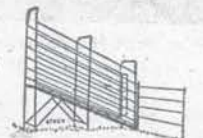
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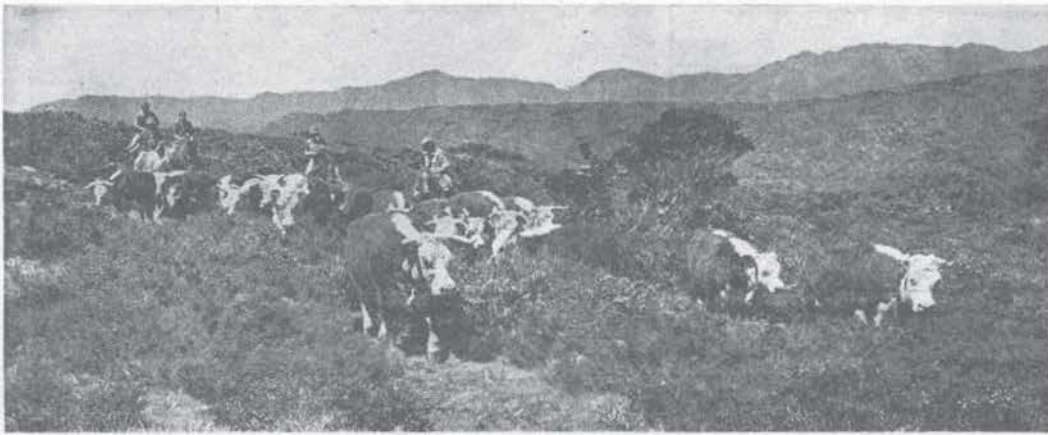
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The leaders fan out as they reach the plateau of The Bluff. In the background: Mt. Speculation, Mt. Buggery, the CrossCut Saw and Mt. Howitt.



Fallen logs make the going hard near Blowhole Creek.



John Gough has to dismount to push cattle through a difficult spot in the maze of dead mountain ash.

Steep climb to plateau

From Pages 4 and 5

The climb up the Howqua is steady but flat between the river crossings are cool and shady and small groups of cattle manage to slip away requiring a lot of "scrub bashing" by horses and riders to get them moving again once the afternoon sun gets hot.

By the system of moving the herd in groups, and riding backwards and forwards between them, the cattle reach a point just short of Pike's Flat by nightfall.

The horses get good grass at the flat. But the going has been hard and one has lost a shoe and another needs a shoe straightened.

The cost of maintaining the six horses necessary for taking cattle up ash which is not cheap these days. Each horse goes through a set of shoes a trip — say \$70 for the team — and wear and tear on gear is costly also. To replace a saddle costs about \$200 and a stock horse can range from \$400 to \$800.

Day 4. Six miles. 2400 ft. to 4700 ft. (Blowhole Creek) and 5650 ft. (The Bluff).

It should be a straight up climb, which the cattle know, but it is not.

On the crest, where one lot is to go out on the end of The Bluff, and one to Blowhole Creek just under The Bluff, there has been a great falling of dead mountain ash.

The distance is only about three miles but it takes from 8 in the morning till 1 p.m. to get the Blowhole creek mob to their destination.

They travel easily enough through an expanse of young mountain ash which the Forests Commission has regenerated by aerial sowing but then strike a section of forest where old trees have fallen in a maze across the track.

Some boughs have to be lifted to allow cattle and horses through. Others have to be axed.

On Blowhole Creek old 326 and her calf are the last through.

Time and again it has looked as if she will never get there but she has and her calf has come through particularly well.

She has stopped to suckle it frequently, turned on humans and dogs who have tried to move her on, and on the two preceding days has been left behind only to get up and catch up through the night.

On The Bluff itself the 30 cattle going out to summer on the alpine pastures move freely. These are the fast walkers and again 224 and 240 vie for each other in the lead.

High and windswept,

with a stretch of snow under the shadow of the lip even in December. The Bluff permits views across to Mt. Buller, Mt. Lovick, and Mt. Howitt.

A natural fissure, the Blowhole, which leads down to Blowhole Creek where the main mob were left earlier in the day, divides The Bluff outcrop itself from a peak which the Cattle-men's Association has asked be named Mt. Eadley Stoney in memory of Graeme Stoney's father. Legend has it that once when cattle were snowed in on The Bluff they were pushed down the Blowhole and most got off the mountain safely. Graeme Stoney, who has climbed down it, thinks it might be possible for cattle to get down if there were no other way, but says he does not know for certain that the incident took place.

Not legend, but an optical illusion is "water flowing uphill" on the end of The Bluff.

Not legend also are the records of the particular cows back at Minto Park.

These show that Cow 326 has had two previous top calves but is stubborn in many ways. She will, for instance, not go into the race to be inoculated. She will probably hold her place in the herd because of the calves she rears.

Cow 224 had a good calf in 1973 (her first) and will undoubtedly hold her place.

Cow 240 had average calves in '73 and '74 and this year's will probably determine her future.

Graeme Stoney will try to steer a balanced course between traditional judgments and what the performance records tell him.

The old-time cattlemen, with fewer pressures in the management sense, knew each cow individually and spent more time with them than is possible today.

Nevertheless the Howqua track drive remains pretty much as it was in the 19th century and with farming changing so rapidly elsewhere the Victorian Mountain District Cattlemen's Association seems to make a good point when it says: "The tradition of running cattle in the Victorian mountains and forests is part of the natural heritage and should be allowed to continue, under certain supervisions, for all time so that future generations of Australians will be able to see a romantic link with our early history."

It is that and in order to get it down on paper we thank Graeme Stoney, the leader of the drive, John Ash, Ann McElroy and Fiona Heath who went with the cats throughout, to John Gough, Noel Stoney, Robin Stoney, Helen Stoney and Chris Stoney (aged 9) who shared dif-

ferent stages of it, to the horses Tambo, Patch, Smokey, Minty, Megs, Bluey, Fred and Dolly and the dogs.

No one knows how long the Howqua track, and all the others leading up to the mountains, will be open to cattle.

For some years now some conservationists have been demanding that the practice of grazing the snow leases in the summer months be stopped. They claim that the high country should be one large national park that cattle are an introduced species and that they upset the ecology of the region.

The cattlemen counter these theories by arguing that alpine grazing, under strict control, does not upset the ecology of the region; but rather makes the area more pleasant and far less fire

prone by keeping the country open.

The tracks through the mountains and cattlemen's huts, which are enjoyed by bush walkers, are all directly attributable to the presence of cattle.

No one is advocating a return to uncontrolled grazing of large mobs of cattle; the present system is a highly controlled one with both the Forests Commission and the Soil Conservation Authority having the major say on numbers permitted, and in recent years the number of cattle spread through some 3 million acres has never exceeded 30,000 — a stocking rate of one beast to 100 acres for only four months of the year.

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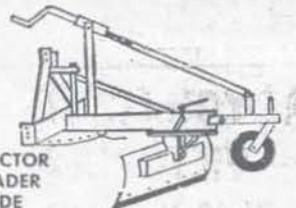
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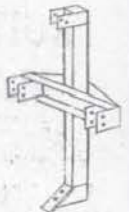
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