

## ADDRESS TO HERITAGE COUNCIL WALLACE'S HUT MAY 16 2009

For those that don't know me, my name is Chris Commins.

I will give you some background on myself and my families association with the High Country.

I am a Mountain Cattleman and I live near Ensay. working in a partnership with my brother Bruce .

Yesterday, Ian Stapleton gave an excellent presentation on various characters of the High Country.

I'm sure he could fill another book or two with interesting personalities.

One such person was my Primary school teacher, Mr Griffiths. Mr Griffith was a very keen hunter, gun crank, and weekend warrior in the Citizen Military Forces ,now the Army Reserve.

"Griffo would train us in ballistics. Periodically he would bring an array of rifles to school and we students would set up Blocks of wood at 50meters 100 meters up to 300 meters. Griffo would fire a variety of rifles from a .22 calibre to a .306, then we kids would race up to the blocks of wood, prise the projectile out and measure the depth of penetration. I guess you could say that was our science lesson.

For nature study, Mr Griffiths armed with a .222 of 243 calibre rifle with school kids in tow, would head off across the paddocks to whistle up a fox.

I think my daughter Emma doubted the validity of my stories until Emma and I bumped into my old school teacher recently. Mr Griffith and I were recounting my early school career and he went on to tell Emma "That's right ! At recess the kids would sometimes race into the school shouting excitedly, "Mr Griffiths, Mr Griffiths an eagle, an eagle", so I would grab the 303 off the school desk race outside and have a pot shot at the eagle."

We never saw Mr Griffiths deck one as the eagle was usually soaring at about 1000 feet, but it never stopped Griffo having a crack at them.

It was a different world back then.

Another character that left a lasting impression on me was a man of Chinese heritage, Bill Ah Chow.

Bill gave his pack horses "Billy" and "Paddy" to my parents, so my sister Anne, brother Bruce and myself had a mode of transport to school. I was the last of an era that rode horses to school, up and down the road, 10 kilometres every day, to my little primary school

I rode double dink bare back with Bruce on "Paddy." Being the youngest I was always steerage. It was not much fun, especially when you thought you could drive the horse better than big brother.

Bill Ah Chow was a remarkable person and fantastic story teller.

He was a veteran of the First World War and was badly wounded and gassed on the battlefields of France.

I doubt there were many Chinese Australians who saw active service in the First A.I.F. After the war, Bill worked for most of his life in the bush, and he was probably best known for his construction of huts.

Bill built our hut at Quinn's Plain, Nunniong around 1937 But his most famous hut is "Moscow Villa" at Bentley's Plain.

This was a log cabin with three rooms for his own use whilst working for the Forests Commission. Constructed in 1942 around the time the Battle for Moscow was on, Bill decided to call it "Moscow Villa". Shortly after completion, Bill had the bosses of the Forests Commission stay with him and they were not overly impressed with the name "Moscow Villa" with its socialist connotations. The obvious question was asked, Why ? Bill went to his bedroom and shortly returned with the answer on a piece of paper. Moscow Villa is an acronym ( I am sure he started a fad in the Department) and it stands for, My Own Summer Cottage Officially Welcomes Visitors Inside Light Luncheon Available.

As a regular guest of my parents Bill enthralled us kids with his story telling, usually tall stories and you knew when they were getting taller because Bill could not help but give you a big wink.

When Bill died in August 1967, in his will, he left his 1948 Series 1 Landrover to my brother and myself, the walls of 'Moscow Villa' to the Forests Commission and the roof to my father, Jim Commins.

The first member of my family to come to Ensay was my Grandfather James Lilburne Commins, as a soldier settler after the 1<sup>st</sup> World War. He took up a grazing run at Nunniong in 1934 which we still hold. The Northern section of the Run was incorporated into the Alpine National Park from which we were evicted after the 2003 fires.

Thankyou Anne, (Sedgley) for the opportunity, at short notice to make this address. I have to say the Mountain Cattlemens Association of Victoria were miffed we were not invited to address the High Country Forum in Omeo.

After all, the first European settlers into the high country of Victoria were Mountain Cattlemen. James Macfarlane at Macfarlanes Flat in 1835, O'Rourke's at Suggan Buggan in 1835, and the Pendergasts at Benambra shortly afterwards

We provide a living link with that Heritage./

The fires of Black Thursday 6<sup>th</sup> Feb 1851 were indirectly the cause for the first graziers to come to the Bogongs and Cobungra High Plains.

George Grey of Pelican Lagoon Run- Wangaratta was burnt out, so went looking for grass travelling to Mitta Mitta, then to Omeo. An Aborigine showed Grey the way to Cobungra. Grey left 2 stockmen, James Brown and John Wells and stock at Cobungra. They stumbled upon the Bogong High Plains while investigating a more direct route to Beechworth.

The earliest registration of the Bogong High Plains as a run was in 1866 (Ensay Station Record)

In 1883 Thomas MacNight Hamilton from Ensay Station took up a 100,000 acre run on Bogong. It was considered 1<sup>st</sup> class fattening summer country capable of carrying 50,000 sheep.

Hamilton was given advice by a stock and station agent to buy sheep from the Monaro to stock the run. T.M Hamilton never took that advice and never grazed sheep on the Bogongs. T. M Hamilton relinquished the run in the early 1900's.

I would like to bring your attention to a point made by Dr Ruth Lawrence yesterday. Ruth stated as fact that 40,000 sheep ran on Bogong during the Federation Drought and subsequent drought of 1914/15.

I seriously question those numbers as my research reads differently to Dr. Lawrence. My sources are, Ensay Station Records and Peter Cabena's thesis, Grazing the High Country.

The 40,000 sheep was an estimate and they ran not just on Bogong, but Hotham, Dargo, Cobungra and Nunniong.

My experience as a stockman also makes me sceptical. Droving, 1000 drought stricken sheep up the western side of the Bogongs would be seriously difficult let alone 40,000!

Sheep only ran on the high country in drought years. The sheep had to be shepherded because of wild dogs and stockman hated shepherding sheep in the bush.

Alf. Smith, from Omeo, shepherded sheep for 3 years before the second war; between the Blue Duck and Glen Wills, and he told me "the best thing to happen me was World War Two. I was off to war, no more shepherding sheep !!"

Yesterday, at the Forum in Omeo, Parks Victoria handed out audio CD's giving a history tour from Omeo to Mount Beauty. It was disconcerting that another assertion had been made. It was stated that 40000 cattle grazed on the High Plains in one particular drought. Because the CD related to the Bogongs, the inference was that the Bogongs were overgrazed by 40000 cattle ! This is another distortion of fact. 40000 cattle equates to over 300,000 dry sheep equivalent and I suggest the 40000 cattle may have run over an area stretching from the Bogongs to Mansfield, Dargo to Suggan Buggan and back, not just the Bogongs..

Seriously, I am concerned about history being re written, especially when assertions are made without proof.

I often hear how fragile this environment is. It is much more resilient than man of beast; if you abuse it, will destroy you. Mountain Cattlemen have a healthy respect for this environment. They survived because they were good observers of nature, they learnt from the Aborigines and they continued the practice of fire stick farming. Lightning was allowed to run its course.

With closer settlement the practice of fire stick farming was reined in.

When the Forests Commission was created in 1918 it outlawed burning.  
I will now read two extracts from the Herald newspaper dated 13 Feb 1932..

## **BAN ON BURNING-OFF**

### **Defended**

#### **Commission's Reasons**

#### **“ DESTRUCTION OF SAPLING AND SEEDLING GROWTH”**

**“ Uncontrolled burning-off is disastrous, and is condemned in every country in the world where forests are regarded as valuable assets to the community,” says the Forests Commission, in a comprehensive reply to recent complaints about forest fire regulations.**

**Landholders complain that they are greatly harassed in fighting bushfires by these regulations. What's new ??**

The second extract **“ It has been proved beyond doubt, not only in Australia, that nothing less than absolute fire exclusion will promote real progress toward a fully productive forest property.”**

That was the science of the day. We say, just as the law can be perverted so can science !

The disastrous 1939 fires were followed by a royal commission. Various Mountain Cattlemen gave evidence that lightning was a major cause of fire. The only mention Judge Stretton made of lightning in his report was in one sentence, “The real but rare occurrence of lightning”.

In his conclusion as to causes of fire he had the bushman ie Mountain. Cattleman, at the top of the list for illegally burning off. Lightning did not even rate a mention!

We were portrayed as the bogey men of the bush. Not until the 1960's did the Forests Commission acknowledge lightning as the major cause of fire in South Eastern Australia.....

In 1946 Judge Stretton presided over another Royal Commission, a Royal Commission into Forest Grazing. Again Mountain Cattleman gave evidence. They gave evidence that rabbits were the main cause of erosion and land degradation. Judge Stretton arrogantly dismissed this evidence when he wrote “Braer rabbit my blame Braer fox”!!

This arrogant, dismissive attitude was pervasive and we still see it in Government and its bureaucracy today.

Ignore local knowledge at your peril !

Because of this dismissive treatment I have lot of empathy for our Indigenous cousins.

Rabbits have been the greatest scourge this country has ever seen, ecologically and economically. When we hear overgrazing, it is always Graziers, their cattle, and sheep. No mention is made of rabbits and hares. Overgrazing is a subjective topic, it is like defining a loose woman.

Apart from the obvious erosion problems they created, the rabbits along with the lack of “cool” fire, changed the landscape from an open woodland into a scrub dominated thicket.

The negative impacts of rabbits and hares has never been fully understood or acknowledged by scientists, conservationists or government agencies.

I think we all agreed yesterday that the greatest threat to the Alpine Park was another mega fire. I hate to say it, but it is coming, sooner, rather than later.

As the owner of earthmoving equipment, I am a contracted Primary Fire Fighter for the Department of Sustainability and Environment, and have been involved in every major fire in Eastern Victoria over the last 36 years including the recent tragic Black Saturday fires, as well as numerous minor fires. I have extensive experience with fire, fire behaviour, fire control and mitigation.

It is not climate change that is the problem, it is fuel loads. It is the only factor we can control. In many areas, I see fuel loads six times greater than prior to the 2003 fires.

The next fire is going to be seriously intense, much worse than 2003.

To help mitigate this threat Government and people opposed to Alpine Grazing, need to take their blinkers off and return cattle to the Park. Every tool in the management box should be used. Primarily, much more fuel reduction burning is required, but it has to be a “cool burn”, any fire that causes leaf scorch on the tree canopy will only compound the problem of excessive fuel loads.

Grazing and “cool fire” are complimentary and go hand in hand with good management.

Every activity has an impact on the environment, and the miniscule negative impact of cattle grazing compared to any other activity, is far outweighed by the positive benefits.

Thank you.