

HERITAGE LOST?

Those legendary 'Men From Snowy River,' Victoria's Mountain Cattlemen are coming to Ringwood for a rousing protest rally.

They will arrive on Thursday and camp overnight at Eastfield Park, Croydon, before riding into the heart of Ringwood on Friday to protest about Government plans for an Alpine National Park.

The cattlemen will be here because they believe that conservation is looming as a big issue in the Nunawading Province election, especially since the Australian Democrats supported calls by the Australian Conservation Foundation for the immediate establishment of the park.

The President of the Mountain Cattleman's Association, Mr Jim Commins, said last week that grazing rights had already been withdrawn from large areas throughout the high country to make way for national parks and ski resorts.

"Now we are faced with losing the whole area, but we are not about to let it happen, he said.

"We want to prove to the people of this electorate that the proposed contiguous national park is unnecessary."

Mr Commins said -there were many reasons why cattle grazing should be allowed to continue in the alps including protection from wild fires, the value of high country stock to farmers and consumers, its contribution to export income and its linke with Victoria's rich history and heritage.

He invited the people of the electorate to meet the cattlemen during their visit.

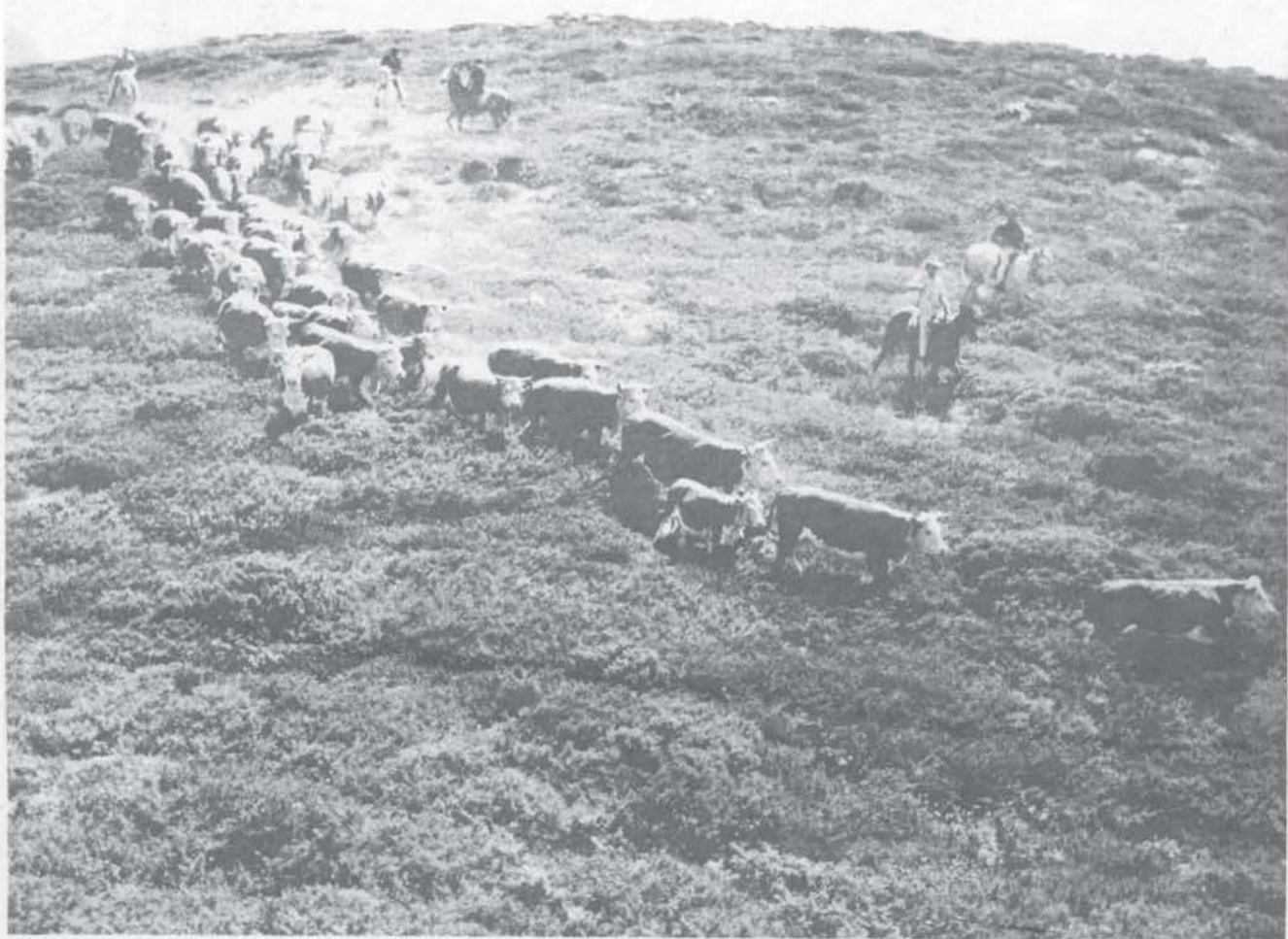
"They will find us very friendly and approachable. We're coming down to make new friends," he said.

HERITAGE LOST?



MOUNTAIN MEN A

by Phil Maguire



They came of bold and roving stock that would not fixed abide, they were the sons of field and flock since ere they learnt to ride. We may not hope to see such men in these degenerate years, as those explorers of the bush the brave old pioneers.

This verse of A.B. Paterson's succinctly sums up this story about a unique group of Victorian families who may soon pass from real life into the pages of history books.

They are the families of Victoria's mountain cattlemen, the descendants of those men who first drove cattle into Victoria from the Monaro Plains of New South Wales in 1834 — almost a year before Victoria's official history began.

History has rarely given the cattlemen the recognition they deserve in the annals of Victoria's settlement. It was largely left to balladists like Paterson to record details of their lives, achievements and their outstanding feats of horsemanship.

But this neglect by official historians was perhaps fortunate because as a result the cattlemen entered into the realm of folklore and many went on to become legends in their own time.

Today, their descendants are the living symbols of an heroic pioneering past.

ENDANGERED

But they may not be so much longer. To put it in their own words, 'Cattlemen are an endangered species.' The State Government, urged on by radical conservationists backed by the Australian Conservation Foundation, is preparing to introduce legislation which could sound their death knell.

The conservationists claim that cattle grazing damages the alpine environment but the cattlemen say they are low on facts and high on misinformation, and in some cases deliberate lies.

Recent research by Melbourne University's Faculty of Agriculture appears to strengthen the Cattlemen's case that alpine grazing is beneficial.

Nevertheless it is Labor Party policy to phase out grazing in national parks and despite talk of allowing the cattlemen to remain, it is not offering any guarantees.

And this is taking place in a year that represents Victoria's 150th Anniversary. The Government has spent millions of dollars helping us celebrate our history but at the same time is presiding over the destruction of our famous 'Snowy River Heritage.'

Surely this is cause for shame, not celebration? For if we lose the mountain cattlemen part of our pride in being Australians will certainly vanish along with them. We will no longer be able to identify ourselves with these laconic, bearded mountain riders who are arguably the best horsemen in the world.

GRAZING BENEFITS ALPS

Jack Lovick is probably the best known cattleman of all. For years he has run horseback safaris into the high country and has introduced more people than he can remember to the delights of summer on the high plains.

In 1970 he was awarded a British Empire Medal for services to search and rescue in the high country and accepted the award on behalf of the mountain cattlemen whom he says contributed to it as much as he did himself.

Jack was location consultant for the movie, 'The Man From Snowy River' and the film owes much of its outstanding success to his knowledge of the mountains and their history.

He knows the conservationist's arguments backwards and never tires of refuting them.

"The alps benefit from cattle grazing. It is absolutely imperative for their well being that grazing be used as a management tool," he says.

"If you have a lawn you mow it. If you have a rose garden you prune it and if you have an alpine meadow you graze it. Otherwise grasses and shrubs grow unrestricted year after year until eventually fire sweeps up from the valleys and destroys the lot."

He points out that a holocaust bushfire would have devastating results on the alps in terms of erosion, but adds that it would be inevitable in the absence of proper management.

"Only this year we had three lightning strikes at the headwaters of the Jamieson River, at the foot of Mt Clear and on The Bluff Range."

"To control it the authorities put in 12 bulldozers, four helicopters, tankers and more than 100 men. They cut fire breaks and worked on trails in the lower country but it still burnt up to the grazed areas of The Bluff."

"However, once there it died down and in most areas went out by itself. But if that area hadn't been grazed it would have burnt over the Bluff Range into the Howqua Valley and over the divide into the McAllister River, Wonnangatta Valley and areas beyond."

"It was grazing and cattle tracks along the face of The Bluff that prevented it spreading further," he says.

SEARCH & RESCUE

There are many other powerful arguments in favour of the continued presence of the cattlemen, including their outstanding contribution to search and rescue operations.

In 1968 a Canadian student, Kerry Atteridge, became lost while skiing on Mr Buller and spent three days and nights in freezing conditions. When he was eventually located by police and ski patrollers they found it an almost impossible task to get him to safety.

Jack remembers that they tried to bring him out by following the South Buller Creek through very rough country.

"The creek was criss-crossed with logs and there were sheer rock faces on the sides. They were out of food so they radioed Mansfield base with a request for 30 stretcher bearers to come in and carry the bloke out. He was in a bad way with frostbitten hands and feet and most of the skin was missing from one side of his face where he had slid down the mountain. He also had some broken ribs."

"We organised a camp on the Howqua that night and told them we'd meet them at a rendezvous point on the Four Mile Spur at 10.30 am the next morning. We planned to bring the party in by horseback, but they radioed back that there was no hope of getting horses into that country."

"They didn't believe we'd be there by 10.30 because it had taken them eight hours to walk in. But anyway we did it. It took us 15 minutes to ferry 30 men across the river, which was flooded at the time, and then we headed up the Four Mile Spur."

"We got there right on time. I dropped off my horse beside the injured bloke and the first thing he said to me was: 'Have you got any hope of getting me out?' He said the party had been arguing among themselves about which way to go."

"I said, 'Don't worry mate — we'll have you out in a couple of hours.' It wasn't long before I found out that he'd ridden horses before so I suggested to him that we put him on horseback with a man walking on either side to balance him."

"We put him up on my horse, 'Mr Black,' and ignored the protests of the others. We sent 20 men ahead to cut scrub off the route, where it was most dense, and rode down the mountain. When we got to the river the police wanted to ferry him across on a flying fox but we positioned a man on horseback on either side of him and with me in the lead we went straight into the river."

"We had him across before they could do anything about it. His fiancée was waiting for him on the other side and you reckon he wasn't happy to see her?"

"We had been given the authority to do what we thought best by the State Emergency Service."

"That was because a couple of years before a girl's life had been lost in the same region due to official bungling."

HERITAGE LOST?...

HISTORY

The first Lovick to arrive in the High country was William Lovick who as born in Tasmania but arrived at Merrijig, near Mansfield in 1862. He had spent time mining in New Zealand but on arriving at Merrijig he selected land and built the first Merrijig Hotel in 1872. Four years later he built another pub at Howqua to service gold miners.

With his sons, Frank, Jack and George he developed cattle interests in the region. He died in 1900. In 1903 the Lovick's obtained cattle leases on Mt Cobbler and Mt Koonika and at the headwaters of the King River. In 1919 they took on the leasehold at Mt Buller.

Burnt Hut Spur, a spot well known to skiers, was the sight of the first cattlemen's hut to be built on the mountain. It was put up by the Lovick's in 1919.

In 1942 Jack's father died and he carried on at Mt Buller until 1958 when he was forced to relinquish it to make way for the alpine village.

Fortunately, at the same time the King Billy run on the Great Dividing Range was unused because the previous leaseholder considered it too far removed from his home base at Mansfield. Jack was offered the run as an alternative lease and jumped at the chance because he considered it to be magnificent country. His cattle still graze there during the summer months.

KOSCIUSKO PARK

Rusty Connley, who has a run with his brother Ken, at Beloka near Omeo is highly critical of national park's management. His run is located only a "good day's ride" from Kosciusko and he can comment first hand on the effects of the Kosciusko National Park.

"It's only a matter of time before they get a bloody big fire in there, that will wipe out Jindabyne and Thredbo," he says.

"It'll go through all those alpine towns and they'll never be able to stop it.

Rusty says the run he shares with Ken is probably one of the roughest in Victoria.

"We can't run more than about 300 head on it. Kenny and I do most of the mustering ourselves. Sure, it's a hard life but we love it.

"If the national park goes ahead they'll make life really hard for us. I'll give you an example. Kenny and I bought about 130 head up on the Monaro near Jindabyne and we ran them back through the park to the Victorian border and across to our run. We had to have a permit to do it and even then they wouldn't leave us alone.

"We gave the cattle a spell at Cascade River and a helicopter flew in with one of the big knobs from Sydney who demanded to see our permit. He asked us how often we were going to do it so we told him we'd be around every time there was a drought. He got the sulks after that."



Mountain cattleman, Jack Lovick, (right) and Jameison policeman, Bernie McWhinney, assist the injured student, Kerry Atteridge, on to a horse during a dramatic rescue near Mt Buller in the winter of 1968. Left: A mountain man strikes a pensive pose as he surveys an overnight fall of snow in the high country.



PRESERVE HERITAGE

The producer of 'The Man From Snowy River', Geoff Burrows, is a strong advocate of the mountain cattlemen and their right to continue their lifestyle.

"There is no legitimate reason for removing them and the arguments of both the Government and the Conservationists are not based on facts," he says.

"The Government's policy on the national park, which is supported by the Australian Conservation Foundation, is exclusionist and selfish. It is in direct contrast to the cattlemen's heritage which is generous and sharing.

"There is no doubt that the conservation viewpoint is emotional and ultimately elitist."

Mr Burrows says the Government's policy is an attack on a uniquely Australian way of life.

The mountain cattlemen are cast in the mould of the legendary Australian bushman and we owe it to them, as well as to ourselves, to give them our wholehearted support.

Throughout their history the mountain cattlemen have not been known for political activism, but the growing threat to the way of life has forced them to emerge from their homes in the shadows of the alps and descend on the city to tell their side of the story.

They hail from distant towns like Merrijig, Dargo, Benambra, Omeo, Tawonga and Licola.

From their high country runs, which stretch from the Snowy Plains in the south to Mt Cobbler in the north and The Cobberas in the east, they are coming to Ringwood to muster friends for the coming battle.

It is a battle that must be won if Australia's bush heritage is to be preserved. The cattlemen stand for the Australia we have all known and loved — an Australia some people would take from us.

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As part of the Mountain Men's fight for survival they will ride from the "Post" office, 24 John St, at 9.15 am to the Lilydale Market this Friday, August 9.

Come along — see and meet these great Australians at the Lilydale Market at 9.30 am.