

THE TRAIL TO DEAD HORSE GAP

She was only five and a half years old but Shirley McGufficke used to say the same thing to her father every time he rode out with the pack horses: "Wish I could go to the Mountains with you Dad!"

At such a young age Shirley could already ride bareback. However, she really didn't have much choice because her parents weren't about to let her ride in a saddle with stirrups - 'She'd have hung high and dry if she fell and got a foot caught!'

Shirley McGufficke's father Laurie spent many months of every year grazing stock in the high country mostly from his base camp at Dead Horse Hut situated on the Dead Horse Gap above modern day Thredbo. In those days Thredbo was known by the local stockmen as Friday Flat, a name given to it by John McGufficke who owned 'Flisk Milne' (there's probably another story associated with this name!).

According to Shirley the story goes that one day John and Dave Spencer had cattle rounded up on the flat waiting for John's father W.J. McGufficke and his main stockman Harry Rixon to come with the stragglers. Not only did they have to wait all Friday, but as John looked up and saw his father coming he remarked to Dave 'Here comes the boss and his man Friday'. It was inevitable that for a long while after this the place was referred to as 'Friday Flat'.

Shirley was persistent in her efforts to eventually visit the mountains. She claims she pestered her parents so much about visiting Dead Horse Hut that her parents finally consented. Her father promised that after he took the packhorses and supplies up he would return in a week to pick Shirley and her mother up.

Now in her late 50's Shirley recalls that first memorable trip that has long remained etched in her memory (a few of her words have been changed for the sake of this article, however the sentiments remain unchanged!):

"All week Mum and I were busy again baking bread, fruit cakes, biscuits and packing all we needed. I was counting the days and watching the gate all week.

True to his word, Dad arrived back right on time. Leo Byatt, a great stockman of the mountains, was keeping an eye on the horses and cattle near Dead Horse while Dad came back for us. There was much excitement that night at 'Karoola'.

The next morning the pack horses were again loaded but only two stock horses were saddled. I was to ride on a cushion behind Dad. That night we stayed at 'Top Place' Moonbah, uncle Norman McGufficke's place where we also picked up more cattle to take to Dead Horse and the high summer pastures.

We set off early, and this time I was on the old chestnut with Mum. We crossed the Moonbah River and then made our way through the hills onto the Thredbo River which we followed up into the mountains. We had many stops to spell the stock and let them enjoy the lush grass and clear, cool water. Lunch consisted of packed sandwiches and the best quart pot of gum leaf tea around!

The cattle started to wander a bit when we reached Friday Flat so Dad gave care of the pack horse to Mum and rode off in pursuit. Mum, being left-handed, pulled the pack horse round to the wrong side, its head somehow got under the chestnut's tail which promptly caused him to pig-root and off went Mum and myself into the tussocks. The horses simply watched the fun as we struggled to emerge!

I was so upset when Dad arrived back because I was very proud of the fact that I'd never fallen off a horse before. Now Mum had ruined my record and I told Dad flat that I didn't want to ride behind her again!

George Day used to make Dad's pack bags and they were made to last using hereford bullock hide supported by a steel frame. The bags were then attached to the pack saddle and it was rare that much in them was ever damaged.

On arrival at Dead Horse, Leo had the fire fairly blazing. Kerosene buckets of water hung on hooks over the fire and a big pot of potatoes cooked on the coals. Steak grilled in front of the fire with tinned peas boiling at the side. All this to be finished off with fruit cake and billy tea! I was in heaven and what a hut to chance upon!

Dead Horse Hut was built by the Nankervis brothers 60 odd years ago. A number of brumbys had perished nearby in the very early days, caught in snow drifts on the Gap. The place had been known as Dead Horse Gap ever since. Corrugated iron for the hut was brought up from Corryong by pack horse, slabs were cut close by, while local gravel and granite made up the hearth and chimney. Stools in the hut were simply kero tins and apart from the slab floor, sleeping quarters consisted of four queen size bunks made from tree limbs with oat bags stretched across as the base and partly full chaff bags for mattresses and pillows.

The hut had a stone saddle-room on the side and water was carried from a well quite a distance away. There was a holding yard for stock nearby as well as a gallows.

The Nankervis brothers also built Cascade Hut, a much more primitive version of Dead Horse, for similar reasons, they were only used occasionally.

I'll never forget that place, let alone that first trip. The views down the valley to Friday Flat, where Thredbo Village now lies, were beautiful. Each morning the men would be up at daybreak checking and counting the cattle. The pack salt was always out near their camp as they mostly returned to the one place each night. Mum and I would also be out early to catch grasshoppers before the sun became too bright. Then we'd walk to the Thredbo, not far away, and catch trout which was very easy because there weren't many people in the area in those days.

Some days we went riding with the men and at every stream the horses would want to stop and have a drink, the water was crystal clear and we'd get off and use the hat brims to snatch a drink.

It was so exciting when the men arrived for the brumby chase. George Day would be up from the Chalet with sweets for me. And then he'd be gone with the rest of the men, away all day chasing brumbies, usually bringing back 2 or 3 at a time. Mum would spend the day cooking dampers and jam tarts in the camp ovens and then occasionally we'd join the chase to the sound of whips cracking and men calling out to each other as they crashed through the bush."

After this trip there was only ever one place Shirley wanted to go in her school holidays; it was up to Dead Horse Hut. "I just loved that area of the Mountain, so much to do and to see amongst the beauty of nature!"

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