

With Pack Horse to Lobb's Hole

C. J. Harnett

(The author was for many years District Surveyor and his knowledge of the area is unequalled.)

THE Park comprises about 1½ million acres, extending from Micalong State Forest southerly to the Victorian border about 100 miles for a width of about 25 miles. In the south part it has frontage to the Indi River for nearly 50 miles and to the Snowy River for 10 miles.

From the top of Cobra Bald one can see a great part of this Park and to the peaks and ramparts that wall it in—to Jounama Peaks and Nimbo (overhanging the headwater of the Gooberagandra River), Morgan, Kelly, Gudgenby, Sentry Box (surrounding the wonderful Yaouk Plain), Peppercorn (the northern limit of the rolling Currangorambla Downs with their most picturesque timbered hilltops sharply cut against the sky in air so clear that distance cannot be estimated). Away to the west towers Jagungal, the far Bald Mountain, Tabletop, the Round Mountain, Manjar, Jagumba, Toolong, Jacky's Lookout, all at the headwaters of that great system which feed the Tumut River, to be one day harnessed to extend the irrigation areas and our power supply.

On Jacky's Lookout the old chiefs of the Monaro tribes, Tongei and his forebears, who had ancestral rights to the bogong grub (3in. long and ¾in. fat) on the falls to the Valentine River, but often poached on the Doubtful River, watched for the rightful owners who would come slipping silently up the valleys.

The Bogongs must have been fatter to the north of Jagungal, for many fights depleted the ranks of the Monaro blacks, and those who came back to the Eucumbene River for the winter had round, full tummies and glossy, shiny skins.

Looking to the south one sees Gungartan, Dicky Cooper, Adams Peak and, gleaming white against the sky, remote, mysterious, of another world, the awe-inspiring, massif-ringed by the jagged peaks of Townsend, Mueller and Ram's Head and dominated by the mighty domes of Kosciusko and Twynam. Then a little to the left and far, far away on a clear day, Paddy Rush's Bogong,

Terrible, the Chimneys, Purgatory, Jerusalem, Paradise and the Pilot, the last only three miles from the border, where Alexander Black in 1847 dug two long trenches at the very head of "the nearest source of the Murray" and commenced to lay out the wonderful straight line to Cape Howe which separates two States.

Over a period of fifty years, I made short trips into the mountains, but a few years ago realised my ambition and, with a commission to examine the whole of them in this State, went with a string of fine horses, a mountain man and a surveyor from Micalong to Ke-wam-bat on the border, zig-zagging over every gully and flat trying to pick up the old tracks and landmarks, photographing the country from all the high peaks, often thinking how delightful it would be to camp for days and weeks in some of the restful, fascinating glades where we threw off the packs for a single night.

One day we started from Long Plain Hut with all ten horses loaded, because we were going to grasshopper-devastated parts.

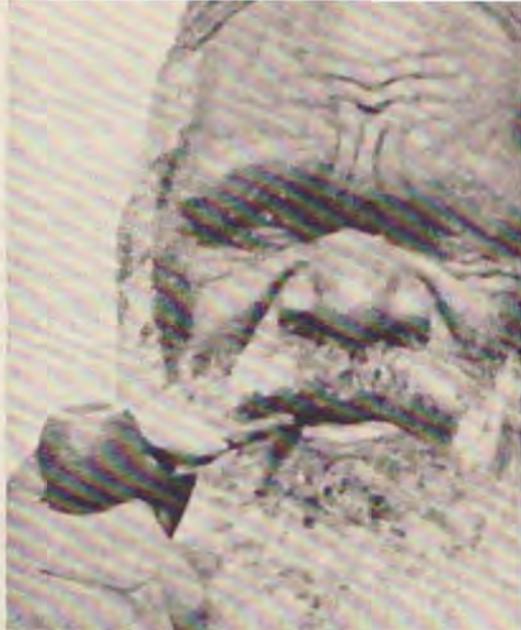
Next morning the pack horses back for a load of fodder and the surveyor and I explore. Traces of an old bullock-dray track, chiefly where iron tyres had ground on rocks, and stumps of trees cut out of the way, steep siddings overhanging Pheasant Creek, then a leading spur, one of those razor-backed ramps that always the Designer left for the boldest bushmen to find; into and across the Gooberagandra flowing deep and fast with crystal-clear water, across a rich little flat and then to wonder if the old Inca had a colony here for, circling round the high steep slopes into the river was a stone-walled aqueduct which once carried water flowing between the stone walls and almost perpendicular mountain side. It was four feet deep and seven feet wide, the stone work three feet wide on top and so faithfully constructed that one could have ridden along it for miles. We led our horses as on a pavement and after going about three miles we passed below us piles of broken machinery, very massive, that had

miraculously come down the old dray track. Here, also, we suddenly faced a surprising waterfall leaping from the mouth of Dubbo Creek into the Gooberragandra River—an opportunity to electrify Tumut and all the surrounding district. Those stone walls and falls will surprise a hiker some day. Back to camp at dusk and next day to Garnet, nearly all scrub and rocks, some trap-yards fairly new indicating wild horses. Long-legged pigs “woof” out of the tea-tree swamps; a great load of fodder is being unloaded from the pack horses as we rode into camp. All next day we rode without boiling the billy because the mountain man said the packs were too heavy for the horses to remain motionless, and came to Micalong Swamp, that five-mile stretch of lush cattle feed that heads the famous trout stream.

In the morning straight through the bush to Nimbo.

“Take the track from Yarrangobilly Caves House to Glory Cave, then turn sharply to the left and cross the river, you can’t miss the track, it will take you straight to Jounama Station.” But I did miss it and hunted about Limestone Cliffs for an hour, returning to find the “turn off” at a spot where wallabies jump over a cliff and one had to lead one’s horse and wonder how the pack horses could manage. I thought we might lose them forever, but they scrambled down safely.

None of us had the vaguest idea of the way from Jounama to Lobb’s Hole, but my saddle mare had once belonged to Frank Yan so would know every stick in that country. So I rode another and let my mare run free with a light pack. She went straight to te lead making mysterious right-angled turns in the roughest of country. The other packs followed and so did we, leading our horses at the steepest pinches, passing between huge boulders and round hair-raising hairpin bends. Sometimes my mare appeared to go over a cliff, but we always found she had scrambled down where there was a foothold. It was a marvellous exhibition of unfailing memory and by and by we came out on a steep ramp with the valley and old copper mine workings spread out below us. We pitched the tent where we could look round the ring of encircling cliffs and realised that the old cattle duffers who discovered the Hole must have felt quite safe there. Pack bullocks used to take the



Tongei, an early Alpine enthusiast

smelted copper out by the way that my mare showed us. The copper was packed in bullock hide and teams used to meet the pack bullocks at the south bounding of Jounama Station—so it must have been rich. The works and a huge chimney still stand as witness.

We climbed out next morning by following a steep little ferny creek up to a crack in the cliffs. Thence the track went right along the edge of the cliffs on side-slopes that made the pack horses falter, hundreds of feet of sheer cliff on the left, breaking away from slopes that were nearly as steep on the right. “Leave them alone—if one kicks the other we’ll lose them.” After nearly 20 minutes old Clyde, heaviest of them all, gave a lead and keeping far behind each other they all edged round. I walked with a strong pointed stick, my saddle horse following and stepping nonchalantly right on the very edge. After a mile along the cliff edge with the ghosts of old bushrangers winding in and out and making the horses nervous, we came on wonderful views of valley cliffs and mountain through a purple haze towards Talbingo. Then out on clear going at “The Milk Shanty,” deserted 60 years ago but still to be identified by cherry

and poplar trees. Good grass at last and the pack horses waiting for us when they stopped to pick. Kiandra and Hetherington's Hut at the New Chum Hill for the night—all the southern slopes hereabouts have been sluiced away for gold, while tunnel mouths along the eastern side tell of the searching for the old lead that had deposited £1,000,000 worth of gold on the granite table between the store and post office at Kiandra and brought 16,000 people to fight through the hardest winter known when all the houses were covered and communication was by tunnel under the snow and my grandfather had to kill a beast every night to feed starving wanderers.

We have wandered over the north part of the Great Reserve. It took eight months to ride over all of it, some day I will tell you of the rest of it, taking you into the parts where there are real alpine scenes, down Hannel's Spur to Geehi where you can look back at a peak you left two hours ago, now 6000 feet above you and to the bases of Watson's Crags where the swinging mountain moss made a bridge strong enough to carry horse and rider over the ravine that the

storms cut out below it when the old moraine broke away and allowed the swamp that grew it to drain away.

I can show you slopes once carrying 18 inches of rich organic soil, fattening grasses and clover for hundreds of acres now huge granite boulders with cracks to break a horse's legs, denuded of soil, covered by wire bush (*Prostanthera Cuniata*) that still live with roots extending 3 and 4 feet down into the cracks. Soon this will go and naked, barren boulders replace the once smiling slopes. Above the 5000-foot contour the wire bush is the most active erosion agent, as slopes in all stages of disintegration testify, and those who have discouraged the shepherds from carefully burning it off have much to answer for. It powders the soil so that it washes away in thunderstorms and has invaded thousands of acres where rich grass grew when I first rode the chestnut mare Kitty to the hills and kept straightening up the pack on McManus' old blue horse.

Au Revolr. I'll keep the pack-stick ready and the leather soft with dobbin till we saddle up again.