

Hugh Young inspected and took delivery of the sheep on Victoria River Downs on January 20th 1894. Gunn then returned to Darwin while Young stayed on to take the sheep overland to Bradshaw.⁷⁵ Five white men took charge of the sheep and by February or March 1894 the last of them had left VRD. Today one of the few visible signs that there ever were sheep on VRD is a set of rock paintings of sheep in the Stokes Range, on the northern boundary of the station (plate 111).

From VRD the sheep were first taken to Delamere where about a dozen died from poisoning on the headwaters of Gregory Creek.⁷⁶ The sheep had been shorn some time before they arrived on the Gregory (probably while they were still on VRD where men to shear the sheep were available) and the wool was carted to the Depot by James Mulligan.⁷⁷ From there it was taken by boat to the Dome where it was loaded on Bradshaw's 'steamerette', the 'Red Gauntlet', and shipped to Darwin.⁷⁸

Probably because of the poisonings that had occurred it was decided that the route to Bradshaw via Gregory Creek was impassable for sheep; they were instead taken the long way around via Delamere, the Flora River and across to the headwaters of the Fitzmaurice River.⁷⁹ By August 1894, Young had formed a sheep station on the 'open tableland' of the Upper Fitzmaurice, but had 'considerable trouble with the blacks,⁸⁰ who on at least one occasion attacked the camp. No one was injured, but one man received a spear through his

⁷⁵ J. Bradshaw in 'Report of the Northern Territory Commission together with Minutes of Proceedings, Evidence, and Appendices'. *South Australian Parliamentary Papers*, vol. 2, no. 19, 1895, answer to question 3254; Log Book of Bradshaw's Run, introductory paragraph for 1894. Northern Territory Archives, NTRS 2261. The Log Book is unique among the historic records of the Victoria River district and is the main source of information on Bradshaw during its formative years. It begins with a general summary of events and highlights, from the founding of the station until June 1899. Then it becomes a record of daily events, continuing until July 13th 1901.

⁷⁶ *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 6-7-1894; J. Bradshaw in *Report of the Northern Territory Commission together with Minutes of Proceedings, Evidence, and Appendices*, 1895, answer to question 3279.

⁷⁷ Log Book of Bradshaw's Run, entry for 2-6-1894.

⁷⁸ Ibid: entry for 2-6-1894.

⁷⁹ Ibid: entry for 2-6-1894.

⁸⁰ J. Bradshaw, 1907. 'The Northern Territory', *Victorian Geographical Journal*, vol. 25, pp. 20-28; Log Book of Bradshaw's Run, general summary at the beginning of the document.

shirt and was pinned to the ground.⁸¹ From the upper Fitzmaurice the sheep were soon shifted to an area near the homestead.⁸² 700 lambs had been born since the sheep left VRD so by the time it arrived at Bradshaw the flock numbered 4,558.⁸³ There is anecdotal evidence suggesting that for a time the sheep may have been located lower down the Fitzmaurice River at the Koolendong valley. In the 1960s Northern Territory cattleman Tex Moar was mustering in the Fitzmaurice River country and when he arrived at the Koolendong his Aboriginal stockmen told him they were at the 'ship camp'. Tex was puzzled and asked what they meant by 'ship camp', and they replied, 'Ship! Alla same nanny goat!'⁸⁴

The Government Resident expressed his regret on the demise of sheep breeding on VRD and the removal of the sheep to Bradshaw station. He commented that Bradshaw was, 'a different class of country to that on which the sheep have been running. It remains to be seen whether the undertaking will prove a success, which I am sure I hope may be the case.'⁸⁵ His caution was not misplaced.

On Bradshaw the sheep faced various dangers and to try and protect them, for the first few years, at least, the sheep were shepherded. Shepherding on Bradshaw seems to have been a lethal occupation. One of the shepherds, Antonis Bolan, died in January 1896 and was buried at the back of the horse paddock,⁸⁶ the first white man to die on the station.⁸⁷ A few months later 'Gunn's Bend', presumably on Angalarri Creek, was fenced in to form a sheep

⁸¹ J. Bradshaw in *Report of the Northern Territory Commission together with Minutes of Proceedings, Evidence, and Appendices*. 1895, answer to question 3284.

⁸² Log Book of Bradshaw's Run, entry for 22-9-1894.

⁸³ C. Dashwood, 'Government Resident's Report on the Northern Territory', 24-7-1894. *South Australian Parliamentary Papers*, vol. 2, no. 53, 1894, p. 3.

⁸⁴ Personal communication, Tex Moar, Pine Creek. In the 1960s Tex was the owner of Dorisvale station, near the headwaters of the Fitzmaurice River.

⁸⁵ C. Dashwood, 'Government Resident's Report on the Northern Territory', 24-7-1894. *South Australian Parliamentary Papers*, vol. 2, no. 53, 1894, p. 3.

⁸⁶ Log Book of Bradshaw's Run, entry for April 1896.

⁸⁷ List of deaths in the Victoria River district, compiled by the Northern Territory Genealogical Society, Darwin.

paddock⁸⁸ and then in July another shepherd, James Edkins, became the second white man to die on Bradshaw.⁸⁹ He was buried next to Bolan.⁹⁰

In spite of being shepherded, sheep turned out to be a disaster on Bradshaw. In December 1895 it was reported that, 'extraordinary mortality has taken place amongst the sheep at Mr. Bradshaw's station... About 90 per cent of the last lambing is reported to have been lost through one cause and another', and deaths among the adult sheep were attributed to poisonous plants.⁹¹ The Log Book contains regular accounts of Aborigines being sent out to look for the sheep. Sometimes they found a good number,⁹² but more often they could not find any, or only a few.⁹³ On one occasion sheep tracks led to a waterhole and station Aborigines read the signs showing where an 'alligator' grabbed one.⁹⁴ Another time the sheep were attacked and killed by dingoes. The carcasses were laced with strychnine and baits were laid. Whether any dingos were killed is unknown, but at least one station dog was poisoned.⁹⁵

Bush Aborigines were an ongoing problem and, unlike at VRD, they appear to have developed a taste for mutton. After causing 'considerable trouble' on the upper Fitzmaurice, Aborigines continued to 'make themselves obnoxious' near the homestead, spearing cattle and horses – and sheep.⁹⁶ When the Norwegian explorer-zoologist Knut Dahl visited the station in May 1895, he remarked that, 'The local blacks were very aggressive and had taken a fancy to spearing sheep, and for this reason the shepherds fired at them whenever they saw them.'⁹⁷

⁸⁸ Log Book of Bradshaw's Run, entry for April 1896.

⁸⁹ List of deaths in the Victoria River district, compiled by the Northern Territory Genealogical Society, Darwin.

⁹⁰ Log Book of Bradshaw's Run, entry for 22-7-1896.

⁹¹ *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 6-12-1895.

⁹² For example, see the Log Book of Bradshaw's Run, entries for 28-9-1899, 21-7-1900.

⁹³ Ibid: entries for 9-7-1899, 11-7-1899, 4-11-1899, 7-7-1900, 5-2-1901.

⁹⁴ Ibid: entry for 19-12-1901.

⁹⁵ Ibid: entries for 11-7-1899 and 13-7-1899.

⁹⁶ Ibid: entry for April 1896.

⁹⁷ K. Dahl, *In Savage Australia: an account of a hunting and collecting expedition to Arnhem Land and Dampier Land*, Alan, London, 1926, p. 190.

In at least one instance Aborigines who had killed sheep apparently were tracked down and shot by Bradshaw stockmen. In a letter to Billy Linklater in 1948, Tom Pearce inquired as to Hugh Young's fate, and had this to say:

let me know how Young died — he was a heavy drinker — and carrying a load on his mind — after Shooting, he & McPhee⁹⁸ — many of the Blacks out on the Run for Killing Sheep & burnt them. McPhee informed me — when one of them was partly Burnt — Rose up & scared Young — the eat [sic] of the fire Caused this to take place.⁹⁹

The Government Geologist visited Bradshaw shortly before the sheep arrived and remarked that 'Mr. Bradshaw...has a cutter in which stores are kept as a precaution against the thieving propensities of the natives.'¹⁰⁰ After the sheep arrived the Aborigines stole shears and fashioned them into spear blades. It may have been one of these that struck Mulligan in the thigh when he and Ligar were attacked at Jasper Gorge in 1895 (see Chapter 5), although it also could have come from VRD or even Delamere.

According to the 'Log Book', the first shearing on Bradshaw was carried out in September 1894 on a billabong some distance east of Bradshaw homestead. The wool was brought in boats to Bradshaw's Schooner 'The Twins' and taken to Darwin by Aeneas Gunn.¹⁰¹ Unless this account is wrong, there was a second shearing early in 1895 and it ended in disaster. Like VRD before him, Bradshaw was unable to obtain woolpacks in time for the shearing, so,

the newly-shorn wool was stacked into huge heaps, handy to the landing place for shipping purposes. One night the creek came down a banker from its head, and swept the lot into the Victoria. There was wool hanging on the mangroves for forty miles down the river. The niggers along the lower reaches must have thought there had been a snow-storm.¹⁰²

⁹⁸ This was Jock McPhee, 'Tam-a-Shanter' in Jeannie Gunn's, *We of the Never-Never*, (Hutchinson, London, 1908); "'Never Never" People. Their Strange Fate', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 21-2-1942.

⁹⁹ Tom Pearce to Billy Linklater, 9-10-1948. Mitchell Library, A1 10/26.

¹⁰⁰ H.Y.L. Brown, 'Northern Territory Explorations'. *South Australian Parliamentary Papers*, vol. 3, no. 82, 1895, p. 3.

¹⁰¹ Log Book of Bradshaw's Run, entry for 22-9-1894.

¹⁰² Letter from S.E. Pearson to G. Buchanan (senior), 31-3-34. Original in possession of Bobbie Buchanan, Macclesfield, South Australia. See also K. Dahl, *In Savage Australia*, 1926, p. 190, and *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 24-5-1895.

Of the 4,558 sheep originally brought onto Bradshaw in mid-1894, there were only 1,553 left to be shorn in late 1896, producing 18 bales of wool.¹⁰³ Nevertheless, Captain Joe was still optimistic and brought seventeen rams to Bradshaw on 'The Twins' in October 1896.¹⁰⁴ By July the following year only 662 sheep were shorn for nine bales.¹⁰⁵ Then in March 1899 Bradshaw reported that,

The wet season culminated in an exceptional flood which drowned nearly half the few surviving sheep although all hands were working up to their necks in water till midnight trying to save the sheep in boats. It might have been avoided if the sheep had been moved to the base of the mountain at the first indications of a high flood. The water was two feet deep in the dwelling house and three feet in the kitchen and outhouses. The station staff vacated the house and camped for ten days on a stony rise in the horse paddock.¹⁰⁶

Probably largely as a result of this flood, in April 1899 Bradshaw reported that 'only 114 surviving sheep shorn today'.¹⁰⁷ Sixteen bales of wool were shipped to Darwin the same month,¹⁰⁸ but some of these are likely to have contained wool from an earlier shearing. By September 1899 there seem to have been only 62 sheep left.¹⁰⁹

In spite of their dramatic decline, as late as 1902 Bradshaw imported fourteen more sheep.¹¹⁰ These 'declined' as fast as the others and by 1904, 'Fred Bradshaw had the six survivors...kept in a wire-netted enclosure at the homestead, where they were fed and watered by the station gins. We used to jest with Fred, and call it his "sheep museum"'.¹¹¹

¹⁰³ Log Book of Bradshaw's Run, entry for 15-10-1896.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid: entry for 16-10-1896.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid: entry for July 1897.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid: entry for March 1899.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid: entry for 5-4-1899.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid: entry for 28-9-1899.

¹¹⁰ C. Dashwood, 'Government Resident's Report on the Northern Territory, 1902', *South Australian Parliamentary Papers*, vol. 3, no. 45, 1903, p. 26.

¹¹¹ Letter from S.E. Pearson to G. Buchanan, 31-3-34. Original in possession of Bobbie Buchanan, Macclesfield, South Australia.

This was the ignoble end of the great Victoria River Sheep Saga and dreams of vast sheep stations in the region, although some continued to think of the district as potential sheep country. In 1907 Surveyor Wells remarked 'A large tract of this country is well adapted for sheep, especially that lying latitudes south from Pigeon hole,'¹¹² and in an interview he gave in 1908 he envisioned up to 2,000,000 sheep on the Victoria, Ord and Sturt Creek!¹¹³ In 1913 the manager of Wave Hill thought that 'fully 65 per cent of the Wave Hill Station should be well adapted for sheep... There were large areas of the Victoria River country suited for sheep, and he considered much of it would carry 120 sheep per square mile.'¹¹⁴ On Argyle station there was a thriving flock of sheep in the 1950s, apparently kept solely for meat,¹¹⁵ but they were never again tried on a commercial basis.

Even though it has long been known that sheep have a more severe impact than cattle on vegetation, and the failure of the sheep experiment probably saved VRD from worse environmental degradation than has already occurred, the failure was still being lamented as recently as 1992. Jock Makin, a farmer and grazier from South Australia, discussed the attempt to establish sheep on VRD in his book, *The Big Run*, a history of Victoria River Downs station. His startling and hyperbolic conclusion was that 'For the Northern Territory, this was one of the greatest tragedies of all time. Had the sheep been kept on the Victoria there is every likelihood that stations now carrying cattle would also be counted as wool producers.'¹¹⁶ Well might cattlemen today say 'Baa Humbug!'

¹¹² L.A. Wells, *The Victoria River and the Adjacent Country*, Government Printer, Adelaide, 1907. p. 5.

¹¹³ 'Northern Territory. Interview with Mr. L.A. Wells', pp. 3-4. Department of Territories, Correspondence files NT series, Australian Archives, ACT CRS A1640, file 1908/43.

¹¹⁴ 'The Railways Commission', *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 7-8-1913.

¹¹⁵ G. Bolton, *Kimberley Pastoral Industry from 1885 to Present*, Unpublished MA thesis, University of Western Australia, Perth, 1953, p. 254.

¹¹⁶ J. Makin, *The Big Run*, 1992, p. 71. This book was first published in 1970 and has been reprinted and revised several times.

Chapter 9

THE NEST OF THIEVES

For twenty years after the first settlers arrived, the Victoria River country was the preserve of big stations, most of them owned by wealthy companies and southern pastoralists. There never was a Northern Territory equivalent of the Robertson Land Act that opened up the big stations in New South Wales for closer settlement,¹ so once the big Victoria River stations were established in the 1880s, the land within their leases could not be taken from them by 'selectors'. It was possible to gain a lease, or later a pastoral permit or grazing licence, on whatever land was left, but almost all the worthwhile pastoral land was locked up in these stations and only areas of rough ranges or arid country remained as Crown Land. Any later would-be landowner had to make do with the 'left-overs', and what was left was largely worthless.

Some of the first to come seeking land found small left-over areas here and there in rough range country on the edge of the big stations. Most of these areas were eventually consolidated into the big runs, or held by longer-term battlers. Once this happened, later arrivals were forced to turn their eyes to the south, to the almost limitless expanse of the Tanami Desert, beyond the southern borders of Wave Hill, Inverway, Gordon Downs, and other big stations further west (see Chapter 10).

In 1909 a journalist named Burton travelled across the Victoria River district from the Kimberley. Later he published a description of local society:

The population of the district consists of station managers, cattle duffers, horse thieves, wild and woolly stockmen, and outlaws. A man is almost out of the pale of the law when he reaches the Victoria, and it may well be called "No Man's Land."

¹ This Act was passed in 1861 and enabled people to select an area from 40 to 320 acres anywhere on the large stations of the time (S. Roberts, *History of Australian Land Settlement (1788-1920)*, Macmillan and Co. Ltd., Melbourne, 1924, pp. 222-232.

Unless offence be murder the authorities will not trouble to look for him; and he may remain for years wandering about the country.²

His account may have been accurate enough for the time, but a decade earlier he could not have written his story in quite the same way. Certainly there were station managers and wild stockmen then, perhaps even the occasional outlaw, and at different times horse stealing was a problem; during the gold rush to Kimberley in 1886, Auvergne station lost over 100 head, and there were raids on other stations.³ No doubt white travellers also killed the occasional beast for beef – during the Kimberley gold rush it was claimed that because of illegal cattle killing most stations along the route were keeping their cattle twenty miles off the main road⁴ – but until 1902 there was not a cattle duffer to be seen.

For twenty years nobody bothered to take up and stock any of this ‘left over’ land. Then, almost overnight the country was overrun with ‘small men’, ‘battlers’ who took up blocks here and there around the edges of the big runs (map 9). This influx began in 1902 and lasted for a decade; it was the Golden Age of cattle duffing in the Victoria River district.

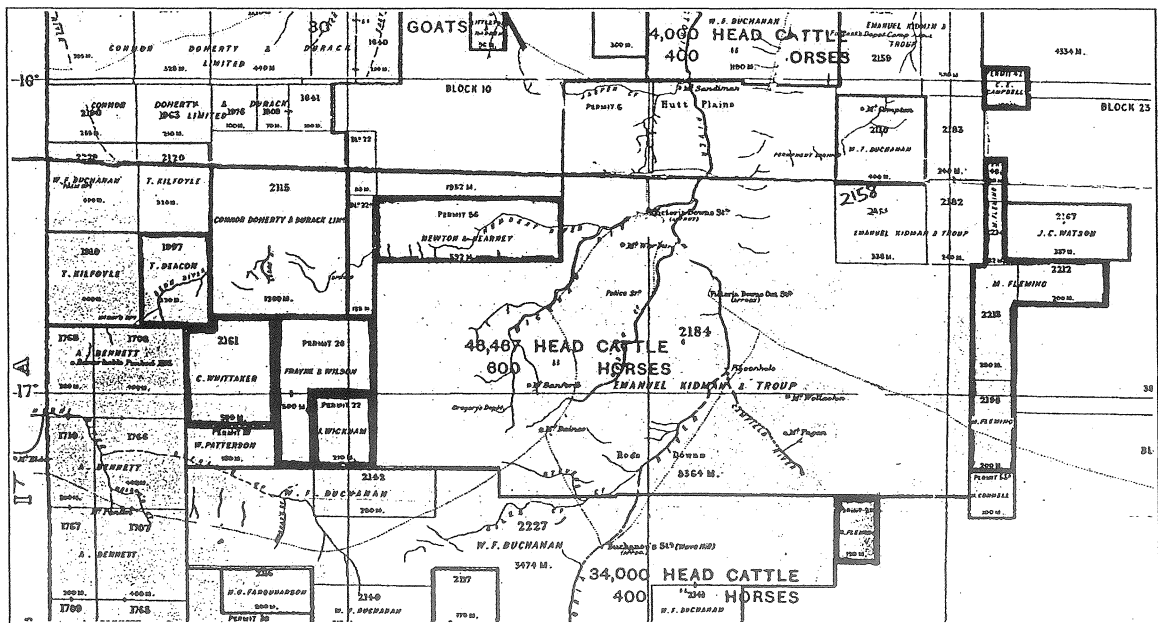
This chapter looks at the rise and fall of cattle duffing society across the Victoria River country in the first decade of the twentieth century. It seeks to answer the following questions: why did it take so long for ‘small men’ to appear in the district, who were they, what happened to them, and why did the stations they established last for only a decade? Quite often the people who figure in works of outback history are the ‘big men’ – the cattle barons, explorers, government officials and so forth. In contrast the men who were the actors in this story are a microcosm of the types of ordinary workingmen who lived in the Territory in this early period. Their origins and lives are varied and colourful, and the events which surrounded them are complex. Their stories provide an insight into social attitudes and relations – between each other, between themselves and the big stations,

² ‘An Irresponsible Journalist’. *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 30-4-1909. This is a reprint from ‘a Queensland paper’ under the heading, ‘Victoria River Depot Race Meeting’.

³ H.W.H. Stevens to the manager of Goldsbrough Mort & Co, Ltd., 9-10-1891. Goldsbrough Mort and Co. Ltd: Head Office, Melbourne: letters received from HWH Stevens, Port Darwin, re NT property and butchering business, 1889-1892. Noel Butlin Archives, Australian National University, 2/872.

⁴ Ibid.

between themselves and ‘authority’, and themselves and the Aborigines – and are thus worth telling in some detail. In the process I hope to bring these cattle duffers back from virtual oblivion and place them within the broader picture of Victoria River and ultimately Australian history.



Map 9: Pastoral leases and pastoral permits in the Victoria River district, c1906.

In answer to my first question, several reasons can be put forward, but before doing so two points need to be addressed. First, the terms ‘poddy dodger’ and ‘cattle duffer’ should be explained. A poddy-dodger is one who steals unbranded calves from a branded mother and marks them with his own brand.⁵ A cattle duffer is one who steals cattle, young or old, cleanskin or branded.⁶ In terms of risk, branding cleanskin cattle was a relatively safe procedure. Because the runs were unfenced cattle regularly wandered from one lease or permit to another, so unless a man was actually caught branding cleanskins outside his own boundary, finding cattle with his brand on your land was not grounds for legal action.

⁵ Anon, *The Ringer's Book of Outback Terms & Phrases*, The Australian Stockman's Hall of Fame and Outback Heritage Centre, Longreach, 1988, p. 18.

⁶ *Ibid*: 10.

Cross-branding cattle – that is, placing a new brand on top of an existing brand to obliterate it – was a much riskier business. For a variety of reasons a beast sometimes carried the original owner’s brand on more than one part of its body. Double-branding was sufficiently rare that a cattle duffer would not expect to encounter it, and when he cross-branded one original brand, the other could be overlooked.⁷ A second and much greater problem was that when a cross-branded hide was wet the original brand often could be detected under the new one.⁸ Both situations have led to charges of cattle duffing being laid.⁹

Branding cleanskin cattle was not regarded as a crime by many people. The logic seemed to be that if the owner was not branding them he deserved to lose them, but cross-branding was not so readily condoned. In the Victoria River district and elsewhere the term ‘cattle duffer’ was often used rather loosely to include men who branded full-grown cleanskin cattle, those who cross-branded cattle, and poddy-dodgers.

The second point of clarification concerns lease covenants. Once a person obtained land there were certain conditions that had to be met before they could become a cattleman. One was to stock the land with legitimately obtained cattle. No doubt some men bought cattle and moved them onto their land, but for those with limited cash or no desire to spend their money there were other ways to become ‘legal’. Ernestine Hill described how it was done on one of the Victoria River cattle duffers’ blocks discussed in this chapter:

The cattle that formed Illawarra were a mythical mob. Negotiations consisted of a cheque – never presented – and a receipt from a cattle-dealing friend that “Jim Campbell has this day taken delivery of five hundred mixed cattle of various breeds and colours” – the usual poddy-dodger legalities to stave off pertinent questions.¹⁰

⁷ For example, in 1909 when the police were examining VRD cattle allegedly stolen by Jim Campbell, they found a bull which bore both Campbell’s diamond 40 brand and the VRD G10 brand (Timber Creek police journal, 3-7-1909. Northern Territory Archives, F302).

⁸ C. Schultz and D. Lewis, *Beyond the Big Run*, University of Queensland Press, Brisbane, 1995, p. 171.

⁹ An example of cattle theft being discovered occurred when a herd of cattle from Coolibah were dipped at Anthony’s Lagoon in 1953. Once the brands were wet it was noticed that in some instances the ‘Q’ of the Coolibah brand ‘MTQ’ was superimposed on the VRD ‘bulls head’ brand.

¹⁰ E. Hill, *The Territory*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1951, p. 324.

The other legality – a formality – was to obtain a registered brand. This was supposed to be applied only to the progeny of the founding herd and officially this meant that no cattle could be turned off the property for twelve months. Any cleanskin cattle over twelve months old on Crown Land were regarded as the property of the Crown and were supposed to be sold at public auction.¹¹ However, as will be seen, this is not how things always happened.

To return to my first question of why it took so long for battlers to establish themselves, when the big stations were first formed the only ‘left-over’ land was on the arid edges of the region, or some areas of coastal country. It wasn’t until the settlers had time to examine their leases that they began to redraw their boundaries to exclude much of the poorer country between the best areas, and consequently make it available to others. However, for the first two decades, more or less, the entire region was in a raw and dangerous state (see Chapter 4), and apparently there were other factors which discouraged the ‘battlers’ for some time.

One factor may have been the availability of cattle, and in particular cleanskin cattle. Because of the prevailing open range system of cattle management, the stations quickly began to lose control of their herds, and cleanskin cattle soon became common (see Chapter 3). For nearly two decades this problem was intensified through lack of markets and generally low prices for cattle.¹² Initially the herds were small and relatively easy to supervise, so the number of cleanskin cattle was correspondingly low, but the cattle numbers grew exponentially. On VRD in 1889 there were about 14,000 cattle,¹³ but by 1905 there were 56,000.¹⁴ By 1900 there were probably more than 150,000 cattle in the

¹¹ C. Herbert, ‘Government Resident’s Report on the Northern Territory, 1905’, *South Australian Parliamentary Papers*, vol. 2, no. 45, 1906, p. 9.

¹² R. Duncan, *The Northern Territory Pastoral Industry 1863-1910*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1967, p. 60-65.

¹³ Government Resident J.L. Parson’s ‘Report on the Northern Territory for the Year 1889’, *South Australian Parliamentary Papers*, vol. 2, no. 28, 1890, p. 2

¹⁴ C. Herbert, ‘Government Resident’s Report on the Northern Territory, 1905’, *South Australian Parliamentary Papers*, vol. 2, no. 45, 1906, p. 8.

region as a whole. They had spread out to the edges of the big stations and almost all control of the herds was lost.

Any man who obtained a block of land on or near the boundary of one of these stations had easy access to large numbers of unbranded cattle, a great incentive for cattle duffers to move in. For such men it was of no consequence that the available land was too poor or the area available too small to form a viable cattle station. They could gain title for as little as 100 square miles, but because the station boundaries were unfenced until the 1960s and later, they could effectively use much more land. On the one hand, cleanskin cattle could wander onto their block from the neighbouring station, and on the other they could surreptitiously muster and brand cattle on their neighbours' land. And, of course, any cattle branded on their own block could graze all over the good land of the neighbouring big station.

The most important factor undoubtedly was the price of cattle. There was not much point in obtaining a block of country and branding cleanskins if there was little financial reward. Throughout the 1890s depression gripped Australia and there were other problems peculiar to Northern Territory pastoralists. In 1892 Western Australia imposed a tax of thirty shillings per head on cattle entering the state. This tax was removed in 1896, but by this time all livestock from the northern areas of the Northern Territory had been banned from entering Western Australia and the other colonies to try and stop the spread of 'tick fever'.¹⁵ These bans were dropped progressively by each state, with South Australia the last in 1903,¹⁶ but while they were in place they effectively closed or restricted the outlets for many Territory cattle producers.¹⁷ The near impossibility of selling cattle during this period meant that many station owners could not afford the infrastructure and man-power needed to adequately look after their herds, so the proportion of cleanskin cattle grew ever larger.¹⁸

¹⁵ R. Duncan, *The Northern Territory Pastoral Industry 1863-1910*, 1967, pp. 58-9.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ R. Duncan, *The Northern Territory Pastoral Industry 1863-1910*, 1967, pp. 58-9.

¹⁸ 'The Victoria River and the Meat Works', *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 20-6-1902.

As discussed in Chapter 3, in Queensland the ban on Territory cattle was completely ineffective because the 'tick fever' had been present since at least 1888. It only became a serious problem in 1893 but during the next seven years or so it spread rapidly and decimated the Queensland beef cattle industry.¹⁹ This calamity was overlapped by a series of dry years, beginning in 1895 and culminating in the great drought of 1900-1902.²⁰ This dry period put a stop to the cattle ticks but further reduced the herds. Before the drought really took hold the depression eased and cattle prices began to rise; when the dry years finally ended there was a great demand for cattle to restock the stations, as well as to supply meat to the eastern markets. As a result, the price of cattle increased significantly.²¹

Even though all these factors were coalescing by 1900 – available land, numerous cleanskin cattle, the opening of markets, an easing of the depression and an increasing sale price for cattle – there was no immediate rush of cattle duffers into the region. A couple of men took up leases early in 1902, and at the same time another gained the use of a leasehold block taken up by someone else in 1900, but before others could follow suit, in July 1902 the South Australian Parliament passed the *Transcontinental Railways Act*. A provision of this act was that contracts for construction would be awarded 'on the land grant principal', and to ensure that land would be available for such grants it was decided not to issue any more pastoral leases for a distance of twenty-five miles (forty-one kilometres) on either side of the proposed line.²² Instead, a system of annual pastoral permits was introduced, but when the act was gazetted it was worded in such a way that instead of being restricted to a corridor twenty-five miles either side of the proposed railway, the law applied to the entire Northern Territory.²³

¹⁹ G. Bolton, *A Thousand Miles Away: A History of North Queensland to 1920*, The Jacaranda Press in association with the Australian National University, Brisbane, 1963, pp. 219-221.

²⁰ Ibid: 221; R. Duncan, *The Northern Territory Pastoral Industry 1863-1910*, 1967, p. 131.

²¹ Ibid: 163-65.

²² Correspondence docket, N.T., memo re withdrawal of land from leasing 25 miles either side of proposed railway line, Australian Archives, ACT. A1640/1 item 1902/273.

²³ Correspondence docket, N.T., copy of wire addressed to the Government Resident Northern Territory, from F.E. Benda, Secretary to the Minister Controlling the NT, 18-8-1902. Australian Archives, ACT, A1640/1 1902/273; C. Herbert, 'Government Resident's Report on the Northern Territory, 1905', *South Australian Parliamentary Papers*, vol. 2, no. 45, 1906, p. 8; *South Australian Government Gazette*, 2-6-1904.

It does not seem likely that the new permit system was an inducement to those considering taking up land. The annual pastoral permits were far less secure than pastoral leases, which were issued for a period of forty-two years, and for the first seven years the permits were dearer. From 1890 the annual rent on pastoral leases cost sixpence per square mile for the first seven years, one shilling for the next seven years, two shillings for the third seven years, and a charge for the remaining years of the lease to be determined by valuation,²⁴ but pastoral permits were a flat one shilling per square mile per year.²⁵

Nevertheless, during the time that pastoral permits were being issued, hundreds were taken up throughout the Northern Territory. Some were issued to existing large landholders but many were obtained by battlers on the edges of big stations.²⁶ In the Victoria River district more than twenty permits were issued, of which eight or so formed the basis of about six small stations in the hands of perhaps a dozen men.²⁷ They were industrious men, and by 1905 one writer declared that 'The two principal industries on the East Kimberley side are cattle rearing and cattle "duffing"...and cattle duffing is about the principal of the two industries.'²⁸

So who were these battlers? In a number of cases very little or nothing is known about them. In the Victoria River district, of the fourteen or so men who at one time or another were involved with small holdings between 1902 and 1912, W.J.J. Ward, Jimmy Wickham, John Duggan, Tom Hanlon and William Patterson appear 'out of the (historical) blue'. Fortunately, the backgrounds of the Fleming brothers, Jim Campbell, Ben Martin, Jack Beasley, Jack Frayne, Mat Wilson, James Kearney and Jack Newton are less mysterious. In some cases they were associates before they took up any land.

²⁴ R. Duncan, *The Northern Territory Pastoral Industry 1863-1910*, 1967, p. 116.

²⁵ Correspondence docket, N.T., copy of wire addressed to the Government Resident Northern Territory, from F.E. Benda, Secretary to the Minister Controlling the Northern Territory, 18-8-1902. Australian Archives, ACT, A1640/1 1902/273.

²⁶ Duncan reports that by 1910, 49,150 square miles were held under permits (R. Duncan, *The Northern Territory Pastoral Industry 1863-1910*, 1967, p. 121).

²⁷ At any one time there were about ten or a dozen men involved with these permits, but there were changing partnerships so the total number was more like fourteen or fifteen.

²⁸ H7H, 'How cattle are run in the East Kimberley', *The Pastoralists' Review*, February 1906: 1001.

Mick and Jim Fleming both were early Northern Territory pioneers. Jim is said to have been in charge of fifty Chinese brought to McArthur River station in the 1880s to build yards, fences and huts,²⁹ and for a period he was proprietor of the Macarthur River hotel at Borroloola.³⁰ Mick had been in the great Kimberley gold rush of 1886³¹ and in 1891 acted as a guide for the first sheep taken to VRD.³² He was also one of the drovers who in the 1890s took VRD cattle to Darwin.³³ In 1895 Mick and Wave Hill manager Tom Cahill were summonsed for failing to pay the rent on pastoral leases they jointly held in the Victoria River district.³⁴ By June 1899 he probably was working for Wave Hill as he had a camp twenty miles west of the station,³⁵ and in May 1902 he took 2000 cattle from Wave Hill to stock W.F. Buchanan's 'New Delamere' station on Gregory Creek.³⁶ He built a homestead there and stayed on for some time as manager.³⁷ With his extensive experience of the district, Mick clearly had ample opportunity to see the potential for a small station on the margins of VRD and Wave Hill.

Ben Martin originally came to the Victoria River district intending to take up a job offer made to him in Queensland many years before by Jim Ronan, who had been appointed manager of VRD early in 1900.³⁸ Before Martin arrived he met the Fleming brothers and decided to throw in his lot with them, and became 'another hard riding individualist' on the eastern boundary of VRD.³⁹ Martin certainly could ride. In 1887 he won tent-pegging and

²⁹ C.E. Gaunt, 'Old Time Memories: The Birth of Borroloola', *Northern Standard*, 16-10-1931.

³⁰ *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 15-9-1888.

³¹ C.E. Gaunt, 'Old Time Memories: The Lepers of Arnhem Land and Sketches', *Northern Standard*, 10-7-1934.

³² Report on NT Stations. H.W.H. Stevens to Goldsbrough Mort & Co. Ltd., 8-1-1891. Goldsbrough Mort and Co. Ltd: Head Office, Melbourne: letters received from HWH Stevens, Port Darwin, re NT property and butchering business, 1889-1892. Noel Butlin Archives, Australian National University, 2/872.

³³ T. Meldrum to drover J.A. Davis, 6-7-1897. Goldsbrough Mort and Co. Ltd: Noel Butlin Archives, Australian National University, 2/872.

³⁴ Statement of charge, signed by Plaintiff's Attorney J.K. Stuart, 17-12-1895. Government Resident of the Northern Territory (South Australia) – Inwards Correspondence, 1870-1912, Northern Territory Archives, NTRS 829, item 6950.

³⁵ Timber Creek police journal, 27-6-1899.

³⁶ Ibid: 15-5-1902, 30-5-1902; W.F. Buchanan was the brother of Wave Hill pioneer, Nat Buchanan, and was the outright owner of Wave Hill from 1894 (*Northern Territory Times and Gazette*, 23-2-1894).

³⁷ Timber Creek police letter book, 27-6-1903. Photocopy held at the Berrimah police station, Darwin.

³⁸ T. Ronan, *Deep of the Sky*, Cassell & Company Ltd., Melbourne, 1962, p. 179; *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 22-6-1900.

³⁹ Ibid.

lemon-slicing contests at an athletics carnival in Darwin.⁴⁰ He could also shoot. While buffalo hunting in the 1890s he was credited with shooting thirty-six beasts from horseback with thirty-six shots (Paddy Cahill held the record with 58 shot in one day).⁴¹

Ernestine Hill claims that Jim Campbell came to the Territory with a mob of horses stolen from South Australia in 1893,⁴² and that later he worked as a sub-contract teamster for Tom Pearce, carting steel poles from Borroloola to the overland telegraph line.⁴³ 'Honest Tom' Pearce was 'Mine Host' in Jeannie Gunn's, *We of the Never Never*,⁴⁴ and was to play a major but largely hidden role in coming events. Campbell was in the East Kimberley district as early as October 1898, working with Jack Beasley, Jack Frayne and others on Argyle station, one of the Durack properties.

According to M.P. Durack, Campbell and Beasley had a 'fighting partnership', and he claimed that 'There is nothing Campbell has not taught Beasley except for what Beasley already knew'.⁴⁵ One of the early Northern Territory police, Mounted Constable Jack Johns, described Campbell in his prime as 'a splendid type of a man physically, standing well over six feet high...a super horseman, a crack shot, a hard living man, master bushman, hard, defiant, cruel on occasion, and above all, apparently, a thief'.⁴⁶ Aborigines

⁴⁰ *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 8-1-1887. R.S. Summerhays' *Encyclopaedia for Horsemen* (Frederick Warne, London, 1975, pp. 332-33) defines tent-pegging as 'A spectacular equestrian sport, which originated in India. A soft, white wooden peg, bound with wire, is placed in the ground at an angle...and it has to be taken with a lance or a sword at full gallop.' Lemon-slicing is not defined in this book, but presumably it involves cutting a lemon with a sword at a full gallop.

⁴¹ 'Big Game Hunt in Arnheim [sic] Land', *Northern Standard*, 27-1-1931.

⁴² E. Hill, *The Territory*, 1951, p. 317.

⁴³ *Ibid*: 318-322; The sub-contract work is substantiated in the *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 11-5-1900.

⁴⁴ W. Farmer Whyte, "'Never Never' People. Their Strange Fate', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 21-2-1942.

⁴⁵ M. Durack, *Sons in the Saddle*, Corgi Books, Britain, 1985, pp. 69-70.

⁴⁶ D. Lewis (ed.), *Patrolling the 'Big Up': The Adventures of Mounted Constable Johns in the Top End of the Northern Territory, 1910-1915*, Historical Society of the Northern Territory, Darwin, 1998, p. 41. Johns examined Campbell's body some weeks after he was killed but whether he actually met Campbell alive is unknown. However, he undoubtedly knew many Territory people who had met Campbell, including his brother, William Francis, who was a trooper in the Territory from 1905 to 1915. When Campbell was being hunted by the police, a description of him was issued to all stations and interstate. This described Campbell as 'forty five feet nine about fourteen stone dark complexion [sic] dark scraggly beard good moustache turning grey mark on forehead over one eye eyes weak' (Public Records Office of Western Australia, Acc 741-9. Rough Occurrence Book [Wyndham] 1907-1908, entry for 10-5-1909).

in the Victoria River country would add that he was a murderer.⁴⁷ Subsequent events were to reveal just how cruel Campbell could be.

All I know about Kearney is that, like many men in the outback, he was a man with a 'history'. In 1892 he and a man named Sam Long had been charged with the murder of a Chinese miner on the Macarthur River. In spite of damning evidence against them, both were acquitted in unusual circumstances.⁴⁸

Somewhat more is known about Newton, largely because a contemporary of his, Billy Linklater, compiled a short biography of him.⁴⁹ According to Billy, Newton 'got left at Wyndham' by a cattle boat in about 1897. From there he went inland with a drover, and received his nickname, 'Colorado', on Argyle station after he told a stockmen there he had been in America. It seems likely he had indeed been to America because, according to Linklater, he later built a Mexican-style pise homestead at Texas Downs (East Kimberley). He was also a very good bush carpenter.⁵⁰

The 1891 census lists Jack Frayne as being born in Bendigo, Victoria, in about 1865. In the late 1880s he held the licence for the Roper Bar Hotel⁵¹ and in 1892 he was one of a party led by police hunting the Aborigines who murdered W.S. Scott at Willeroo (see Chapter 7). Two years later he passed through the Victoria River country because Mounted Constable Willshire reported inspecting his horses there.⁵² Possibly he was then on his way to the East Kimberley because in 1896 he was working as a drover for Connor, Doherty and Durack (CD&D),⁵³ and during 1898 and 1899 he was working as a stockman or drover on Auvergne, Newry and probably other Durack stations.⁵⁴

⁴⁷ Personal communication, Big Mick Kangkinang (now deceased).

⁴⁸ *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 15-7-1892; 'The Northern Territory Murder Case', *Adelaide Observer*, 1-10-1892, p. 36, c. 5 and 15-10-1892, p. 31.

⁴⁹ W. Linklater, hand-written manuscript, in possession of Bobbie Buchanan, nd.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*; J. Makin, *The Big Run*, Rigby Limited, Sydney, 1970, p. 124.

⁵¹ *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 15-9-1888.

⁵² Timber Creek police journal, 8-7-1894.

⁵³ Public Records Office of Western Australia, Acc 741-3 Occurrence Book [Wyndham] 1895-1897, entry for 10-1-1896 and 14-4-1896.

⁵⁴ M. Durack, *Sons in the Saddle*, 1985, pp. 69-70, 78-79, 104; Public Records Office of Western Australia, Acc 741-4 Occurrence Book [Wyndham] 1895-1897, entry for 17-5-1899.

Apparently Frayne was a highly competent all-round bush worker, an outstanding horseman and a great personality; like many of his contemporaries he was fond of 'lifting his little finger'. Mary Durack states that he 'was too valuable a stockman to be dismissed for his drinking habits', and she adds that, 'It was obvious that [her father] M.P. had a considerable respect for Frayne, who would carry out a job he had undertaken where others might well give it up as impossible'.⁵⁵ Tom Ronan, author of several books on the Victoria River district, heard about Frayne's 'magnificent achievements' from his father and others, and intended to write a full-length novel about him.⁵⁶ Unfortunately he never did so. When Jim Ronan took over the management of VRD in 1900, Frayne was one of the team of first class stockmen he assembled.⁵⁷ According to Tom Ronan, his father sent Frayne to establish Montejinni outstation to stop the Aborigines killing cattle,⁵⁸ and Frayne had a camp in that area by May 1902.⁵⁹

Finally, there was Jack Beasley (plate 112). Beasley was in the East Kimberley and Victoria River district from at least 1896⁶⁰ and spent most of his life working on various stations in the region, including Auvergne, Ord River and VRD.⁶¹ He must have occasionally worked elsewhere because, according to Mat Savage who was one of his contemporaries, it was Beasley who formed Soudan station, on the Barkly tableland. Savage says Beasley could not write his own name but instead would sign with a conjoined JB, which was also his brand.⁶²

⁵⁵ M. Durack, *Sons in the Saddle*, 1985, pp. 69-70.

⁵⁶ T. Ronan, *Deep of the Sky*, 1962, p. 179.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid: 195.

⁵⁹ Timber Creek police journal, 11-5-1902.

⁶⁰ N. McLennan, *Ord River Station, W.A. 1895-1896, Yesterday and Today*, Privately published in Stawell, Victoria, 1965, p. 7.

⁶¹ Ibid: 7; M. Durack, *Sons in the Saddle*, 1985, p. 70; E. Morey, 'Timber Creek Patrols', pt. 2 *Northern Territory Newsletter*, Darwin, August issue, 1977, p. 18.

⁶² K. Willey, *Boss Drover*, Rigby, Sydney, 1971, p. 40.

B 27 ⁶³

Aborigines from one side of the Victoria River district to the other remember Beasley as a very hard man and one of the main culprits in early massacres.⁶⁴ He certainly was in the district early enough to have been involved in such killings, and Aboriginal oral traditions as widespread and consistent as this should be taken seriously. There is only one piece of written corroboration. When Doug Moore became bookkeeper on Ord River in 1900, Jack Beasley was the head stockman there. Years later Moore wrote a short memoir and he remembered Beasley as 'a rough good natured chap who talked about gouging out blackfellows eyes with a blunt pocket knife'. At the time Moore thought it was 'only talk', but he was forced to reconsider when 'some built on it later.'⁶⁵ Jimmy Manngayarri, one of the oldest Aboriginal men I interviewed, had known Beasley years ago. He claimed that on one occasion Beasley's Aboriginal wife ran away, and when Beasley caught her he shot her.⁶⁶

These, then, are the backgrounds of the men of the 'second wave' of settlers in the Victoria River district about whom anything is known. What follows are the stories of what happened to them and their associates over the following decade, or more. Because the duffers settled in two widely separated localities – more or less the east and west sides of the district – and because they are not known to have interacted to any great degree, I will deal with them as two distinct groups, beginning with those on the east.

The Fleming brothers were in the vanguard of the battlers who moved into the east side of the district. They obtained their first lease (PL 2198) on the eastern boundary of VRD on

⁶³ Carving on a boab at the Drover's Rest, East Baines River.

⁶⁴ I have been told about Beasley's involvement in the shooting of Aborigines by the late Albert Lalga, whose country was Montejinni and Wave Hill, and by the late Jimmy Manngayarri whose country was southern VRD, Limbunya and Mistake Creek; See D. Rose, *Hidden Histories*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 1991, pp. 39-41, 67-68.

⁶⁵ Doug Moore's Memoirs, unpublished typescript, nd., p. 2. Batty Library, Acc 3829A MN 1237.

⁶⁶ Taped interview with Jimmy Manngayarri, Midnight station, 1989.

October 1st 1901,⁶⁷ and stocked it the following February or March with some cattle the police thought they had obtained from Tom Pearce in Katherine.⁶⁸ The Flemings soon acquired three other leases and together the four leases gave them a north-south strip along the VRD boundary (see map 9).⁶⁹ They named their station Illawarra, presumably a reference to their place of origin in New South Wales. From November 1905 Mick also held pastoral permit 29 for a block further south, near Camfield Creek, on the western edge of Wave Hill. Although only Mick's name appears on the lease documents for Illawarra,⁷⁰ various sources state that he was in partnership with his brother Jim, and probably at times with Ben Martin and Jim Campbell.⁷¹

Jim Campbell also was in the district early in 1902, having obtained the right to use a 400 square mile pastoral lease taken up in 1900, but never used, by a New South Wales man named Kirby.⁷² In one of the strange outcomes of the original system of land allocation, this block was actually inside the boundaries of VRD, in the north-east corner of the station (see map 10). It became Campbell's famous 'Retreat station' and lasted until 1904 when Kirby sold the lease to W.F. Buchanan, owner of Wave Hill (plate 113).⁷³ Buchanan renamed the block 'Killarney', after his home property of that name near Narrabri, in northern New South Wales.⁷⁴ Campbell also seems to have been in partnership with or employed by the Flemings. When Mick Fleming was setting up and managing 'new

⁶⁷ Department of Lands – Land Administration Branch, office copies of pastoral permits - 1902-1922, Northern Territory Archives Service, F670 vol. 1, lease 2213.

⁶⁸ Timber Creek police letter book, 27-7-1903. Photocopy held at the Berrimah police station, Darwin.

⁶⁹ They obtained leases 2212 and 2213 on January 1st 1902, and lease 2214 on January 4th 1902 (information from the Office of the Placenames Committee, Lands Department, Darwin).

⁷⁰ File at the Office of the Placenames Committee, Lands Department, Darwin.

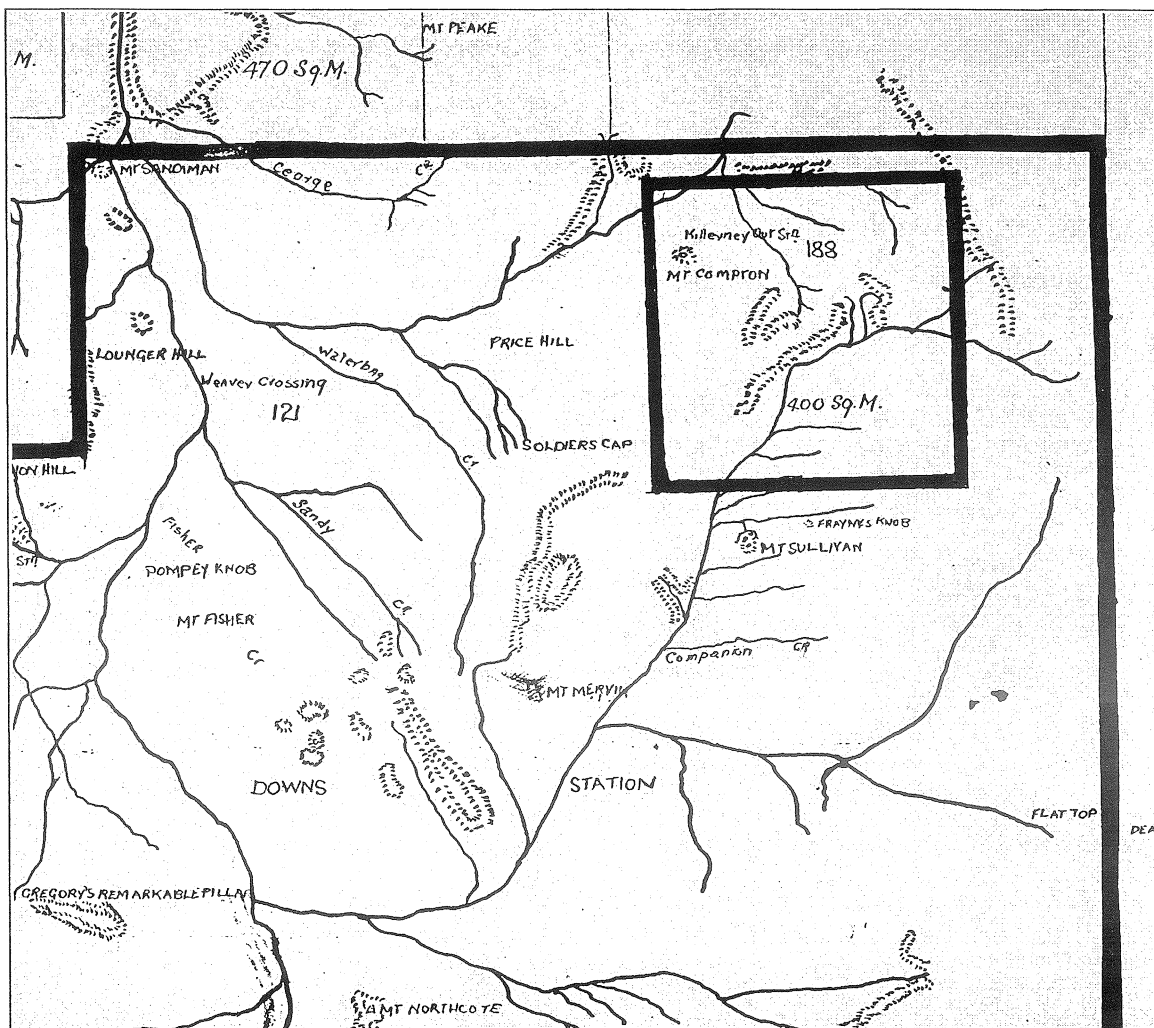
⁷¹ An entry in the Timber Creek police letter book (12-3-1903) and others in the Timber Creek police journal (18-8-1902, 24-8-1902, 3-11-1902, 12-3-1903 and 17-6-1903) make it virtually certain that Campbell, Martin and Fleming were partners on Illawarra station. Mounted Constable E. O'Keefe, cited in 'Government Resident's Report on the Northern Territory, 1905' (*South Australian Parliamentary Papers*, vol. 2, no. 45, 1906, p. 23), states that Fleming and Martin had dissolved their partnership.

⁷² Timber Creek police letter book, 12-3-1903. Photocopy held at the Berrimah police station, Darwin.

⁷³ A history of Killarney lease, compiled by Mr Vern O'Brien, formerly the Director of the Northern Territory Lands Department, Darwin.

⁷⁴ 'Killarney', *The Pastoralists' Review*, 16-5-1910: 272-75.

Delamere' in 1902, he left Jim Campbell in charge of Illawarra,⁷⁵ and later Martin took on this role.⁷⁶



Map 10: the north-east corner of VRD, showing the original Killarney block within the VRD boundary.

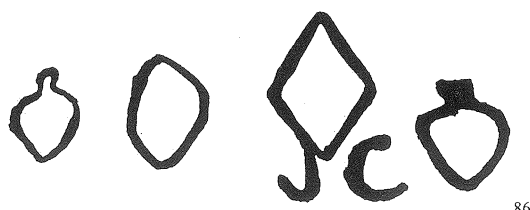
Before he could begin work on Kirby's block Campbell had to have a brand, and the one he devised, a 'brand of genius',⁷⁷ shows that he intended to do more than brand cleanskins. At the Timber Creek police station some time in 1902, he registered a diamond-shaped

⁷⁵ Timber Creek police letter book, 17-6-1903. Photocopy held at the Berrimah police station, Darwin.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ E. Hill, *The Territory*, 1951, p. 324.

brand (◇).⁷⁸ This was to become the basis of one of the most famous and versatile brands in Australian cattle-duffing history – the Diamond 88 (◇88) – and also the lesser known Diamond 40 and Diamond 30.⁷⁹ With these brands Campbell could cover the 62U brand used both on Delamere and Wave Hill,⁸⁰ the O55 on Ord River,⁸¹ the O71 on Auvergne,⁸² and the G10 of Victoria River Downs.⁸³ By contrast, Ben Martin’s brand was M76⁸⁴ and the Flemings’ brand was BMF,⁸⁵ neither of which was suitable for cross-branding other local brands.



86

Within months of Campbell and Martin beginning work in the eastern VRD area they were to face charges of ‘unlawful possession of cattle on Armstrong Creek.’⁸⁷ The case was heard at the Depot by Captain Joe Bradshaw, JP, on November 3rd, the day before race day (plate 114).⁸⁸ Jim Ronan and ‘his man’ Jack Frayne arrived on November 2nd, and Jim Campbell, Ben Martin and one of the Fleming brothers turned up together the next morning.⁸⁹ At 5pm Captain Joe held court and asked the protagonists – Jim Ronan and Ben

⁷⁸ The information about Campbell’s diamond brand is on the inside of the front cover of the Timber Creek police journal that begins on March 31st 1902, but whether it was written that day or some time later is unknown.

⁷⁹ Timber Creek police letter book, 17-6-1903. Photocopy held at the Berrimah police station, Darwin; Timber Creek police journal, 3-7-1909.

⁸⁰ *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 29-5-1903 [advertisement].

⁸¹ The Ord River brand at since at least 1893 was a circle with a dot in the centre followed by ‘55’ (Australian Archives, ACT. A3 NT 14/5459; G. Bolton, *A Survey of the Kimberley Pastoral Industry from 1885 to the Present*, 1953, p. 169; M. Durack, *Sons in the Saddle*, 1985, p. 404.

⁸² Temporary Inspector of Stock, Mounted Constable F. Burt, ‘Report on the Victoria River district, 30-12-1905’, cited in ‘Government Resident’s Report on the Northern Territory, 1905’, *South Australian Parliamentary Papers*, vol. 2, no. 45, 1906, p. 24.

⁸³ Timber Creek police journal, 16-5-1904, 21-5-1904.

⁸⁴ Timber Creek police letter book, 12-3-1903. Photocopy held at the Berrimah police station, Darwin.

⁸⁵ ‘The Northern Territory. Huge Pastoral Holdings Held at 1/- per Square Mile’, *The Leader*, (Melbourne), 29-7-1922. It is probable that this brand incorporated the initials of Ben Martin and Mick Fleming.

⁸⁶ Carving on a boab on the Victoria River above Timber Creek. The diamond with the attached ‘JC’ almost certainly represents ‘Diamond’ Jim Campbell (see plate 171).

⁸⁷ Timber Creek police journal, 25-9-1902.

⁸⁸ Ibid: 3-11-1902.

⁸⁹ Ibid: 2-11-1902, 3-11-1902.

Martin – to ‘come to some agreement and settle the case out of court’, and this they were able to do, though no details of the settlement are known.⁹⁰ This probably annoyed Mounted Constable O’Keefe because ‘previous to this [he] told Ronan he would have to go on with the case,’⁹¹ and it wasn’t long before the police began to pay special attention to the activities Campbell, Martin and the Flemings.

Races were held the next day, only the second ever held at the Depot, and the first with sales of alcohol. This undoubtedly suited Jack Frayne who had been drinking rum for a day or two before he arrived at the Depot, and was drunk the whole time there.⁹² At one stage O’Keefe had to throw him out of the police station kitchen because he kept trying to entice Tracker Wombat to go with him.⁹³ Then Campbell and Martin got into a fight and Campbell had to be restrained.⁹⁴ No doubt a good time was had by all (except O’Keefe), and everyone (except O’Keefe) left the next day.⁹⁵

Some station managers quickly realised that the influx of small men around their boundaries could mean trouble for them. In December 1902, just four months after the permit system was introduced, Aeneas Gunn, then managing Elsey station, wrote to the Government Resident protesting the allocation of pastoral permits and pointing out that:

however honest the intentions of the lessees may be anyone who is acquainted with conditions of pastoral settlement & enterprise in this country is aware that it is almost impossible to profitably work a holding of 400 or 500 square miles on an honest basis unless such country is exceptionally good. A premium is given to illicit branding by the practise when as has been the case in most of the recent allotments, the country leased has been for years frequented by stragglers from the established stations’ herds, the temptation to pick up any unconsidered trifles of clearskin [sic] cattle must be nigh irresistibly strong.⁹⁶

⁹⁰ Ibid: 3-11-1902.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid: 2-11-1902, 4-11-1902.

⁹⁴ Ibid: 4-11-1902.

⁹⁵ Ibid: 5-11-1902.

⁹⁶ A. Gunn, manager of Elsey station, to the Government Resident, 9-12-1902. Government Resident of the Northern Territory (South Australia) – Inwards Correspondence, 1870-1912, Northern Territory Archives, NTRS 829, item 11817.

Gunn argued that if permits could not be refused the big stations should at least be given 'due notice that their cattle must be removed within a given time & that on the expiry of the term the right to the cattle running on the blocks will be sold by Public Auction.'

Other managers held a different view. According to Tom Ronan, his father Jim was of the opinion that the battlers,

were actually the best friends Victoria River Downs had. For every cleanskin they picked up there were fifty cows and calves and young bullocks turned back into the herd. What's more, they kept the bush blacks out. Had it not been for them the G10 (V.R. Downs brand) cattle had nothing to stop them till they hit the Overland Telegraph Line, and the losses from spearing would have been much heavier than they were.⁹⁷

A similar sentiment towards the battlers was voiced by M.P. Durack.⁹⁸ Tom Ronan said that his father thought 'Men like Ben Martin and Mick and Jim Fleming were good types', and 'The country could have done with more of them.'⁹⁹ But Jim Campbell was 'a bloody dingo', and Tom said his father refused to eat with him when on one occasion Campbell rode into his camp.¹⁰⁰ Jim Ronan reserved his anger towards the man (Tom Pearce) who financed the battlers on his eastern boundary and bought their cattle:

The poor devils would work like slaves and live like blackfellows, and when they got a few head of cattle he'd buy them at bedrock prices. He'd then pour [sic] rot-gut grog into them until they were so far in debt that all they could do was go out after another mob.¹⁰¹

In March 1903 Mounted Constable O'Keefe reported that Campbell had formed a camp at Coolibah Creek on Kirby's block (Retreat station). He was of the opinion that Campbell and Martin were working for Tom Pearce, hotelier and general businessman in Katherine,¹⁰² and said that although Campbell had brought no cattle onto the block, in a few

⁹⁷ T. Ronan, *Deep of the Sky*, 1962, pp. 179-80.

⁹⁸ M. Durack, *Sons in the Saddle*, 1985, p. 70.

⁹⁹ T. Ronan, *Deep of the Sky*, 1962, p. 180.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² Timber Creek police letter book, 12-3-1903. Photocopy held at the Berrimah police station, Darwin.

months' time there would be VRD cleanskins there and that Campbell and Martin intended 'to get all the clean skin Animals there is to be got in that country.' He also reported that Campbell and Martin had mustered a number of brumbies there the previous year, and said that either he or Mounted Constable Gordon would go 'to watch the movements and take particular notes of there [sic] work at Coolibah & Illawarra Downs'.¹⁰³

Finally, O'Keefe noted that he had heard that 'Mr. Ronan and Martin has come to an understanding re the clean skins cattle.' On this subject, on June 20th 1903 he wrote to Ronan as follows:

I am informed by good authority that you have offered the clean skin cattle east of Victoria river to Campbell and Martin also that you do not forget to notify Campbell and Martin when the police are in the neighbourhood.

Yet you cry out about not being able to get justice, and have the audacity to write and say you have no relations with them whatever, and you supply Campbell with rations to enable him to prosecute his career amongst the clean skin herd at Vict River Stn.¹⁰⁴

In April and May 1903 Mounted Constable Gordon patrolled from Timber Creek to Illawarra Downs, Retreat station and Delamere station, and interviewed Martin, Campbell and Fleming. His report paints a picture of volatile relationships and changing alliances between these men, and possibly between them and Jim Ronan. Martin told Gordon that he had bought Illawarra Downs, including the brands and stock. He also said that Ronan refused to cooperate in any way with him, but during a joint muster on Battle Creek had said that if Campbell turned up he would give him a number of old cleanskin bulls they had in hand. Later Campbell told Gordon that Ronan had helped him repair his dray and lent him some rations to keep him going until his own rations arrived. Gordon then saw Mick Fleming who was then managing Delamere, and Fleming told him that the previous year he had placed Campbell in charge of Illawarra, but that Ronan had 'bluffed him off all the good waters' and for that reason he then placed Ben Martin in charge.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ Timber Creek police letter book, 12-3-1903. Photocopy held at the Berrimah police station, Darwin. Many of the pages in this photocopy have the bottom line or two missing and in this case the signature is missing. However, by comparison with the handwriting on pages where O'Keefe's signature is present, it is clear that this report was written by O'Keefe.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid: 20-6-1903.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid: 17-6-1903.

It is difficult to reconcile these police reports with what Tom Ronan had to say about his father's relationship with Campbell, Martin and the Flemings. It may be that Jim Ronan did make deals with the cattle duffers, and was supportive of Jim Campbell, but painted himself in a good light for his son's benefit. Or it may be that the cattle duffers lied to the police in order to make trouble for Ronan, and perhaps for one or more of their fellow battlers.

Fleming also told Gordon that he 'had purchased the clean skin cattle running on the neighbourhood of Illawarra Station', presumably meaning those running on Crown Land east of Illawarra, rather than those on VRD. This surprised O'Keefe because he had not heard that the government had sold the rights to any cleanskin cattle recently. However, he thought Fleming had bought the rights to cleanskin cattle on Armstrong Creek in 1898 and had not been able to muster them at the time because of the very bad season.¹⁰⁶

In July 1903 O'Keefe reported that Martin intended to take some cattle in 'to the line' for the butchers. He pointed out that 'Campbell Fleming & Martin are very little over twelve months at Illawarra station and if Martin can muster aged cattle fit for Butchers meat he must undoubtedly get them unlawfully.'¹⁰⁷ Whether Martin did take cattle in to the line is unknown, but there is no record of any action being taken against him by the police.

Over the next three years the police kept an eye on the three men. In June 1903 there was police correspondence that Campbell and Martin had been caught 'branding cleanskins 18 months old',¹⁰⁸ but no legal action seems to have been taken, so it may have been a reference to the 1902 case. The following August Fleming and Martin were fined £1 each and fifteen shillings costs for possessing unregistered dogs (plate 115),¹⁰⁹ and at various times they checked Campbell's horses to see if any were stolen.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁶ Ibid: 27-6-1903.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid: 27-7-1903.

¹⁰⁸ Timber Creek police journal, 8-6-1903.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid: 29-8-1903.

¹¹⁰ Ibid: 22-5-1904, 1-8-1904, 10-10-1904.

During 1905, Campbell left his partnership with the Flemings and shifted his cattle to a block north of Illawarra, which he called Mayvale.¹¹¹ He also obtained pastoral permit 121 for a block between the western end of Delamere and the south-east corner of Bradshaw¹¹² (map 11). This didn't please Fred Bradshaw who in October asked the police to check on Campbell's activities in the area.¹¹³ Ben Martin also dissolved his partnership with the Flemings in 1905 and in September 1905 removed his share of the cattle, 950 head, to Scott Creek, between Willeroo and Katherine.¹¹⁴ In 1909 the police ordered him and a partner, 'notorious duffers', to shift from this area.¹¹⁵ Apparently he had been squatting on Crown Land for four years and had never bothered to obtain a pastoral permit.

Martin got out of the Victoria River district in good time. In 1906 L.A. Wells began the first official survey of the Victoria River district and this quickly led to substantial adjustments to the boundaries of some stations. The *Northern Territory Times* received a report on the early results of Wells' survey, with sarcastic comments on some of the settlers:

The readjustment of their boundaries – or what they have hitherto looked upon as their boundaries – has come at a great and a not too pleasant surprise to a few. It is found, for instance, that the Victoria River Downs boundary runs 25 miles further to the southward and 10 miles further to the eastward than was supposed by some of the settlers.¹¹⁶

This meant that for more than twenty years Wave Hill had been using something in the order of 2,500 square miles of prime Mitchell grass downs country that really belonged to VRD! Wells later claimed that because of this change 'one station' (undoubtedly VRD)

¹¹¹ Pastoral permit 42, taken up on 21-2-1905.

¹¹² Pastoral permit 121, taken up on 21-2-1905.

¹¹³ Timber Creek police journal, 27-10-1905.

¹¹⁴ Temporary Inspector of Stock, Mounted Constable F. Burt, 'Report on the Victoria River district, 30-12-1905', cited in 'Government Resident's Report on the Northern Territory, 1905', *South Australian Parliamentary Papers*, vol. 2, no. 45, 1906, p. 23.

¹¹⁵ Timber Creek police journal, 3-7-1909.

¹¹⁶ 'The Victoria River Survey', *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 23-3-1906.

'increased its carrying capacity by 20,000 head.'¹¹⁷ This survey was bad luck for Wave Hill, but for the Fleming brothers and Jim Campbell it was a disaster. The eastern boundary of VRD was found to be ten miles further east and the same correspondent to the *Times* reported that:

the owner of the adjoining Illawarra Downs Station now discovers that all his principal sources of water supply are located on the rival territory [VRD]. As a consequence of this unpleasant discovery I hear that Mr. M. Fleming is now removing the whole of his herd to country on the Daly River. I fear that in that case he will not have so good a time as he has had on the Illawarra Downs country; the country on the Daly is certainly not so good for cattle, and they will not thrive or breed so quickly there as on the rich pastoral lands around the Victoria Downs. I hear that Mr. Campbell is also beating a retreat from Maryvale [sic]. He is said to be removing his cattle on to Bradshaw's (Fred) Creek, situated between the Daly River and the head of the Fitzmaurice River.¹¹⁸

The Flemings were able to acquire pastoral permits for land in the Daly River country. Mick's block formed the basis of the future Douglas River station and Jim's block became Ooloo station, and the brothers had no further connection with the Victoria River district.¹¹⁹ Campbell was able to hang on, the last of the cattle duffers in the eastern part of the district. He retained the Mayvale block but may have shifted his base to his pastoral permit (PP121) on Sullivans Creek.¹²⁰

In 1907 Paddy Cahill, then the manager of Delamere, made general complaints about Campbell 'stealing calves and altering brands and earmarks',¹²¹ and there were suspicions that some stolen horses were at Campbell's camp,¹²² but no specific evidence could be found and no charges could be laid. Then, in 1909, all hell broke loose.

¹¹⁷ W. Steele and C. Steele, *To the Great Gulf: The Surveys and Explorations of L.A. Wells*, Lynton Publications, Adelaide, 1978, p. 129.

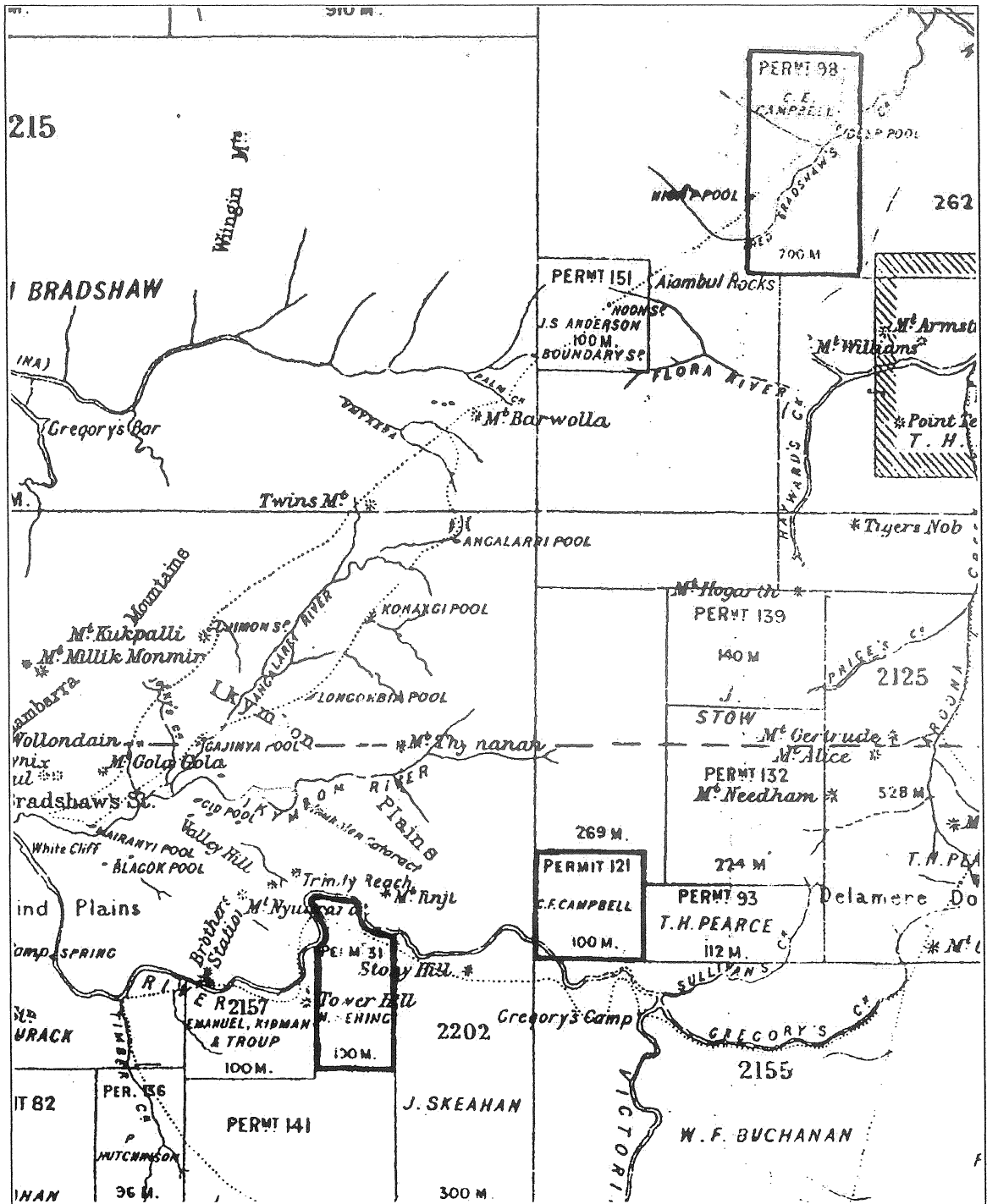
¹¹⁸ 'The Victoria River survey', *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 23-3-1906.

¹¹⁹ Files at the Office of the Placenames Committee, Darwin.

¹²⁰ Department of Lands – Land Administration Branch, Northern Territory Archives Service, office copies of pastoral permits – 1902-1922, NTRS, F199, Box 3, PP 121/1907; the Timber Creek police journal of 7-9-1907 states that Campbell was actually on country held by Willeroo (permit 93). This appears to be wrong, but if it was correct it would once gain highlight how close the relationship was between Pearce and the battlers.

¹²¹ Ibid: 7-9-1907.

¹²² Ibid: 20-5-1908, 14-6-1908.



Map 11: Pastoral permits in the Bradshaw station area, c1906.

On or shortly before April 23rd Dick Townshend, the VRD manager, and a stockman named Harry Bening,

found James Campbell @ Muir, of Mah Vale, tailing 400 and odd mixed cattle on Dry River on the V.R. Downs station. The cattle had recently been branded $\diamond 40$ and earmarked \triangleleft . The brands were deeply and widely burnt and no doubt covered the G10 which is the old V. R. Downs brand. The earmark would cut out \subset , the V.R. Downs earmark.¹²³

This encounter was the end of 'Diamond Jim' in the Victoria River country, but the beginning of one of the great cattle duffing stories of the Northern Territory. Townsend immediately took possession of the cattle and as he began to shift them Campbell called out, 'This would have been another Mount Cornish if I had got away with them'.¹²⁴ This was, of course, a reference to the famous cattle 'lift' by Harry 'Captain Starlight' Redford and his gang who stole about 1000 head of cattle from Bowen Downs in western Queensland in 1870, and drove them 1500 kilometres down Coopers Creek and through to South Australia.¹²⁵ For much of the way their route was through unsettled and little-known desert country where only nine years earlier Burke and Wills had perished. Redford eventually was arrested and charged with the theft of a distinctive white bull, and tried at Roma, but despite overwhelming evidence he was acquitted. As he left the court many people shook his hand and because of his tremendous feat of daring and bushcraft he was hailed a hero by many bushmen throughout the outback.¹²⁶

Of the 428 cattle taken from Campbell, twenty-three bore the brands of Delamere, Ord River and Illawarra, or were old diamond 88s. The remaining 405 were recently branded $\diamond 88$ or $\diamond 40$. In a remarkable echo of the Redford story, among the 405 was a white bull with a $\diamond 40$ brand, and also a VRD 'G' which had been overlooked. This bull was killed and the brand and earmark preserved as damning evidence against Campbell.

¹²³ Ibid: 25-4-1909, 3-7-1909.

¹²⁴ Ibid: 3-7-1909.

¹²⁵ P. McCarthy, *The Man who was Starlight*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1987, pp. 43-44.

¹²⁶ Ibid: 86-92.

In a strange twist to the story, Tom Pearce, who had previously quietly supported (and exploited) Campbell and the other cattle duffers in their unlawful activities, was called upon in his capacity as Justice of the Peace to sign warrants for the arrest of Campbell and his accomplices.¹²⁷ We can only guess, but it seems quite likely that as he fled the region Campbell would have let Pearce know he was in trouble, and to avoid any embarrassing connection being revealed, Pearce would have helped him on his way. An intensive and sustained manhunt for Campbell and his known associates (Aboriginal and white) was carried out in the district, but no trace could be found and the police were convinced that 'all save Mr Townshend and the M.C. were actively working in his [Campbell's] interest.'¹²⁸ The chances are that Campbell was out of the district before the police were even notified. Within three days of being caught with the cattle he had arranged for a friend, Arthur Love, to sell his permit and stock. A drover named George Stevens who was then in the Willeroo area bought it, and installed Love as acting manager.¹²⁹ Campbell then 'went into smoke' beyond the frontier in Arnhem Land.¹³⁰

In Arnhem Land Campbell settled in to a life of trepanging,¹³¹ buffalo hunting and prospecting.¹³² He had a friend or partner with a lugger who would take his trepang and buffalo hides to Darwin and sell them, and bring rations and other goods out to him. Eventually the police found out where Campbell was and made several attempts to arrest him, but the 'bush telegraph' kept him informed of police movements. If the police came overland Campbell would shift out to an offshore island, and if they came by sea he would ride his horses inland for a while.¹³³

¹²⁷ Timber Creek police journal, 11-5-1909.

¹²⁸ Ibid: 3-7-1909.

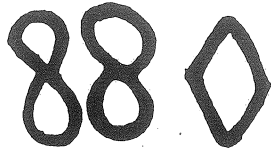
¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ E. Mason, *An Untamed Territory: The Northern Territory of Australia*, Macmillan and Co. Limited, London, 1915, p. 162; D. Lewis (ed.), *Patrolling the 'Big Up'*, 1998, p. 41.

¹³¹ Trepang or *bêche-de-mer* is a sea slug, used in Chinese cuisine. D.J. Mulvaney and J. Kamminga, *Prehistory of Australia*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1999, pp. 412-13.

¹³² D. Lewis (ed.), *Patrolling the 'Big Up'*, 1998, p. 41.

¹³³ Ibid: 41.



134

He remained out of harms' way in the bush until 1913 when the charges against him were dropped, and he was finally free to make a trip to Darwin.¹³⁵ In yet another parallel with the Redford story, according to an oral tradition he was greeted there as a hero, and carried shoulder-high down Smith Street and into the Victoria Hotel.¹³⁶ Campbell returned to Arnhem Land shortly afterwards, and within a few months he was speared and killed while trepaning (115).¹³⁷ His murder caused the usual outrage amongst his friends and supporters, who claimed he was 'one of the best', but one man echoed Constable Johns' assessment when he remarked, 'My friend Campbell, he very rough on blacks'.¹³⁸

At the same time that the Flemings, Martin and Campbell were establishing themselves on the eastern side of the district, another group of battlers was doing the same further to the west. These men were Billy Patterson and Jack Beasley, Jack Frayne, Jimmy Wickham, Jack Newton, W.J.J. Ward, and others who were their partners for varying lengths of time (map 9).

Billy Patterson and Jack Beasley were the first to arrive. In June 1903 they obtained pastoral permit 10 for an area extending north from Stirling Creek. Their block abutted the eastern boundary of Ord River and the north-west boundary of Wave Hill. They built a small hut and a stockyard on the south bank of Stirling Creek, and named their block 'Mount Stirling' (plate 116).¹³⁹ At the time they obtained their permit, Beasley was

¹³⁴ Rock painting of Jim Campbell's brand in the prime buffalo hunting country around Mt. Borrodaile, west Arnhem Land.

¹³⁵ 'Murder by Blacks', *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 10-7-1913.

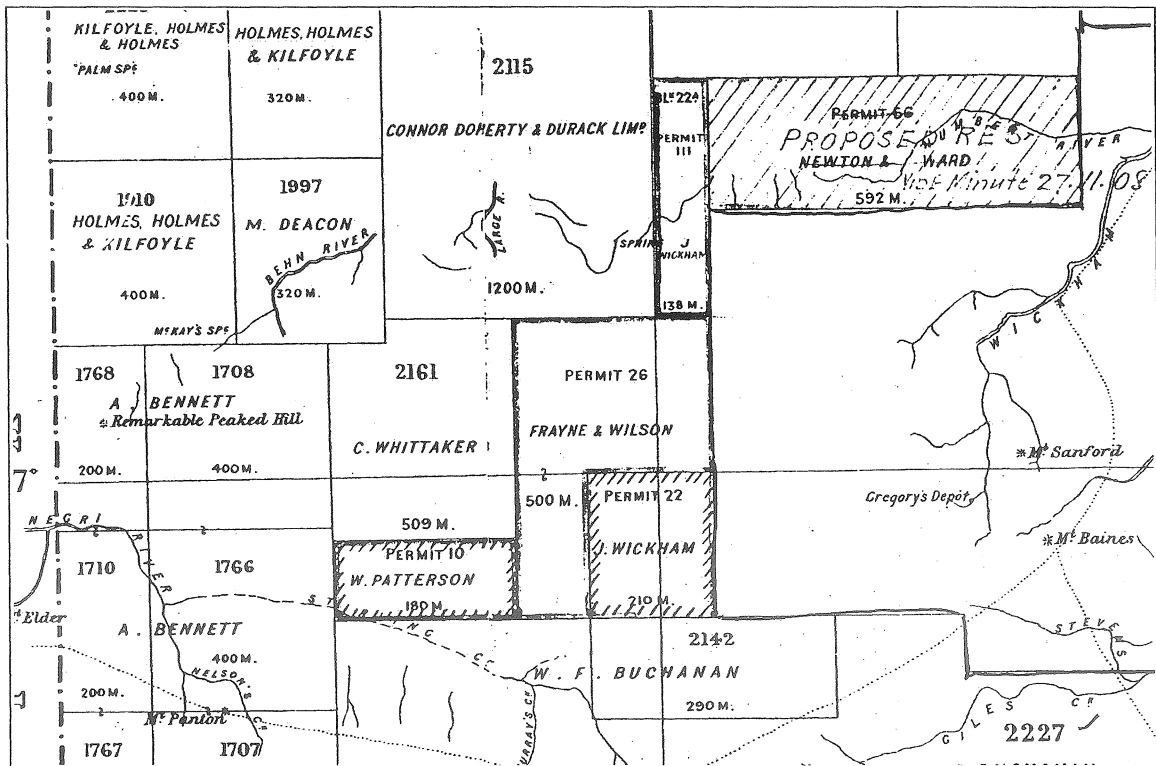
¹³⁶ Personal communication, Reg Wilson, who was told the story by John Mott, a Territory surveyor in the period 1913-15.

¹³⁷ 'Murder by Blacks', *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 10-7-1913.

¹³⁸ E. Mason, *An Untamed Territory: The Northern Territory of Australia*, Macmillan and Co. Limited, London, 1915, p. 162.

¹³⁹ D. Lewis, *In Western Wilds: A Survey of Historic Sites in the Western Victoria River District*, Report prepared for the Australian National Trust (N.T.), Darwin, 1993, Vol. 1, pp. 135-36 and vol. 2, pp. 108-09.

working as head stockman on the neighbouring Ord River station, and he immediately commenced 'doing all he could to stock that country up for the partnership' by branding as many Ord River cleanskins as he could with the Mt Stirling brand.¹⁴⁰



Map 12: The cattle duffing blocks of Beasley and Patterson, Wickham, Frayne and Wilson, and Newton and Ward, on the western side of the Victoria River district.

Jack Frayne was next. When he was sent to establish Montejinni outstation on VRD, ostensibly to put a stop to cattle killing by bush blacks, he no doubt was also told to keep an eye on the local battlers. Apparently he liked what he saw. Not one to miss an opportunity himself, by August 1903 he had left VRD¹⁴¹ and in September he moved onto pastoral permit 26, on the watershed between Stirling Creek, the West Baines River and Humbert River.¹⁴² This location gave Frayne access to Auvergne in the north, VRD to east, Wave Hill to the south and Ord River to the west (see map 12). Frayne built a hut on the

¹⁴⁰ Doug Moore's Memoirs, nd. Battye Library. Acc 3829A MN 1237.

¹⁴¹ Timber Creek police journal, 29-8-1903.

¹⁴² Pastoral permit 26. Australian Archives, ACT. CRS A1640, Item 1903/553.

banks of Kunja Rockhole, on Kunja Creek, and applied this name to his station.¹⁴³ He had a 'sleeping partner', drover Mat Wilson who was later to be the owner of the Depot Store for many years, but who does not appear to have ever lived at Kunja.¹⁴⁴

After Frayne came Jimmy Wickham who in July 1904 obtained pastoral permit 22 for a block on Uindait Creek, on the north side of the Stirling and east of Beasley and Patterson's permit 10.¹⁴⁵ Later he acquired pastoral permit 111, a long and very narrow strip of country along the western end of the Humbert River block (permit 56; see map 12).¹⁴⁶ He called his place Uindait station¹⁴⁷ and built a substantial homestead of local basalt rocks, bush timber and corrugated iron¹⁴⁸ – 'a little fortress of stone and ant-bed' as described by Ernestine Hill¹⁴⁹ – as well as two large basalt-walled yards and other stone structures (see plate 67).¹⁵⁰ Unlike the other battlers, Wickham was married and had his wife Olive and their children at Unidait (plate 118).¹⁵¹

¹⁴³ In 1989 I was taken to the site of Kunja homestead by Mr Jimmy Manngayarri, senior Malngin-Bilinara elder, who told me the name of the rockhole. The name 'Kunja station' appears on various early maps.

¹⁴⁴ Wilson and Frayne's names appear together on maps which show pastoral permit 26.

¹⁴⁵ Temporary Inspector of Stock, Mounted Constable E. O'Keefe, cited 'Government Resident's Report on the Northern Territory, 1904', *South Australian Parliamentary Papers*, vol. 2, no. 45, 1905, p. 27; Department of Lands – Land Administration Branch, Northern Territory Archives Service, office copies of pastoral permits – 1902-1922, NTRS, F199, PP22/1910.

¹⁴⁶ Department of Lands – Land Administration Branch, Northern Territory Archives Service, office copies of pastoral permits – 1902-1922, NTRS, F199 PP111/1915. Wickham held this block from June 10th 1906 to June 10th 1912.

¹⁴⁷ There are various spellings of this name, for example, 'Uyndoyte' (agreement signed by James Wickham, 14-6-1910, Battye Library, Acc 2184A/1, MN485, letterbook, 1901-1912. Inward and outward correspondence relating to Connor, Doherty & Durack); 'Vandyke' (Mounted Constable Dempsey to Sub-Inspector N. Waters, 13-4-1908. Re Newton for unlawfully branding; and Miscellaneous. Australian Archives, ACT, CRS A1640, Item 1906/223; 'Ewandyte' (Ernestine Hill, 1951: 339); 'Nyerdoyle' (Mary Durack, 1985: 331); 'Wyandotte' and 'Mindyt' (L. A. Wells to Mr Justice Herbert, Government Resident, Darwin, 8-11-1907. Department of Territories. Correspondence Dockets N.T. Series: (Aborigines Reserve – Ord River District, N.T. – re proposal). Australian Archives, ACT, CRS A1640, Item 1906/223.

¹⁴⁸ There is no corrugated iron at the site today, but Jimmy Manngayarri, who as a child visited the homestead with his parents not long after the building was abandoned, remembered the upper part of the walls and the roof being clad with corrugated iron.

¹⁴⁹ E. Hill, *The Territory*, 1951, p. 339.

¹⁵⁰ See D. Lewis, *In Western Wilds*, 1993, Vol. 1: 115-18 and Vol. 2: 93-98.

¹⁵¹ E. Hill. *The Territory*, 1951, p. 399; In a letter written by M.P. Durack to Jimmy Wickham on 24-7-1910, he sends his regards to 'Mrs Wickham and child' (Battye Library, Acc 2184A/1, MN485, letterbook, 1901-1912. Inward and outward correspondence relating to Connor, Doherty & Durack).

Finally came 'Colorado' Jack Newton and James Kearney who in May 1905 took up pastoral permit 56, on the Humbert River immediately west of Kunja.¹⁵² In what was almost certainly a great joke on their part, on their pastoral permits both men described themselves as 'Halls Creek sheep farmers'.¹⁵³ In 1906 Kearney withdrew from his partnership with Newton and disappeared from the historical record, and his place was taken by W.J.J. 'Brigalow Bill' Ward, another self-proclaimed sheep farmer from Halls Creek.¹⁵⁴ On the south bank of the Humbert River one or more of these men built a stockyard, and a hut with a bush timber frame clad with cane grass, and roofed with thatch.

Apparently Colorado and Brigalow couldn't get along because by October 1906, Ward wanted to dissolve his partnership with Newton and asked the Lands Department if he could pay half the rent for 'the portion next to the Victoria Station Boundary'¹⁵⁵ – the only part that wasn't spinifex-covered sandstone ranges! In May 1907 Newton tried to counteract Ward's move by sending in money for the entire rent and asking for the block to be transferred solely to his name.¹⁵⁶ I don't know what the result was of their competing claims, but eventually only Brigalow Bill was living on the block.

Once the battlers obtained their permits, all was well for a while. Huts, homesteads and yards were built, and no doubt the men were quietly building up their herds, but in 1907 Surveyor Wells came along to 'readjust' all their boundaries, or should I say, to place their boundaries in their proper positions. Wells' survey showed that the boundaries of the various permits were substantially further north and east than previously believed, and as a result the homesteads built by Beasley and Patterson, Wickham, and Frayne were not on

¹⁵² Department of Lands – Land Administration Branch, Northern Territory Archives Service, office copies of pastoral permits – 1902-1922, NTRS, F199 PP 56/1908; Australian Archives, ACT. A1640/1, item 06/102. These records indicate the Humbert River block was taken up in 1905, but other records suggest that it occurred in 1903. I have not yet been able to determine the facts of the matter (see the 'Government Resident's Report on the Northern Territory, 1903', *South Australian Parliamentary Papers*, vol. 2, no. 45, 1904, p. 8).

¹⁵³ Department of Lands – Land Administration Branch, Northern Territory Archives Service, office copies of pastoral permits – 1902-1922, NTRS, F199, Box 2, PP 56/1908; Australian Archives, ACT A1640/1 Item 1906/102.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ W.J.J. Ward to Lands Department, 28-10-1906. Australian Archives, ACT. A1640/1, item 1906/102.

¹⁵⁶ J. Newton to Lands Department, 1-5-1907. Australian Archives, ACT. A1640/1, item 06/102.

their own land. As Surveyor Wells explained to the Government Resident in November 1907,

The Lessees of No 10 were settled on lease No 2227 [Wave Hill's] and lessees of No 22 were on No 10 [Beasley and Patterson's]... Permit 10 is over 3 miles North of Stirling Creek and has but one creek, Wyandotte? ("Mindyt") of any importance which trends South through the block from its North boundary where a permanent Spring exists.

Permit No 22 [Wickham's] is a dry block except the East portion which is very rough and forms the source of the Wickham River. This block has never even been occupied by the Lessees.¹⁵⁷

It is not clear if Beasley and Patterson moved at all, and it may be that they stayed squatting on south bank of Stirling Creek, on Wave Hill country. Jack Frayne built a new homestead further north at Coomanderoo Spring,¹⁵⁸ on the southern edge of the great Pumuntu sandstone. In the early 1900s Pumuntu was a major refuge area for bush Aborigines (see Chapter 4), and it appears that his move brought Frayne into conflict with them. Billy Miller, who worked for Frayne at 'Koonju', was 'warned to take no chances whatever with the blacks, for they were always ready to show a very practical belligerence towards the occupation of their country'. In spite of this warning Billy was attacked, and very nearly lost his life,¹⁵⁹ Jimmy Manngayarri told me that bush people had been shot near Coomanderoo, in one instance after they had speared a number of milking cows near the homestead.¹⁶⁰

The battler most seriously affected was Jimmy Wickham who had inadvertently built his homestead on Beasley and Patterson's block. I have no hard evidence that he abandoned the site, but this is likely because in the middle of where pastoral permit 22 was shown to be, on the headwaters of the Wickham River, there is the remains of a hut made from

¹⁵⁷ L. A. Wells to Mr Justice Herbert, Government Resident, Darwin, 8-11-1907. Department of Territories. Correspondence Dockets N.T. Series: [Aborigines Reserve – Ord River District, N.T. – re proposal]. Australian Archives, ACT. CRS A1640, Item 1906/223.

¹⁵⁸ A. White, Report of the Sub-Inspector of Stock, Victoria River District, cited in the 'Northern Territory. Report of the Government Resident for the Year 1910', *South Australian Parliamentary Papers*, vol. 3, no. 66, 1911, p. 25; this name is more accurately rendered 'Kumanturu'.

¹⁵⁹ W. Linklater and L. Tapp, *Gather No Moss*, Hesperian Press, Perth, 1997, p. 122 (originally published by The Macmillan Company, 1968).

¹⁶⁰ Interview with Jimmy Manngayarri, recorded at Midnight homestead, 1989.

basalt rocks and bush timber in a similar manner to the house at Uindait. Jimmy Manggayarri said that this site was named 'Midnight' and this name appears in a few historical documents.¹⁶¹

The problems caused by this 'readjustment' of their boundaries was soon overtaken by a more serious threat. In April 1907 Mounted Constable Dempsey began a seven week patrol through the western district, among other things, to report on the suitability of various areas for an Aboriginal reserve.¹⁶² He recommended sections of Ord River station along the Negri River and the north side of Stirling Creek, and all of pastoral permits 10 and 22.¹⁶³ Dempsey's report was forwarded to Surveyor Wells who pointed out that Dempsey had made his suggestions in ignorance of the fact that the supposed boundaries of the blocks had been corrected, and as a result did not have the abundant water and traditional foods that Dempsey believed. Wells instead suggested that permit 56 (Humbert River station) be declared an Aboriginal reserve.¹⁶⁴ Later he elaborated on his recommendation:

Permit 56 has a few head of cattle, running on the Eastern end. It is of little value for depasturing, owing to its roughness, and is held by questionable characters, who are not likely to become good Crown tenants.

The latter block, having abundance of fish and game, I thought would be most suitable for a reserve.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶¹ I suspect that 'Midnight' is a corruption of 'Uindait', as implied in Surveyor Wells' letter cited above in endnote 157. The name 'Midnight' appears only after Wickham had sold his permits, in reference to a temporary police camp established there (Mounted Constable William Johns to Inspector N. Waters, 8-1-1912, Australian Archives, ACT, A3/1 N.T. 14/6947; N. Waters, Police Inspector's Office, Darwin, 6th February, 1912, 'Northern Territory. Report of the Acting Administrator for the Year 1911', *Commonwealth Parliamentary Papers*, 1912, vol. 3, no. 54, p. 29.

¹⁶² Timber Creek police journal, 11-6-1907.

¹⁶³ Mounted Constable Dempsey to N. Waters, Sub-Inspector of Police, Darwin, 13-6-1907. Re Aboriginal Reserve, vide G.R.O. 14777/06 attached. Australian Archives, ACT CRS A1640, Item 1906/223.

¹⁶⁴ Surveyor L.A. Wells to Mr Justice Herbert, Government Resident, Darwin, 8-11-1907. CA60 Department of Territories. Correspondence Dockets N.T. Series [Aborigines Reserve – Ord River District, N.T. – re proposal] 1906-1910. Australian Archives, ACT, CRS A1640, Item 1906/223.

¹⁶⁵ L.A Wells to Surveyor General's Office, Adelaide, 25-1-1908. Australian Archives, ACT CRS A1640, Item 1906/223.

News of the plan to establish an Aboriginal reserve reached the battlers around the time that Mounted Constable Dempsey was on patrol in their district. Understandably, they were outraged, and Dempsey later reported that,

This they all bitterly resent and put it that it is because they are “small settlers” that they are being driven off their country. To a man the workers of this district are in sympathy with them. All fail to recognize that these particular “small settlers” are “large thieves” It would appear that cattle raising blunts the moral principles and makes those working at it oblivious to the law of meum and tuum.¹⁶⁶

Dempsey added that Wickham had gone to Adelaide to try to get the resumption notice revoked, and Beasley had been to Wyndham to seek ‘the aid of one Skinner there to prepare a long indictment against the squatters.’ Beasley’s ‘long indictment’ was in fact rather short:

please do utmost to prevent forfeiture lease represent matter as iniquitous harassment of small settler who Govt pretend desire no Aboriginal reserve required there even so why take small mans whole country after expensive improvements leaving untouched surrounding big stations Victoria Wave Hill Ord River proceedings appear monstrous please do best prevent such injustice.¹⁶⁷

Beasley’s partner, Patterson,¹⁶⁸ told Dempsey that all the permit holders were planning to camp on the lease of Charlie Whittaker, north of the Mt Stirling block, and continue running their cattle on their old blocks, but Dempsey convinced him that this plan would not work. Dempsey then summed up the situation as follows:

From such a nest as that on the Stirling may come a Kenif.¹⁶⁹ It is politic that such people be dealt with promptly. I cannot but feel that the resumption was an excellent

¹⁶⁶ Mounted Constable Dempsey to Sub-Inspector N. Waters, 13-4-1908. Re Newton for unlawfully branding: and Miscellaneous, 13-4-1908. Australian Archives, ACT. CRS A1640, Item 1906/223.

¹⁶⁷ W. Skinner to Symes, Solicitor, Darwin, 6-2-1908. Australian Archives, ACT. CRS A1640, Item 1906/223.

¹⁶⁸ Beasley had two partners named Patterson. The first was Billy Patterson who died at Mt Stirling on 24-2-1907 (Timber Creek police journal, 29-6-1907). Another Patterson, possibly Billy’s brother, is mentioned in records after that date (e.g. Timber Creek police journal, 25-7-1908; Mounted Constable Dempsey to Sub-Inspector N. Waters, Darwin, 13-4-1908. Re Newton for unlawfully branding: and Miscellaneous. Australian Archives, ACT. CRS A1640, Item 1906/223).

¹⁶⁹ The Kenniff brothers were stock thieves—come—bushrangers active in central Queensland in the late 1800s. In March 1902, they shot two police in the bush and burnt their bodies, and were subsequently declared outlaws. In June 1902 they were captured, tried and convicted. Paddy Kenniff was hanged in January

move and I would respectfully request you, Sir, to use your influence to see that it is not permitted to these people to sit down any longer on the country in question than is necessary in fairness to remove their stock.¹⁷⁰

Brigalow Bill Ward was the most strident in protesting the proposed resumptions. In April 1908 he wrote to the Lands Department that,

I have been informed that my country held by Newton & Ward Humbert River Block 53 has been canceled [sic] for Aboriginal reserve I should like to know the reason why after going to a lot of trouble of branding [sic] cattle from the Kimberley District in to the territory [sic] and stocking it and been put to a lot of trouble [sic] time & money in settling the country to be Hunted of [sic] they were plenty of country before I came and are plenty now only fit for Black reserve without chising [sic] one of the only few that is there now it is a nice way of settling people on the land. I am put to a great deal loss I will have to give my cattle away.¹⁷¹

Ward went on to allege that the big stations were holding land that was not stocked and asked that he be allowed to keep the lower end of his country, or be given one of the unstocked blocks on VRD. He had good cause to be worried. Unbeknown to him his block had already been singled out as the most suitable for an Aboriginal reserve, and on top of that he had the bad luck to be linked to a man who was the subject of a police manhunt – Colorado Jack Newton.

During a joint muster on the boundary between Ord River station and ‘Whittaker’s place’ in September 1907, the Ord River stockmen found a bullock and a cow, both branded N93 on top of O55 – in other words, with Colorado Jack’s brand on top of the Ord River brand. The earmarks had also been changed. The Timber Creek police were notified and began proceedings against Colorado.¹⁷² After sending Mounted Constable Artaud to Willeroo to

1903. James Kenniff was also sentenced to hang but this was later commuted to life in prison and he eventually did sixteen years with hard labour. The Kenniff outbreak was only three years before Dempsey wrote his report on the battlers on Stirling Creek, and the Kenniff episode clearly was still fresh in his mind (R. Good, *Ketching the Kenniffs: the origins and exploits of the Kenniff brothers – Patrick and James*, Booringah Shire Council & Booringah Action Group, Mitchell Queensland, 1996, pp. 121-128, 163-167, 190-196).

¹⁷⁰ Mounted Constable Dempsey to Sub-Inspector N. Waters, 13-4-1908. Re Newton for unlawfully branding: and Miscellaneous. Australian Archives, ACT. CRS A1640, Item 1906/223.

¹⁷¹ W.J.J. Ward to Surveyor General’s Department, 15-4-1908. Australian Archives, ACT CRS A1640, Item 1906/223.

¹⁷² Timber Creek police journal, 17-10-1907.

get Tom Pearce, J.P., to sign summonses for Newton and various witnesses,¹⁷³ Mounted Constable Dempsey then patrolled to the Stirling Creek country to serve these summonses.¹⁷⁴ However, the ‘bush telegraph’ had been at work – Colorado knew the police were onto him and the police later learnt that shortly after they had been at Willeroo Colorado turned up there, asking if a summons had been issued against him.¹⁷⁵

At Campbell Springs, an outstation of Wave Hill located close to the various battler’s blocks (plate 119), Dempsey requested that the manager call a muster of the Campbell Springs country in the hope that Colorado would attend, and also that they might find cross-branded cattle. Colorado never appeared and nothing incriminating was found, so Dempsey had to return to Timber Creek empty-handed.¹⁷⁶ He came away feeling that ‘the nest of reputed thieves on the Stirling should be broken up’ and that Newton,

must be driven from the district. He has no country in it and palpably is a thief. Only last year he put up a yard on Farquaharson’s [sic] country and in it a “crush”. This though his few head of cattle could have but calves that would not need “crushing”. He was on the country too, without permission. ... Newton may have left the country – he is in deadly fear of arrest – and if so the country will be rid of a nuisance.¹⁷⁷

The police never did catch up with Newton. In July 1908 they heard that he had sold his cattle to Beasley and Patterson and gone to the Kimberley, and furthermore, the chief witness against Newton was no longer in the Territory.¹⁷⁸ A month or so later Newton applied to have his brand transferred to Jack Beasley, and it was believed that Newton and Ward wanted to transfer their permit.¹⁷⁹ Referring to Newton and Ward, Mounted Constable Dempsey declared,

¹⁷³ Ibid: 21-10-1907.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid: 13-12-1903.

¹⁷⁵ Mounted Constable Dempsey to Sub-Inspector N. Waters, Darwin, 13-4-1908. Re Newton for unlawfully branding: and Miscellaneous. Australian Archives, ACT CRS A1640, Item 1906/223.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Timber Creek police journal, 25-7-1908.

¹⁷⁹ Sub-Inspector N. Waters to the Government Resident, 7-9-1908. CA60 Department of Territories. Correspondence Dockets N.T. Series: [Aborigines Reserve – Ord River District, N.T. – re proposal] 1906-1910. Australian Archives, ACT, A1640/1 Item 1906/223.

Both men are, as a matter of common notoriety, as are all the small settlers, cattle duffers if there be a chance to get clean skins from their neighbours, [sic] and they and their fellows with very few exceptions I regret to report, do not think that "Thou shalt not steal" applies to clean skin cattle.¹⁸⁰

Meanwhile, the government was moving inexorably towards declaring Newton and Ward's Humbert River block an Aboriginal reserve. In May 1908 the Government Resident expressed the opinion that a reserve should be declared 'before the country becomes more settled', and he added that 'If Newton is half as bad a character as M.C. Dempsey gives him, (and I have no reason to doubt the constables honesty of intention) he should be deprived of his Permit even were it not wanted for the purpose of a reserve.'¹⁸¹ The Humbert River permit expired March 28th 1909 and was not renewed.¹⁸²

As well as being threatened with losing his pastoral permit, Brigalow Bill was being threatened by Aborigines. In March 1908 he wrote to the Lands Department asking once again to be given a separate permit for the lower half of the Humbert block, and also complaining that 'after sivelizing [sic] the country and getting half my stock killed with Blacks' he might be forced off the place.¹⁸³ Three months later he wrote an urgent message to the Timber Creek police demanding 'your instant protection here at once the Blacks Killing Cattle & throwing spears at me. They are now hostile and defiant they forbid me to go out again I will expect you here in the course of a week.'¹⁸⁴ Afterwards he had cause to regret such precipitous action.

Mounted Constable Holland arrived a month later, and heard both sides of the affair. The basic story is that while riding around his cattle Brigalow met a group of Aborigines,

¹⁸⁰ Mounted Constable Dempsey, 15-8-1908. CA60 Department of Territories. Correspondence Dockets N.T. Series: [Aborigines Reserve – Ord River District, N.T. – re proposal] 1906-1910. Australian Archives, ACT. A1640/1 Item 1906/223.

¹⁸¹ Government Resident Charles Herbert to the Minister Controlling the Northern Territory, Adelaide, 19-5-1908. Australian Archives, ACT CRS A1640, Item 1906/223.

¹⁸² Australian Archives, ACT. A1640/1 1907/580.

¹⁸³ W.J.J. Ward to Lands Department, 1-3-1908. Australian Archives, ACT. CRS A1640, Item 1906/223.

¹⁸⁴ W.J.J. Ward to Mounted Constable Dempsey, Timber Creek police station, 28-6-1908. Australian Archives, ACT. CRS A1640, Item 1906/223.

including a number of so-called 'outlaws'.¹⁸⁵ He accused them of killing his cattle, and they told him they had indeed killed a beast but that it was a VRD bullock they had seen Brigalow muster from VRD to Humbert. As a result, it was agreed that if Brigalow did not tell the police about their cattle killing, the Aborigines would not tell the VRD manager about his cattle duffing. When the Aborigines moved off into the hills Brigalow followed, so they threw spears at him. When all their spears were thrown there was a stalemate until one Aboriginal said 'you let us get our spears and we let you pass' – Brigalow let them get their spears and they let him pass. Holland and Brigalow made a search for the Aborigines involved, but Holland later remarked that 'As the country is highly mountainous and affords splendid hiding places for the Natives, there appeared to be no chance of getting any of them and Ward was disinclined to prosecute if any were got.'

In September 1908 Brigalow again wrote to the Lands Department, this time asking for a lease instead of a permit, and once again asking to be given title to the lower half of the permit area. He also complained about the rent, declaring that 'I reckon the rent to [sic] high it aught to be sixpence insted [sic] of a shilling considering they are four watersheds on it country walls of mountains you cant get up and spinfix [sic] they call this a river the Humbert it is only a short creek.'¹⁸⁶

Whatever letters Brigalow may have written after this time either have not survived or have not been found. The next mention of him is in March 1909 when Mounted Constable Dempsey reported that he was on the Murrnaji Track in pursuit of a man named Webb who had enticed away Brigalow's Aboriginal 'wife' and was headed for Borroloola. Following Brigalow was a man named Nye and 'a ruffian Known as "Rackarock"'.¹⁸⁷ The police

¹⁸⁵ Mounted Constable Dempsey to Sub-Inspector N. Waters, 15-8-1908. CA60 Department of Territories. Correspondence Dockets N.T. Series: [Aborigines Reserve – Ord River District, N.T. – re proposal] 1906-1910. Australian Archives, ACT, A1640/1 Item 1906/223; No Victoria River district Aborigines were officially outlawed. The term was applied to persistent, known trouble-makers, who defied the whites in various ways – cattle spearing, stealing, or threatening attack. In this instance the 'outlaws' were Riley and his son, Malgat and his brother Picknarry, and Billy. Years later Riley later became a valued employee of Humbert River station (C. Schultz and D. Lewis. *Beyond the Big Run*, 1995, pp. 36, 43, 60).

¹⁸⁶ W.J.J. Ward to the Lands Department, 20-9-1908. Australian Archives, ACT. CRS A1640, Item 1906/223.

¹⁸⁷ Timber Creek police journal, 1-3-1909. 'Rackarock' Mahoney was 'a rough old bushman' and 'a famous bagman' whose nickname was the name of an explosive (G. Broughton, *Turn Again Home*, The Jacaranda

'feared a tragedy might be the end of the affair', but Ward soon returned with the woman,¹⁸⁸ and a month later Webb wrote to the police reporting Ward 'for ill treating a lubra'.¹⁸⁹

The Humbert River block was declared an Aboriginal Reserve in June 1909,¹⁹⁰ but Brigalow refused to leave and was still squatting there some months later when he was speared and killed at his homestead. Rumours of his death reached the police in February 1910.¹⁹¹ They travelled to his hut, and found it empty and ransacked, and with bloodstains on the doorway (plate 120). Later they learnt that Judy, almost certainly the woman he had retrieved from Webb in 1908, had been a key player in his death. She had taken his pistol down to the river in a bucket and the bush Aborigines then attacked Ward and speared him. While he was dying they pulled out his beard,¹⁹² and then Judy and other women urinated on his face – a sign of contempt for his sexual demands.¹⁹³ Accounts vary as to what happened to his body. One says it was buried,¹⁹⁴ another that it was thrown into the river,¹⁹⁵ and yet another that it was buried in the bed of the river.¹⁹⁶ In any event, it was never recovered.¹⁹⁷

GORDON J SHOT →
19 10

198

Press, Sydney, 1965, p. 102; K. Willey, *Boss Drover*, 1971, p. 47; 'Rackarock' *The Adelaide Observer*, 27-12-1890 [advertisement]).

¹⁸⁸ Timber Creek police journal, 15-3-1909.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid: 21-4-1909.

¹⁹⁰ *South Australian Government Gazette*, June 17, 1909.

¹⁹¹ Mounted Constable Dempsey, 15-2-1910. Timber Creek police letter book, photocopy held at the Berrimah police station, Darwin.

¹⁹² Timber Creek police journal, 17-4-1910.

¹⁹³ C. Schultz and D. Lewis, *Beyond the Big Run*, 1995, p. 45.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid: 43.

¹⁹⁵ Timber Creek police journal, 17-4-1910.

¹⁹⁶ P. Read and J. Read, *Long Time, Olden Time: Aboriginal accounts of Northern Territory history*, Institute for Aboriginal Development Publications, Alice Springs, 1991, p. 30.

¹⁹⁷ Timber Creek police journal, 26-6-1910.

¹⁹⁸ Carving on a boab in the ranges near Humbert River homestead (see plates 161, 162).

According to the police account of the hunt for Brigalow's murderers, only one Aborigine, Gordon, was shot dead.¹⁹⁹ However, Charlie Schultz, a cattleman who owned Humbert River station from 1928 to 1971, heard from old-time VRD locals that a great many Aborigines were shot.²⁰⁰ Eventually Mudgela, Fishook, Longana and Walgarra were arrested and a number of witnesses detained (plates 121, 122), but Longana and one of the witnesses escaped before they could be taken to Darwin.²⁰¹ Of the others, only Mudgela and Fishook were convicted. Both were sentenced to death,²⁰² later commuted to life. In 1914 it was reported that Mudgela had escaped,²⁰³ but whether he was again captured or made it back to Humbert River and remained at large is unknown. Fishook must have eventually been released because in later years he worked for Charlie Schultz on Humbert River. Charlie didn't know Fishook's background, but said he was always terribly afraid of the police.²⁰⁴ Several other Aborigines implicated in the murder, including Maroun and Cockatoo, were never caught and remained in the ranges as 'outlaws' for the rest of their lives.²⁰⁵ The final irony of the sorry saga is that although Brigalow's block was declared an Aboriginal reserve it was never used as such, and within five years of his death a grazing license was issued for the area.²⁰⁶

So, Brigalow Bill was murdered and Colorado had 'smoked', but what of the other battlers in 'the nest of thieves'? Jack Beasley and his partners managed to avoid trouble with the

¹⁹⁹ Timber Creek police journal, 26-6-1910.

²⁰⁰ Personal communication, Charlie Schultz. This statement was in the original manuscript of Charlie's biography, *Beyond the Big Run*, but Charlie wanted it removed because, he said, 'Those townies wouldn't understand that it was us or them in those days'.

²⁰¹ Timber Creek police journal, 15-7-1910, 18-7-1910.

²⁰² *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 16-9-1910. The conviction of Fishook in September highlights problems the police sometimes had in identifying bush Aborigines, or at least, potential problems with the police accounts of events. The previous April a man supposedly named 'Fishook' had been involved in an attack on Harry Condon, the manager of Bullita. The police tracked the offenders into the East Baines country and shot Fishook dead (*Timber Creek police journal*, 4-4-1910).

²⁰³ Pine Creek police journal, 21-3-1914. Northern Territory Archives, F294.

²⁰⁴ Personal communication, Charlie Schultz.

²⁰⁵ C. Schultz and D. Lewis, *Beyond the Big Run*, 1995, pp. 43, 60. In 1924 Cockatoo was one of three Aborigines who 'stuck up' the cook at Mt Sanford outstation (VRD) with spears, and demanded flour from him (Mounted Constable Sheridan to Police Commissioner, 1926. Department of Home and Territories, Correspondence Files, Annual Single Number Series, 1903-38: Victoria River "N.T. Fight between police and Natives". Australian Archives, ACT. CRS A1, Item 1926/2816).

²⁰⁶ Lands Department to P.R. Allen and Co., agents for W.H. Butler, 21-11-1914. Northern Territory Archives, F28.

law, although through their association with Colorado and along with the other battlers they were under intense suspicion of unlawful activities. They undoubtedly were among the East Kimberley drovers a drover-cum-journalist named Hely Hutchinson wrote about in 1906 when he said that, 'Every cow they possess must have at least twenty calves per year, and many of the calves born with horns, and about two to three years of age at that.' Hutchinson quoted 'the managing partner of one of the largest cattle-buying firms the day he took delivery of a mob of 100 fatts from a 'small' man at £5 per head.' This man told Hutchinson, 'with a very bitter tone in his voice, "It is hard luck to be buying your own cattle back at £5 per head, especially when they have grown fat on your own country."²⁰⁷ The 'large cattle-buying firm' was probably Connor, Doherty and Durack, which in the early 1900s was buying cattle from many stations in the region, including from Mt. Stirling, Uindait, and other small holdings.²⁰⁸

Billy Patterson died on February 24th 1907 and bequeathed all his property to his partner.²⁰⁹ Later it appears that Beasley went into partnership with someone named Barry (probably Jack Barry²¹⁰). In 1910 the police reported that, 'Messrs Barry and Beasley disposed of their Mount Stirling Station to Mrs Skuthorpe, of Waterloo',²¹¹ but records in the Northern Territory Archives indicate that the block remained in Beasley's hands until 1911 when he sold it to W.F. and C.H. Buchanan of Wave Hill. On December 16th 1913 Wave Hill was sold to Vesteys so the Mt. Stirling block then became part of the Limbunya run.²¹²

²⁰⁷ 'H7H' (Hely-Hutchinson) 'How Cattle are run in the East Kimberley', *The Pastoralists' Review*, February 1906: 1001 (reprinted from *The Queenslander*).

²⁰⁸ Letter book, 1901-1912. Inward and outward correspondence relating to Connor, Doherty & Durack. Rosewood Records, Battye Library, Acc 2184A/1, MN485.

²⁰⁹ Timber Creek police letter book, 21-6-1907. Photocopy held at the Berrimah police station, Darwin.

²¹⁰ There were two men with the surname Barry in the Victoria River district in the early 1900s. One was Frank Barry who died on Wave Hill in 1911, and is therefore unlikely to have been Beasley's partner. The other was Jack Barry (*Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 14-7-1911).

²¹¹ A. White, 'Report of Sub-Inspector of Stock, Victoria River District', in 'Report of the Government Resident for the Year 1910'. *South Australian Parliamentary Papers*, vol. 3, no. 66, 1911, pp. 24-25.

²¹² Department of Lands – Land Administration Branch, Northern Territory Archives Service, office copies of pastoral permits – 1902-1922, NTRS F199, PP 279/1911.

Jack Beasley
Better known as the
W.A. gun jockey

213

After the sale of Mt Stirling Beasley went back to stock work and droving,²¹⁴ mostly in the Victoria River-East Kimberley districts. Apparently old habits died hard. In 1932 he was sacked from his position as head stockman at Moolooloo outstation (VRD) because a number of Delamere-branded cattle were found with calves carrying the Moolooloo brand.²¹⁵

J-BARRY
FEB
" "
1907

216

Jack Barry also remained in the district for many years, working as a yard builder,²¹⁷ drover,²¹⁸ stockman,²¹⁹ station manager²²⁰ and cattle duffer.²²¹ An oral tradition suggests that

²¹³ An insult written on a water tank at Murrniji Bore.

²¹⁴ *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 10-2-1911; 'Cattle Shipment from Darwin', *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 31-5-1912.

²¹⁵ A. Martin to the 'Chairman of Directors' (Lord Luke), 23-3-1932. Bovril Australian Estates: Correspondence between London and station manager 1927-1932. Noel Butlin Archives, Australian National University, 119/4/2.

²¹⁶ Carving on a boab tree, upper East Baines River.

²¹⁷ There is a 'Barry's yard' on the East Baines River, Gregory National Park, and nearby is a boab tree marked 'J. Barry Feb 1907'. D. Lewis, *The Boab Belt: A Survey of Historic Sites in the North-Central Victoria River District*. Report prepared for the Australian National Trust (N.T.), 1996, vol. 2, pp. 107-110.

²¹⁸ 'Victoria River Notes', *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 27-7-18; *Hoofs & Horns*, June 1946, p. 7.

²¹⁹ Taped interview with Stan Jones, Katherine, August 2000. Stan, who was manager of Gordon Downs from 1952 to 1964, said that Barry had once been head stockman at Birrindudu.

²²⁰ G. Bolton, *A Survey of the Kimberley Pastoral Industry from 1885 to the Present*, 1953, p. 214; Wave Hill police journal, 27-9-23, Northern Territory Archives, F292; M. Terry, *Across Unknown Australia*, Herbert Jenkins, London, 1925, pp. 178-79.

²²¹ According to Vic Hall (*Outback Policeman*, Rigby, Adelaide, 1970, pp. 181-85), in 1928 Barry stole a mob of cattle from Wave Hill and tried to take them across the Tanami Desert, but the track was too dry and he turned them loose. When the police found him at Hooker Creek they could not prove a connection between him and the cattle in the area so he escaped arrest.

Barry could also be cruel to the point of murder. When his Aboriginal wife ran away from Birrindudu to Turner station, he caught her there and 'flogged her back with the whip... on the horse back, and she died when she got back.'²²²

Jack Frayne never got into serious trouble with the law either, although the police were certainly suspicious of him, too, on one occasion declaring 'He has not a halo'.²²³ In 1908, after agreeing to sell eighty bullocks to Connor, Doherty and Durack (CD&D), Frayne instead sold them to Ord River, an action which M.P. Durack described as 'most dishonourable'.²²⁴ He also sold cattle to the great friend of the battler, Tom Pearce.²²⁵

FRAYNE

226

In 1911 Frayne agreed to sell Coomanderoo to Wave Hill²²⁷ but he must have retained ownership of his livestock and had time to muster them because in June 1911 he was reported to be 'on his way in with all his stock, some 700 or 800 cattle' to a block on the Katherine River,²²⁸ and in May the following year he started to bring another 500 head down the East Baines River. This time he didn't get far – he died from fever on the headwaters of the East Baines in May 1912.²²⁹ Some time later his cattle were put up for auction by the administrator of his estate.²³⁰ Good old 'Honest Tom' Pearce was the

²²² Taped interview with Stan Jones, Katherine, August 2000. Jones was manager of Gordon Downs from 1952 to 1964, and met Barry when Barry was an old man. He was told this story by Jacky Burns, an old-timer who had worked at Birrindudu and Gordon Downs for many years, and who had known Barry in earlier decades.

²²³ Mounted Constable Dempsey to Sub-Inspector N. Waters, 13-4-1908. Re Newton for unlawfully branding: and Miscellaneous. Australian Archives, ACT. CRS A1640, Item 1906/223.

²²⁴ Diary of M.P. Durack, 1-1-1908 to 31-12-1908, entry for 3-7-1908. Battye Library microfilm, MN 71/3 4587A-28.

²²⁵ 'Veterinary Officer and Inspector of Stock', Mounted Constable W.F. Johns, 1-1-1912, cited in 'Northern Territory. Report of the Acting Administrator for the Year 1912', *Commonwealth Parliamentary Papers*, vol. 3, no. 54, 1913, p. 36.

²²⁶ Inscription on a boab at the Drovers' Rest, East Baines River.

²²⁷ 'Veterinary Officer and Inspector of Stock', *Commonwealth Parliamentary Papers*, vol. 3, no. 54, 1913, p. 36.

²²⁸ *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 30-6-1911.

²²⁹ *Ibid*: 6-2-1913, 13-2-1913.

²³⁰ *Ibid*: 19-9-1912.

successful bidder and eventually he mustered Frayne's cattle 'on the head of the Wickham River'.²³¹

Like Frayne, Jimmy Wickham and his partners were never charged with any offence, nor were any specific allegations made against them. His partnership with John Duggan was dissolved in August 1909,²³² and it may be that Duggan moved to a block immediately south of Katherine that he had taken in 1908.²³³ Wickham soon acquired a new partner, a tall and solid man named Thomas Hanlon whose ancestry was reputedly Chinese, the name Hanlon coming from 'Han Loon'.²³⁴ In March 1910 Hanlon tried to get the brand 'OIQ' transferred to his name, but the police were onto his game. His application was rejected on the grounds that it was 'too like other brands' – namely, the G10 of VRD.²³⁵

Like Frayne, in 1908 Wickham went back on his word to sell cattle to Connor, Doherty and Durack,²³⁶ but this didn't stop CD&D buying his cattle in subsequent years.²³⁷ Wickham and Hanlon retained permit 22 until July 1912 when they sold out to Wave Hill station.²³⁸ They had sold permit 22A to Wave Hill a month earlier, on June 10th 1912.²³⁹ I suspect that Wickham, Beasley and Frayne had agreed to sell out to Wave Hill in 1911 but were given time to muster and dispose of their cattle. In 1911 Wickham and three companions took cattle down the Canning stock route, the second or third droving team to attempt the 1500 kilometre track. According to an old Canning drover, Ben Taylor, the drovers were Wickham, Beasley, Patterson and possibly Hanlon. On their way down the

²³¹ Ibid: 6-2-1913.

²³² Timber Creek police journal, 3-8-1909.

²³³ Information from files at the Office of the Placenames Committee, Darwin.

²³⁴ P.A. Scherer, *Sunset of an Era: The Heffernan's of Ti-Tree*, Privately published, Alice Springs, 1993, p. 25.

²³⁵ (Mounted Constable?) John Needham to Sub-Inspector N. Waters, Timber Creek police letter book, 14-3-1910. Photocopy held at the Berrimah police station, Darwin.

²³⁶ Diary of M.P. Durack 1-1-1908 – 31-12-1908, entry for 3-7-1908. Battye Library microfilm: MN 71/3 4587A-28.

²³⁷ M.P. Durack to J. Davis, 23-7-1910. Letter book, 1901-1912. Inward and outward correspondence relating to Connor, Doherty & Durack. Battye Library, Rosewood Records, Acc 2184A/1, MN485,

²³⁸ Department of Lands – Land Administration Branch, Northern Territory Archives Service, Office copies of pastoral permits – 1902-1922, NTRS, F199, Box 1, PP 22/1910.

²³⁹ Ibid: Box 3, PP 111/1915.

Canning, Wickham and his companions found the murdered bodies of the preceding drovers, Shoesmith and Thompson.²⁴⁰

After selling their stock Wickham and Hanlon shifted to pastoral permits on the Frew River in Central Australia.²⁴¹ Wickham went on to other colourful exploits. Among other things, he lifted a mob of 600 cattle from Lake Nash, was caught and spent five years in gaol²⁴²; he was reported murdered by bush blacks in the Tanami, but 'rose from the dead'²⁴³; he acquired Willowra station on the Lander River²⁴⁴; and he spent years prospecting in the Tanami. Some believed he found, and lost, a rich gold reef there.²⁴⁵ Hanlon helped Wickham steal the Lake Nash cattle, but avoided conviction. One story has it that while Wickham was in gaol Hanlon sold the Frew River blocks, but he neglected to give Wickham's share of the money to Wickham's wife, Olive, and as a result spent years in fear of running into Wickham.²⁴⁶ In the late 1920s he owned Huckitta station,²⁴⁷ and in 1929 was involved in the discovery of a supposedly ancient skull there.²⁴⁸

So why did Beasley, Wickham and Frayne all sell out at much the same time? Why didn't one or more of them continue on as landowners in the district for many years? There is no

²⁴⁰ Personal communication, Bob and Sandy Woods, who have researched the Canning Stock Route for many years; D; M. Terry, *Through a Land of Promise*, Herbert Jenkins Limited, London, 1927, p. 152; E. Hill, *The Territory*, 1951, p. 298; Another version has it that the bodies of the murdered men were found by Wickham and a man named Cole (A. Lucanus (1929), cited in C. Clement and P. Bridge (eds). *Kimberley Scenes: Sagas of Australia's Last Frontier*, Hesperian Press, Perth, 1991, pp. 50-51).

²⁴¹ Veterinary Officer and Inspector of Stock, Mounted Constable W.F. Johns, 1-1-1912, cited in 'Northern Territory. Report of the Acting Administrator for the Year 1912', *Commonwealth Parliamentary Papers*, vol. 3: 1912, p. 36.

²⁴² *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, 14-12-1916, 19-4-1917; Another version has it that Wickham and Hanlon only lifted about 200, but were blamed for the theft of another 400 stolen by someone else (R. Kimber, *Man from Arltunga: Walter Smith Australian Bushman*, Hesperian Press, Perth, 1986, pp. 111-12, endnote 12).

²⁴³ Mounted Constable Dasmith to Sergeant Stott, Alice Springs, 24-9-1923. Australian Archives, ACT, A3/1, item 23/3646.

²⁴⁴ P. A. Scherer, *Sunset of an Era: The Heffernan's of Ti-Tree*, 1993, p. 19.

²⁴⁵ M. Terry, *Through a Land of Promise*, Herbert Jenkins Limited, London, 1927, p. 154; M. Terry, *Hidden Wealth and Hiding People*, Putnam, London, 1931, pp.167-69; R. Kimber, *Man from Arltunga: Walter Smith Australian Bushman*, Hesperian Press, Perth, 1986, pp. 104-06.

²⁴⁶ Personal communication, Lester Caine, who worked with Hanlon for a time. Another version has it that Hanlon spent Wickham's share of the profit from a jointly owned Wolfram mine on a huge spree, and that when Wickham found out he accepted it as a fait accompli (R. Kimber, *Man from Arltunga: Walter Smith Australian Bushman*, Hesperian Press, Perth, 1986, p. 107).

²⁴⁷ P. A. Scherer, *Sunset of an Era: The Heffernan's of Ti-Tree*, 1993, p. 25.

²⁴⁸ T. Griffiths, *Hunters and Collectors*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1996, pp. 65-66.

evidence that the government was going to resume their permits, or that the police placed them under severe pressure, or that Aborigines were killing all their cattle. The answer appears to be a reversal of one of the reasons that encouraged them to take up land in the first place – the price of cattle. In 1909 the price of cattle began to drop.²⁴⁹ I am not certain of the reason for this fall, but it may have been because the Queensland herds, depleted by the tick fever and drought in the period 1895-1902, had finally increased to the point where the eastern markets were well supplied.

The cattle duffers appeared in the Victoria River district, and elsewhere in the Northern Territory, because particular conditions had developed – relative peace in the rough country, vast ‘empty’ areas, plentiful cleanskin cattle and high cattle prices. They appeared in the district like crows to a carcass, and when cattle prices eventually dropped they ‘flew’ off to other vocations. Only one of the Victoria River cattle duffers, Jimmy Wickham, had a wife and children on his cattle duffing block, and he, along with most of the others, eventually left the district. Only Jack Beasley remained in the region after selling out, and he never married. Consequently, there were no family dynasties established in the Victoria River country to remember these men and the events they experienced. The only descendant of any of the Victoria River cattle duffers I have met was a daughter of Jimmy Wickham, Patsy Garling, who lived in Darwin until her death in 2001.²⁵⁰ She had almost no knowledge of her father’s station or his time in the region.

The Victoria River cattle duffers discussed here were typical outback bushmen of the time. In common with the majority of outback working people, they worked at various outback activities and regarded the law as a nuisance, something to be broken if circumstances required and opportunity permitted. They gave much greater loyalty to each other than they gave to law officers, and were of the view that if the legitimate owners did not brand their cattle they deserved to lose them. The Timber Creek police highlighted this attitude when they wrote that ‘To a man the workers of this district are in sympathy with [the cattle

²⁴⁹ R. Duncan, *The Northern Territory Pastoral Industry 1863-1910*, 1967, p. 65.

²⁵⁰ ‘Duffer Who Pioneered Outback’, *Northern Territory Times*, 24-7-2001.

duffers]²⁵¹ and that few of them [the duffers] believed that ‘Thou shalt not steal’ applied to clean skin cattle.²⁵² A couple of the Victoria River duffers ‘crossed the line’ – they cross-branded cattle – but even they were protected from the police by their bush comrades.

Such attitudes were part of a long and honourable tradition. In 1873 Anthony Trollope wrote of stock theft that ‘It is like smuggling, or illicit distillation, or sedition, or the seduction of women. There is little or no shame attached to it among those with whom the cattle stealers live...A man may be a cattle-stealer, and yet in his way a decent fellow.’²⁵³ Doug Moore echoed these sentiments when he commented about Jack Beasley and other duffers in the Ord River country in the early 1900s: ‘What rogues these chaps were – all had something against them that they had done in the past but otherwise very nice chaps to meet and converse with.’²⁵⁴

There were to be other small landholders in the Victoria River country in the years to come, and other instances of cattle theft, but when the last of the battlers left the country north of the Stirling, the Golden Age of cattle duffing in the Victoria River district came to an end.

²⁵¹ Mounted Constable Dempsey to Sub-Inspector N. Waters, 13-4-1908. Re Newton for unlawfully branding: and Miscellaneous, 13-4-1908. Australian Archives, ACT. CRS A1640, Item 1906/223.

²⁵² Mounted Constable Dempsey, 15-8-1908. CA60, Department of Territories. Correspondence Dockets N.T. Series: [Aborigines Reserve – Ord River District, N.T. – re proposal] 1906-1910. Australian Archives, ACT. A1640/1 item 1906/223.

²⁵³ A. Trollope, *Australia*, University of Queensland Press, Brisbane, 1967, p. 136 (first published as *Australia and New Zealand*, Chapman and Hall, London, Vol. 1, 1873).

²⁵⁴ Doug Moore’s Memoirs, nd, Battye Library. Acc 3829A, MN 1237.

Chapter 10

THE ELYSIAN FIELDS OF THE TANAMI

When the Golden Age of cattle duffing ended in 1912, most of the blocks held under grazing licence were absorbed by neighbouring large holdings, but the exodus of cattle duffers did not spell the end of battlers' efforts to secure a place in the pastoral world of the region. Others came in their wake, but almost the only land available was south of the big stations in the Tanami Desert, and it was to the desert that many turned their attention.

The Tanami country first became known to many Europeans when the discovery of payable gold in 1909 brought a flood of prospectors into the region.¹ There are pockets of good grazing land in the Tanami, and in spite of the fact that water sources were few and rainfall highly unpredictable, it wasn't long before men began to apply for grazing licences there. Over the years there has been a succession of men whose 'vision splendid' was of a station in the Tanami. Some are now little more than names that appear fleetingly in the historical record. Typical of these was F. Castles who, in 1926, applied for a grazing licence over 100 square miles immediately south of the Tanami Commonage (map 13).² He was granted a licence but afterwards is lost to history.

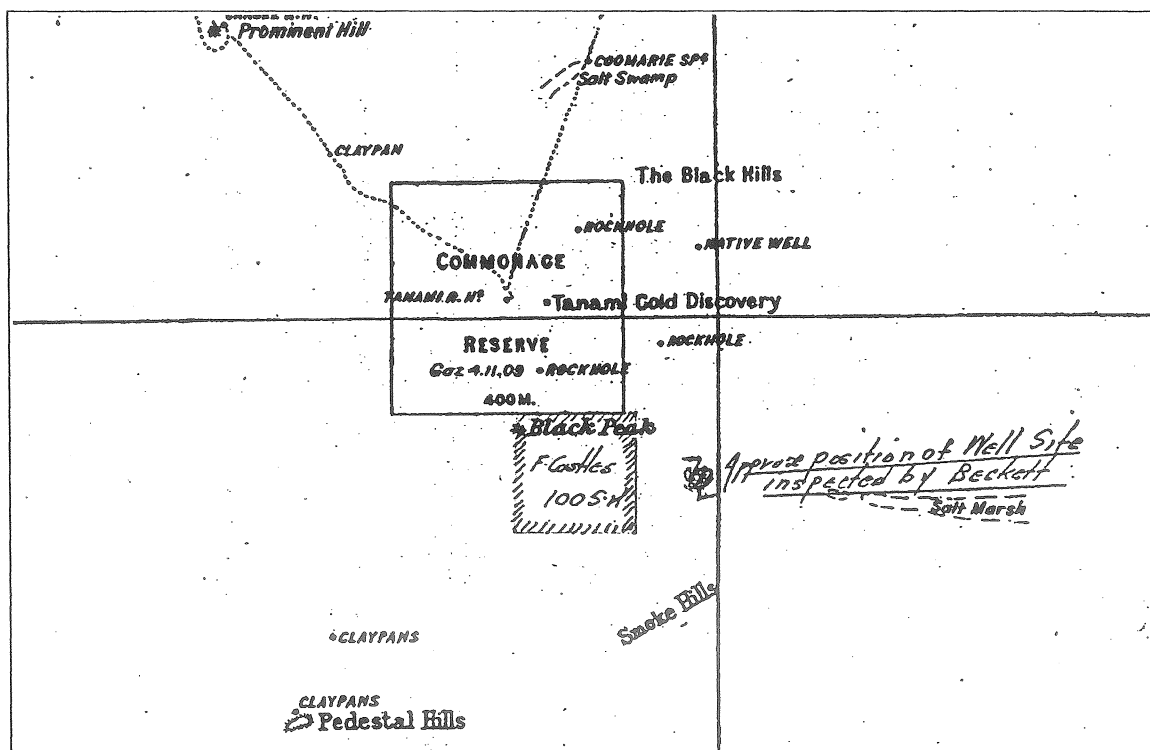
Two other names that appear fleetingly are George Forrestal and Fred Leeson. On January 18th 1919 these men obtained a grazing licence for 512 square miles of country east and south of the Buchanan Hills (on Winnecke Creek), to be called Ely Station (map 14). Forrestal obtained a brand, FTF, and an earmark for cattle,³ but their partnership quickly soured. Towards the end of the year Leeson advised the Lands Department that if Forrestal should try to have his (Leeson's) name dropped from the grazing licence, he (Leeson) did

¹ L.C.E Gee, *General Report on Tanami Goldfield and District*, Government Printer, Adelaide, 1911, pp. 5-6.

² F. Castles to 'Land Office', Darwin, 3-2-1926. Northern Territory Archives, F28, GL453.

³ G. Forrestal to Land Department, 12-12-1919. Northern Territory Archives, F28, GL302.

not want his name dropped.⁴ His concern was misplaced. In May 1920 Forrestal wrote to ask that his own name be dropped from the grazing licence,⁵ and after this the two men, and Ely station, disappear from view.



Map 13: F. Castles' permit south of the Tanami Common.

Of some a little more is known. In December 1927 a man named T. Dwyer successfully applied for a grazing licence for 200 square miles at the eastern end of Winnecke Creek, near the Buchanan Hills (see map 14).⁶ As it turned out, Dwyer was a bush con man. He paid the rent on GL601 up to June 1930 but then dropped out of contact with the Lands Department.⁷ In March 1931 the Department wrote to the Wave Hill police, asking them if they could collect the rent, and Mounted Constable Sheridan replied:

⁴ F. Leeson to Lands Department, 28-11-1919. Northern Territory Archives, F28, GL 302.

⁵ G. Forrestal to Lands Department, 10-5-1920. Northern Territory Archives, F28, GL 302.

⁶ T. Dwyer to 'Government Lands Office', 15-12-1927, Northern Territory Archives, F28, GL 601; Secretary of Lands Department to T. Dwyer, 7-3-1928. Northern Territory Archives, F28, GL 601.

⁷ Chief Clerk of Lands Department to Wave Hill police, 10-3-1931. Northern Territory Archives, NTRS F28, GL 601.

Mr Dwyer left this district about 18 months ago. The last I heard of him he was going across country from Brunette Downs Station to Alice Springs with a string of camels. I am of the opinion that Mr. T. Dwyer only took this Block of country up with a view of trying to get some fool to stock it for him. He very seldom works and has very little cash, in fact he is a nomad who begs most of his provisions. I heard an Irishman say some days ago that he didn't consider it natural for one Irishman to shoot another, but if Dwyer ever returned to this district he was going to prove an exception to the rule. In view of this fact I do not think Dwyer will return to this district to take up such a large area of country.⁸

One man had more legitimate aims. Owen Cummins was born on the Dargo High Plains of Victoria in September 1874,⁹ early enough for him to have later been the model for Banjo Patterson's famous character, 'The Man from Snowy River', as he sometimes claimed when 'in his cups' (plates 123, 124).¹⁰ Albert Lalga, a now deceased Mudbura man from Montejinni station, pronounced Owen Cummins' name (to my ear) as 'Old Home Coming', a name evocative of warmth, comfort and nostalgia, but Albert knew Cummins personally and said that he was one of the men who shot Aborigines in the early days.¹¹ There is evidence that Cummins was on the Pine Creek goldfield by 1894, working as blacksmith, wheelwright and farrier.¹² From May 1914 to July 1917 he worked on Victoria River Downs,¹³ probably a bit late for him to have been involved in shooting Aborigines there. However, it is likely that from VRD he went to Wave Hill which bordered Tanami desert, the home of 'bush' Aborigines in the 1920s, '30s and '40s.¹⁴ He also spent a lot of time in the Tanami itself, and so could have come into conflict with desert people.

OWEN CUMMINS

15

⁸ Mounted Constable F. Sheridan to Director of Lands, Darwin, 4-5-1931. Northern Territory Archives, F28, GL 601.

⁹ E. Evans, *Owen Cummins 1874-1953. The Territory's Man From Snowy River*, privately published, Darwin, nd.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Personal Communication, Albert Lalga Crowson.

¹² E. Evans, *Owen Cummins 1874-1953*, nd.

¹³ Bovril Australian Estates, Pty. Ltd., VRD Day Books, 1909 to 1925, vol. 1, Nov - December 1909 to April 1916. Noel Butlin Archives, Australian National University, 87/1/1.

¹⁴ R.M. Berndt and C.H. Berndt, *End of An Era: Aboriginal Labour in the Northern Territory*, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra, pp. 15-17, 30-32; The Wave Hill police journal of 31-7-22 mentions Cummins repairing the well at Hooker Creek (Northern Territory Archives, F 292).

¹⁵ Owen Cummins' name scratched on a water tank at Murrnaji Bore.

Cummins worked for many years on Wave Hill station as a stockman and in charge of the horse stud,¹⁶ but he wanted to run horses for sale to the big stations.¹⁷ In 1923 he applied for a grazing licence for 100 square miles near Floris Rockhole, on the western headwaters of Winneke Creek, south of Wave Hill station.¹⁸ His application was approved (GL 356) but in 1924 lack of water forced him to relinquish this licence and instead take up a block further west, at Frog Valley (GL 375).¹⁹ On this new block the water went dry in two years out of the next three, so Cummins decided he needed to put down a well. He asked the Lands Department for permission to do so, but pointed out that it would not pay him to sink a well unless he had a guarantee that his annual grazing licence would be renewed each year. He also pointed out that, if he was to sink a well, it would be better for him to do it on his original block as it was closer to Wave Hill:

I must do a little improvement bild yards and a bit of a paddock and as I could not make a liveing just of the sale of horses alone I must get work elsewhere and as the block 356 would suit me best as it is nearer to Wave Hill where I can get something to do for a few months in the year I would again take that block up starting a fresh this year but I would not pay the back rent as I have had all my horses on the Frog Valley block or on Wave Hill Country and one block is quite as mutch as I can aford.²⁰

The Lands Department issued Cummins with a new grazing licence (GL 581) for his original block (formerly GL 356) and gave him permission to sink a well there, and Cummins relinquished block 375. At this point he began to have problems, although it is not fully clear exactly what went wrong. Either the Lands Department forgot to cancel his first grazing licence (GL356), or at some stage Cummins had not sent enough money to cover the fees and rent on this block.²¹ The situation is further complicated by the

¹⁶ Personal communication, the late Charlie Schultz, former owner of Humbert River station.

¹⁷ E. Evans, *Owen Cummins 1874-1953*, nd.

¹⁸ Owen Cummins to Director of Lands, Darwin, 22-9-1923. Northern Territory Archives, NTRS F28 GL 581.

¹⁹ Owen Cummins to Director of Lands, Darwin, 11-7-1924. Northern Territory Archives, NTRS F28 GL 375; see map in NTRS F28, Box 16, GL 601.

²⁰ Owen Cummins to Secretary, Lands Department, Darwin, 24-2-1927. Northern Territory Archives, NTRS F28 GL 581. Cummins' spelling left something to be desired.

²¹ A.B. Finness to the Secretary of the Lands Department, 9-9-1927. Northern Territory Archives, NTRS F28 GL 581.

possibility that in his correspondence to the Lands Department, Cummins referred to the land covered by his third grazing licence (GL581) by its original appellation (GL 356). In any case, Cummins thought he was being asked to pay rent money on a block which he had forfeited in 1924, and he protested that 'It seems strange to me that I am unable to cancel GL 356 and when I forward in rent for GL375 the money is confiscated to pay rent on a Grazing Licence which I forfeited by notifying your Dept I desired to cancel over 3 years ago.'²² The Lands Department persisted in its request for payment of an extra £2 and at the end of 1929 an exasperated Cummins wrote:

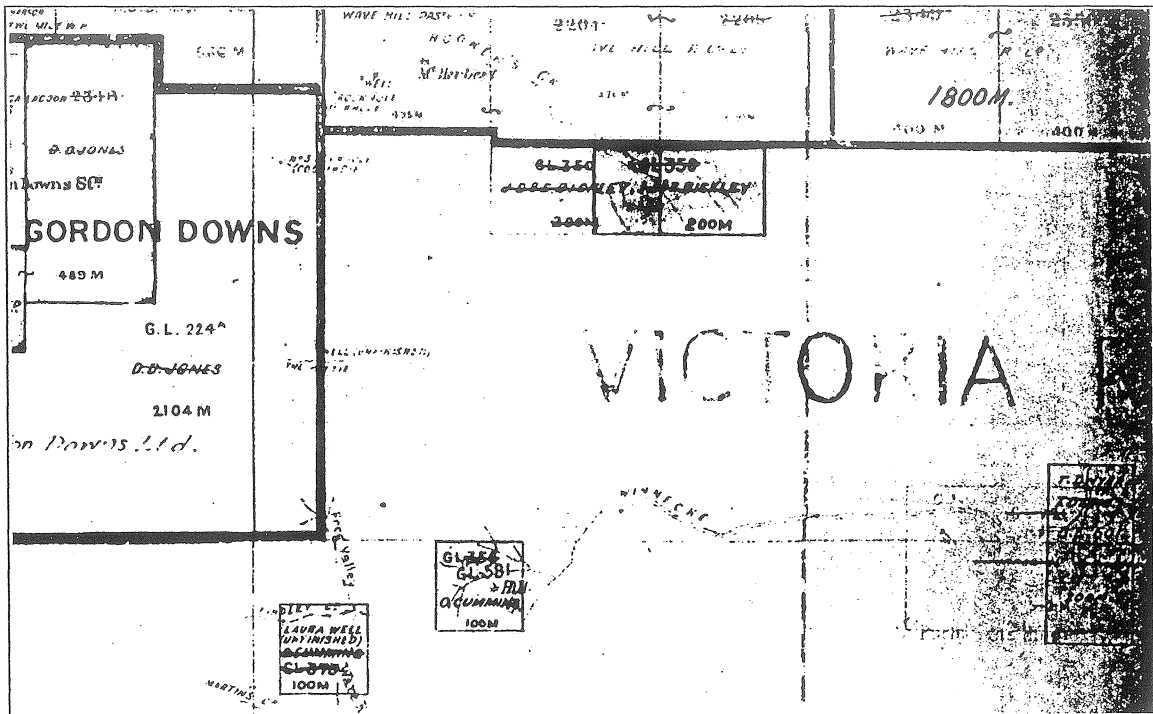
I must try to explain I did not intend to hold that country after 1928 nor do I intend holding it now I made a mistake when I paid the dog tax on it as the dog man was dogging me up so long that I thought I must have owed the money for 28 but I see by the receipt it is for 29 so I will have to get a refund so to save me any further trouble you can give him back the receipt which I am enclosing and tell him to collect the money and shout.²³

The whole experience appears to have soured Cummins and there is no record that he held any grazing licence after this time, though Ted Evans claims that Owen continued to try to obtain Tanami land into the 1940s.²⁴

²² Owen Cummins to Secretary, North Australia Commission, Darwin, 12-8-1927. Northern Territory Archives, NTRS F28, Box 35, GL 581.

²³ Owen Cummins to Secretary, North Australia Commission, Darwin, nd (received 10-12-1929). Northern Territory Archives, NTRS F28, Box 35, GL 581.

²⁴ E. Evans, *Owen Cummins 1874-1953*, nd.



Map 14: Dwyer's GL 601, Owen Cummins' GL 375 and GL 356 (later redesignated GL 581), and the Bickley's GL 350.

The best documented and most interesting of the Tanami men were the Bickleys – James, and his two sons, David and Elijah. Drivers²⁵ and station hands,²⁶ the Bickleys were battlers in the great Australian tradition and apparently possessed of the grand dream of a paradise in the desert. Indeed, their dream was such that at times the Tanami seemed to take the form of the fabled Elysian Fields. Without doubt, Captain Cadell would have been impressed (see Chapter 2). For years the Bickleys tried to fulfil their dream, but they suffered one setback after another. Their story, probably best termed 'The Bickley Saga', can be traced through correspondence between them and the Lands Department, and through police journal accounts. In quotations from these sources reproduced below, I have retained all original spelling, punctuation and idiosyncrasies of expression. The saga

²⁵ In 1916 on an application form for a grazing licence, all three gave their occupations as drovers (Northern Territory Archives, NTRS F28, Box 6, GL 177).

²⁶ In a letter to the Lands Department in November 1918 James Bickley said he was then working as a stockman on Auvergne (Northern Territory Archives, F28, Box 6, GL 177. His son David was probably there with him because his name and the date 1917 are carved on the Retribution Camp boab on Auvergne (D. Lewis, *In Western Wilds: A Survey of Historic Sites in the Western Victoria River District*, site 21, 1993, vol. 1, pp. 64-67, vol. 2, p. 40. Report prepared for the Australian National Trust [NT]).

begins on May 14th 1916 when James Bickley wrote to the 'Minister for Lands' in Darwin, saying:

Please find inclosed Cheque for the sum of Five Pound for Fees & Rent on undermentioned Lot of Land I hereby apply to you for a Block of Land Situated on the Tanami Road I want to take up this Block as a Grasing Block & also make my Home on it & Stock it'.²⁷

The block in question (GL177) was of 32 square miles, extending north and east from Pingidijarra Rockhole on the old Halls Creek to Tanami Road. The Lands Department sent James an application form on which he wrote that the block would initially be stocked with twenty-five head of 'brud' Mares, and twenty-five head of cattle.²⁸

DAVID BICKLEY
JUNE 4 1917 ²⁹

Along with the application form the Department sent a receipt for the rent money, and this contained a minor mistake, the first of a long series of more serious mistakes and problems that beset the Bickleys. The receipt had only James Bickley's name on it, so when he returned the form on October 10th he advised the Lands Department that 'I want to let you know there is tree of us James Bickley & David Bickley & Elijah Bickley we apply jointly now'.³⁰ In a separate letter also dated October 10th, the Bickleys sought permission to erect huts and yards, and to sink wells on the block,³¹ but before an answer came their first real problem arose. Apparently their agent had marked out the block on a map provided by the

²⁷ James Bickley to the 'Minister of Lands', Darwin, 14-5-1916. Northern Territory Archives, F28, Box 6, GL 177.

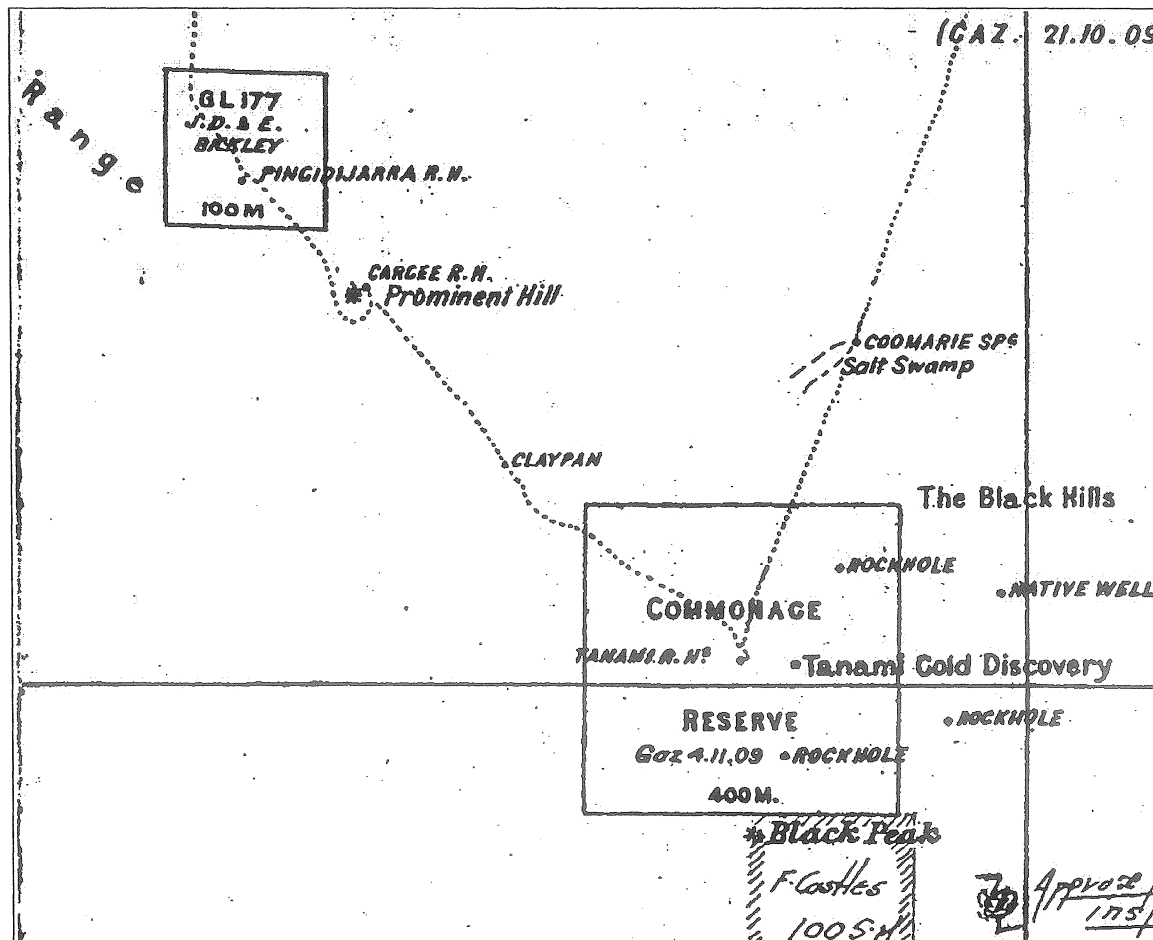
²⁸ James, David and Elijah Bickley to Lands Department, 14-5-1916. Northern Territory Archives, NTRS F28, Box 6, GL 177.

²⁹ Carving on the Retribution Camp Boab, Auvergne station (see plate 167 and fold-out, page 380).

³⁰ James, David and Elijah Bickley to 'Minister of Lands', Darwin, 10-10-1916. Northern Territory Archives, F28, Box 6, GL 177.

³¹ Ibid.

Lands Department, but he put it in the wrong place, and made it 32 miles by 32 miles, which is 1024 square miles rather than the modest 32 square miles the Bickleys wanted.³²



Map 15: The Bickley's GL 177 at Pingidijarra Rockhole (top left), and F. Castles permit south of Tanami.

The mistake was corrected, but permission to construct huts, yards and wells did not come, so in August 1917 the Bickleys renewed their request.³³ The Lands Department wrote back asking for expected costs of the proposed improvements and in December the Bickleys provided an estimate of £460, and added:

³² James, David and Elijah Bickley to Lands Department, Darwin, 31-10-1916. Northern Territory Archives, F28, Box 6, GL 177.

³³ James, David and Elijah Bickley to 'Minister of Lands', Darwin, 22-8-1917. Northern Territory Archives, F28, Box 6, GL 177.

we want to make our Home on the Land & live their & we must fence in some Paddocks so we will be able to classify our Stock well now to make a Home on the Land & to do that we must Improve as Water Yards & Houses & Fencing we Remain yours Truly J D & E Bickley.³⁴

Almost a year later the Bickleys realised their grazing licence stated that their block began 24 miles from the 'Tanami Commonage', when the distance was really about 42 miles. They wrote to the Lands Department asking for the error to be fixed, and presumably it was.³⁵

After this all remained well until November 12th 1920. On that day the Bickleys wrote an astounding letter to the Lands Department,

to let you know we intend to pay no more rent on Block No 177 as when we took up No 177 Block we been advoised by our agent that the Land was good & now we came to inspect this Block & to put on it – Cattle & Horses & we find it consist of Hills & Rocks & that the poision plant called Gastralobeum³⁶ which is a most Dedly fodder for Stock & the Block is of no use to us we had to Send all Cattle back as I want you to understand we could not get away to inspect the Block personally so we was advoised by our agent to apply for this Block No 177 & been marked out by our agent there is plenty of Land here better then this Block No 177 which we have been paying rent on Since 1916 & never used it there is a grate deal of Gastralobeum growing in this part which is a most deadly poision for Stock we have applied for a block West of Block No 177 which [has] not so much of Gatralobeum on & if reccominded to us we intend to grub & to try & Destroy it by Grubbing this plant is the draw back you cannot Stock it & Block No 177 is a hopeless regards getting rid of Gasterlobeum as it is too plentiful Growing so we want to advoise you that that it is no good to us & we intended paying no more rent on it we intend looking for better Land³⁷

Undoubtedly this setback was a great disappointment to them, but two weeks earlier the Bickleys had applied for a block of 50 square miles adjoining the west side of block 177,³⁸

³⁴ James, David and Elijah Bickley to 'Minister of Lands', Darwin, 18-12-1917. Northern Territory Archives, F28, Box 6, GL 177.

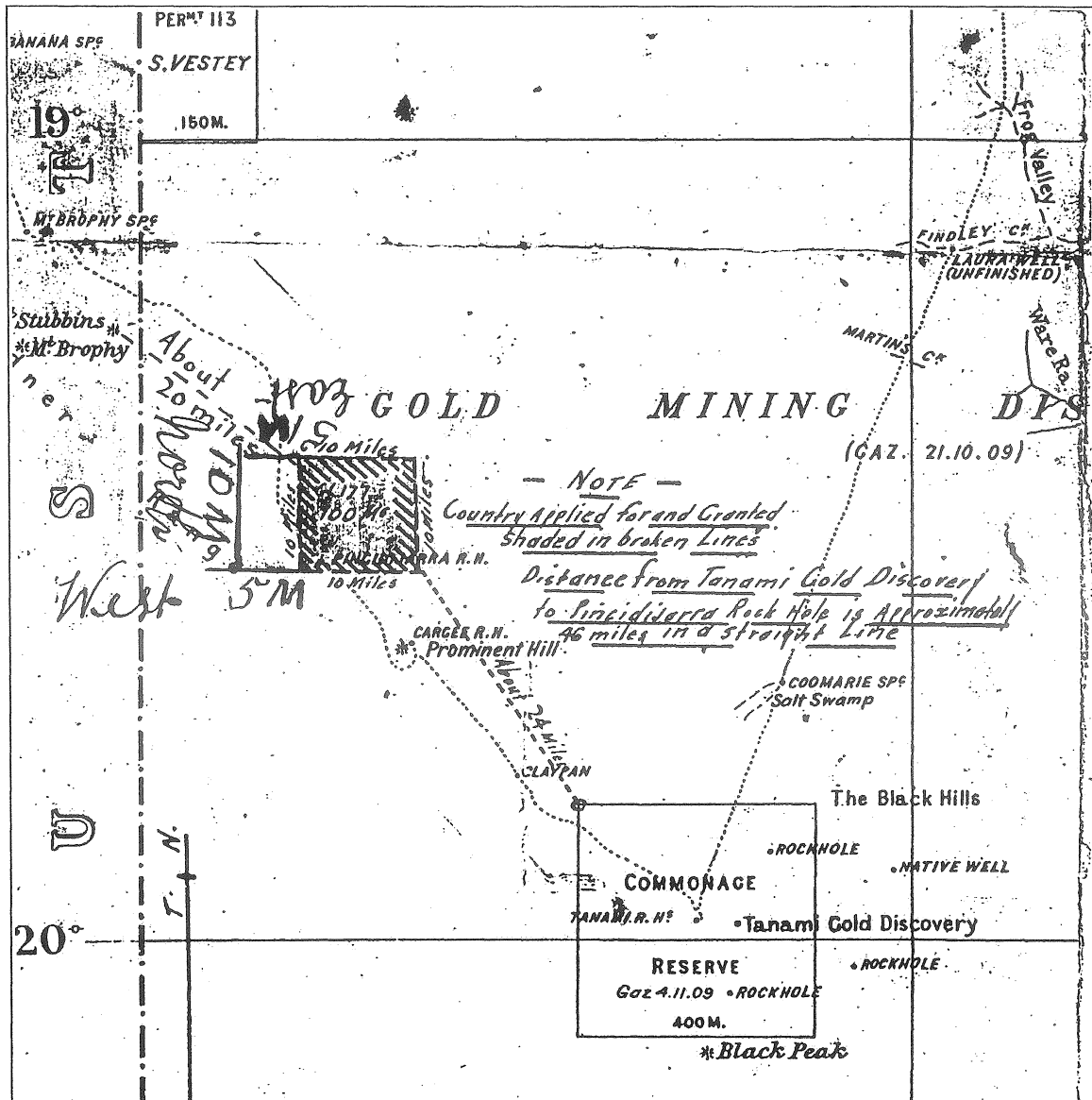
³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ *Gastrolobium grandiflora*.

³⁷ James, David and Elijah Bickley to 'Minister of Lands', Darwin, 12-11-1920. Northern Territory Archives, F28, Box 6, GL 177.

³⁸ Ibid.

and this was approved towards the end of January 1921.³⁹ Perhaps the Bickleys finally believed all was well, but in March the Lands Department advised that there had been a mistake and their new licence (GL313) would have to be cancelled.⁴⁰



Map 16: The Bickley's GL 177, north west of Tanami, and the adjustment they asked for to exclude the poisonous *gastrolobium*.

³⁹ Lands and Survey Department to James, David and Elijah Bickley, 27-1-1921. Northern Territory Archives, F28, Box 11, GL 313.

⁴⁰ Lands and Survey Department to James, David and Elijah Bickley, 11-3-1921. Northern Territory Archives, F28 Box 11, GL 313.

What the Bickleys thought of this has not been recorded. They removed their stock to Western Australia and in October they applied for, and were granted, several blocks on the Bullo River, on the west side of the Victoria River mouth.⁴¹ There is no evidence that they ever stocked these blocks or kept them for long. In any case, they did not abandon their desert dream and, as it turned out, this was another mistake.

They may have applied for another block on the Western Australian side of the border, for it was while camped at Granny's Soak, at the eastern end of the Gardiner Range, that the Bickleys became central players in a major drama. At the end of August 1923, Mounted Constable Kemp of the Northern Territory police arrived at Gordon Downs (plate 125) and received a report from the manager, J. Egan, that 'James Bickley of Granny's Soak had just recovered from having his throat cut by a stock-boy named "Willie", alias "Pitchel", who was then Escaping from police in the bush'.⁴² Egan told Kemp that the Western Australian police had already spent two weeks looking for Willie, but had temporarily returned to Halls Creek to attend the annual visit of the Inspector of Police. Unless otherwise stated the following summary is based on the version of events written by the Wave Hill police on October 19th 1923.⁴³

As soon as he heard the story, Mounted Constable Kemp began his own investigation and within a week had received information that "Willie" had been joined by "Winter" and 2 gins', and was heading west towards rough country on Nicholson station, and that he was going to try and get hold of a rifle. In fact, Willie was headed in the opposite direction. On September 10th at Flora Valley station, Kemp joined forces with Constable Flinders of the Western Australian police. First, they went to Granny's Soak to enlist Elijah Bickley's aid in the coming manhunt. He agreed to go, and was to be a witness and participant in all that

⁴¹ James, David and Elijah Bickley to 'Minister of Lands', 21-10-1921. Northern Territory Archives, F28, Box 11, GL 332; Telegram from Director of Lands to Northern Territory Administrator, 24-1-1922. Northern Territory Archives, F28, Box 11, GL 332.

⁴² Mounted Constable E. Heathcock to Acting Inspector Burt, 31-8-1923, reporting on patrol by Mounted Constable Kemp to Gordon Downs and the hunt for Willie. Wave Hill police journal, Northern Territory Archives, F292.

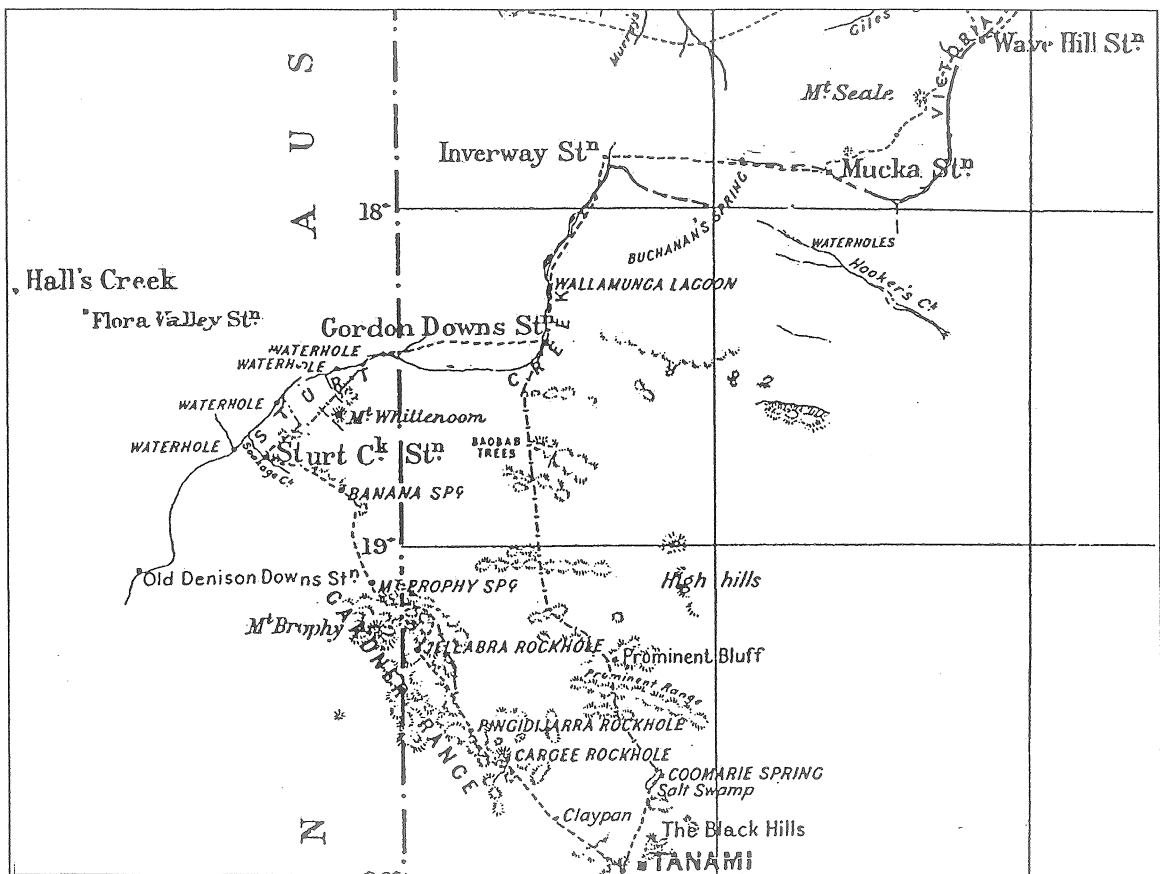
⁴³ Ibid.

followed.⁴⁴ On September 17th the two Mounted Constables, Elijah Bickley, W. Barry (manager of Sturt Creek station⁴⁵), a number of Western Australian and Northern Territory trackers, and several Gordon Downs 'boys' who knew Willie's track, entered the desert country to find Willie.

The party visited a number of waterholes whose names belie the harshness of the country – Sweetwater Hole, Cowcudalgi, Marrlla Hole, Cooljun. At Marrlla they found a camp of 'bush blacks' who said that Willie had 'gone by Jumbra towards Farqhanson's [Inverway station] about [a] month previous.' After searching around Marrlla for another three days the party headed east. At Cooljun they found a 'beast bogged in hole & water not fit to drink – country burnt completely out,' and at Bunda Top Hole they found two 'stock-boys' on walkabout, and learned from them that Willie had gone into rough country east of Inverway. The police took the two stockboys with them so that they could not warn Willie of their approach.

⁴⁴ Inquest Book, Darwin, 1904-35. Northern Territory Archives, F 286.

⁴⁵ 'W. Barry' appears to be a mistake as other records refer to Jack Barry as the manager at this time (M. Terry, *Hidden Wealth and Hiding People*, Putnam, London, 1931, p. 116).



Map 17: The sweep of country in which the manhunt for Willie took place. Neave Gorge is immediately below Mt. Seale, at the top right of the map.

On arrival at Inverway on the 26th, they learnt that Willie ‘was “running” about Stony Bar & Spring Ck’ on the headwaters of the Victoria River. Continuing eastward, they found twenty-seven Aborigines at Buchanan Spring. The police formed a base camp at the spring and detained the Aborigines found there, handcuffing several and assigning two Western Australian trackers to guard them. Later Mounted Constable Kemp justified detaining and providing food to these Aborigines, stating that:

The natives in question, were kept under surveillance and fed during the period prior capture of Willie, to prevent them warning him of an approach, which they most certainly would have done. They all know that Willie had committed a serious offence, and he was kept posted of police movements; if these natives had not been confined to our camp, we may have still been searching for Willie in the rough country he knew so well.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Mounted Constable H. E. Kemp to Inspector of Police, 4-3-1924. Wave Hill police letter book, Northern Territory Archives, F589.

The party then continued on foot, searching for several days around Hooker Creek, Maggie Creek and the old Catfish outstation (plate 126), before discovering recent tracks of Aborigines heading towards Spring Creek. They followed these tracks through rough country for another five days, and finally found Willie's tracks near Neave Gorge on October 6th. Following these tracks, the police discovered a large camp of Aborigines in the gorge. The Neave Gorge area is known to Victoria River Aborigines as Walakula; it is very important site on the track of the Dingo Dreaming,⁴⁷ and it is probable that the Aborigines were gathered there for ceremonial reasons.

The next day was the day of reckoning. Mounted Constable Kemp reported that, 'At daylight – party raided large camp – called on Willie to surrender – he replied by throwing spears and was shot by police whilst escaping to the immediate rough country in Neave Gorge' (plate 127). Mission accomplished, the police party returned to the base camp at Buchanan Springs. Several Aborigines captured at the Neave Gorge camp were taken to the base camp where they were "lectured" – spears broken and released.⁴⁸ Exactly why the word 'lectured' was placed in double inverted commas in the police report is interesting. One can't help but wonder whether it meant 'beaten', rather than 'spoken to sternly'. The Aborigines who had been held at Buchanan Springs were released and some who 'had been of service' were given tobacco. Back at Inverway an inquest into the shooting of Willie was held by Harry Farquharson, J.P. Apparently on the basis of verbal evidence alone he handed down a verdict of 'justifiable homicide', and commended Mounted Constables Kemp and Flinders for their 'capable & persistent manner in finalizing this case.'⁴⁹

After the manhunt and eventual shooting of Willie the police investigated the circumstances of the attack on Bickley. Mounted Constable Heathcock reported that,

⁴⁷ I have been told this by a number of Aborigines at Daguragu Community. Among the Walbiri, who share this Dreaming track with the Gurindji people at Daguragu, the site is called Walgara (M. Meggitt, 'Gadjari among the Walbiri Aborigines of Central Australia'. *Oceania*, vol. 36, no. 3, 1966, pp. 193 and map on page 178).

⁴⁸ Wave Hill police journal, 8-10-1923. Northern Territory Archives, F292.

⁴⁹ Ibid: entry for 12-10-1923.

M.C. Kemp & I have made minute enquiries concerning this assault on Bickley & find...that there is no suggestion of drink mentioned.

Furthermore, I have known James Bickley for more than six years & have never known him to drink & have always known him as a rather decent sort of man.⁵⁰

So what was the cause of the attack on Bickley? Shortly after Willie was shot and the case considered closed, two local white men raised doubts about the official version of events. In one instance allegations were made against the police and in the other against J. Egan, the manager of Gordon Downs (plate 128).

In March 1924 Tom Laurie (plate 129), a prospector who had rendered assistance to James Bickley on the morning after he was attacked, wrote a letter to the Chief Protector of Aborigines in Perth. In it he claimed that there was a native rumour going around that Egan had told Willie to kill Bickley. He pointed out that Egan had a set against both himself and Bickley for previously 'interfering in native matters', and that Egan knew he and Bickley were in Bickley's camp because a few days before they had passed through Gordon Downs on their way to the camp. According to Laurie, Willie was 'Egan's boy', was 'more intelligent than most natives', and was 'well behaved and thought a deal of by previous managers of Gordon Downs.' After the attack, Bickley had told Laurie that he did not know Willie and 'certainly never took his lubra', a common cause of similar trouble. Laurie said he knew Willie well, and unless there was a good reason, he could not see that Willie would take a station horse and ride forty miles from Gordon Downs to Bickley's camp, hang about until 10 pm, and then creep in and try to kill Bickley. No motive had been put forward by the police or anyone else, and Laurie's conclusion was that Willie had 'been prompted to act by the superior domination of the white' (that is, by Egan).⁵¹

⁵⁰ E. Heathcock to Acting Inspector Burt, 31-10-1923. Wave Hill police letter book, Northern Territory Archives, F589.

⁵¹ T. Laurie to the chief Protector of Aborigines, 22-3-1924. State Records Office of Western Australia, Acc 430, item 4871.

Inspector Douglas of the Derby police advised the Chief Protector that Laurie's allegations were probably the result of an 'old trouble'⁵² between Laurie and Egan, and that he had known Egan for some years and could not believe he would have told Willie to kill Bickley.⁵³ Because the main players in the affair lived in the Territory and the crime itself had been committed there, Douglas further advised that any additional investigations would have to be carried out by the Northern Territory police. There is no evidence that this ever occurred.

The other letter was written in February 1924 by a man named W. Sclanders, and sent to Tom Woodlands, the Protector in charge of the Moolaboola Aboriginal station. Sclanders reported Aboriginal rumours that the police hunting Willie had waited at Buchanan Springs, while Elijah Bickley and six trackers followed Willie's tracks. Elijah's party was supposed to have caught Willie and after a short conversation with him, shot him, cut off his head and carried it back to Buchanan Springs. The trackers were also said to have shot two other Aborigines who were running away, and burnt their bodies.⁵⁴ Woodlands forwarded Sclanders' letter to the Chief Protector in Perth and added that he had heard the rumours himself.⁵⁵

Inspector Douglas was sent to investigate Sclanders' allegations. In his report he said he questioned four of the trackers involved who told him only Willie had been shot, and that he made general inquiries throughout the district but found nothing to support Sclanders' claim. He also said he questioned Mulga Jim, who was Sclanders' main informant and one

⁵² The 'old trouble' was a court action brought against Egan after a complaint by Laurie that Egan had 'half beaten to death with a hobble chain' a young Aboriginal woman at Gordon Downs. Egan was convicted and fined £5. Laurie's complaint was supposed to have been kept confidential but Egan found out who it was and afterwards victimised Laurie whenever he could (T. Laurie to the chief Protector of Aborigines, 22-3-1924. State Records Office of Western Australia, Acc 430, Item 4871; Inspector W. Douglas to the Chief Protector of Aborigines, Perth, 31-7-1924. State Records Office of Western Australia, Acc 430, Item 4871).

⁵³ Inspector W. Douglas to the Chief Protector of Aborigines, Perth, 31-7-1924. State Records Office of Western Australia, Acc 430, Item 4871.

⁵⁴ W. Sclanders to T. Woodlands, manager of Mooloolaba station, 18-2-1924. State Records Office of Western Australia, Acc 430, Item 4871; Translation of code telegram from T. Woodlands to Chief Protector of Aborigines, 20-2-1925. State Records Office of Western Australia, Acc 430, Item 4871.

⁵⁵ Translation of code telegram from T. Woodlands to Chief Protector of Aborigines, 20-2-1925. State Records Office of Western Australia, Acc 430, item 4871.

of the party that shot Willie, and that Mulga Jim maintained only Willie was shot. Douglas noted that both Sclanders and Woodlands had grievances against Constable Flinders, and had 'joined forces to endeavour to get rid of Flinders from Halls Creek.' He concluded that there was no evidence that the original police report was flawed and that the rumours of other Aborigines being shot were baseless.⁵⁶ Sclanders was in no position to argue the point because later in 1924 he died after a fall down a well.⁵⁷

So what was the truth of the matter? We will probably never know with any certainty, but in 1991 I interviewed an eye-witness to the shooting of Willie. Inverway Mick (now deceased) was a small child in the Neave Gorge camp when Willie was shot, and later heard details of the manhunt from various Aborigines involved. When I interviewed him he was probably the last person alive who had been there on the fateful day. According to Mick there were actually two brothers involved in the attack on Bickley, and he was attacked by one of them because he (Bickley) had taken his wife. In Mick's words:

This nother one bin sneakin' up him find the rifle, nah, knife – butcher's knife. That kadia [European] and that girl bin sleep. Him bin want to go and cuttim throat. But when, soon as bin put the knife there, well he [the white man] bin, you know, put his head down a bit, you know, he [the attacker] bin cuttim this way longa whisker side, you know.⁵⁸

Mick went on to describe events that closely parallel the police account until the final moments of the manhunt. He mentioned two men met by police between Gordon Downs and Inverway, which would be the two stockmen met and detained by the police at Bunda Top Hole. He said that the police went on past Inverway homestead and found a 'big mob [of Aborigines] longa Buchanan yard, and they bin put a handcuff... They bin tied up, oh a couple of bloke bin tied up longa tree, you know. Then they went, they go through, they bin go through from Buchanan for the old Mucka Yard.'

⁵⁶ Inspector W. Douglas to the Commissioner of Police, Perth, 31-7-1924. State Records Office of Western Australia, Acc 430, Item 4871.

⁵⁷ C. Clement, *Historical Notes Relevant to the Impact Stories of the East Kimberley*, East Kimberley Impact Assessment Project, a joint project of the Centre for Resource and Environmental Studies, Australian National University, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra, Anthropology Department, University of Western Australia, and Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia, p. 2.

⁵⁸ Inverway Mick, interviewed by Darrell Lewis at Daguragu Community, c1991.

When the police finally raided the Neave Gorge camp, according to Mick, the two wanted Aborigines were captured alive and chained by the neck, and then,

They [the white police] bin ask that number one police tracker now... 'Alright. Whata you gotta do? It is your land, not ours. This your boundary and Northern Territory side and not West Australia. [the tracker replied] 'Ah, we'll have to do finish now'. They bin shoot im two fellas. Shoot im right there... They bin burn him, then they bin walk away you know.

Mick also said that when the raid took place a lot of people in the camp managed to get away, but the Western Australian trackers were sent after them and shot a large number.

Mick's account provides a motive for the attack different from the rumour circulating at the time and reported by Laurie. However, the overall correspondence of his account with the police report, and with the reports of both Laurie and Sclanders, suggests that his version of events is likely to be accurate – that at Neave Gorge two men rather than one were shot, that the men were shot after being overpowered and chained, rather than while throwing spears at the police, that their bodies were then burned, and finally, that a number of other Aborigines were afterwards shot by the Western Australian trackers in the ranges around Neave Gorge.

In spite of the murderous attack on James, the Bickleys remained committed to their dream. On November 28th 1923 they received grazing licence No. 350 for 200 square miles immediately south of and adjoining Wave Hill station.⁵⁹ True to past experience, within a year they had more problems. On October 3rd 1924 they wrote to the 'Minster for Lands' in Darwin, advising that the rent on block 350 had been paid 'by two people in a mistake unknowable to each other', and asking for a refund of £11.⁶⁰ However, this was the least of their problems. They explained that they had never used the land because they had been forced off in a dispute with Wave Hill:

⁵⁹ Director of Lands, Northern Territory, to J. D. and E. Bickley, 28-11-1923. Northern Territory Archives, F28, Box 12, GL350.

⁶⁰ J. D. and E. Bickley to Minster for Lands, Darwin, 3-10-1924. Northern Territory Archives, F28, Box 12, GL 350.

We came on to the Land in about August last & we left it on September 27 we depended on a Government Well (for water until the Wet or until we sunk a Well) on Hookers Creek about 100 yards from the main creek and we believed the Well to be on our country so we are in dispute with Wave Hill Boundary the Well is not marked on the map and we intended to water our stock at the Well until it rained but we received a Notice from the Wave Hill Station manager to remove all our stock or otherwise he will Impound and there is no other Water in the District & we were forced to Destroy our goats 150 head by cutting their throats as we could not take them with us sooner or let them perish for Water we have had a 40 miles stage through the Desert and it was impossible to bring them with us so we have decided to leave that part for good after going to a lot of Trouble in Bringing our stock over to it so we have had no use of the Block & we decided to leave the block for good and we ask you kindly to send us our £11 Eleven pound back £11 was sent as over paid in a mistake now I put it I think plain to you we are over £250 out by having anything to do with the Block on Hookers Creek no 350.

The Bickleys went on to explain what their hopes had been and although their dream undoubtedly was unrealistic, even amusing, it is hard to not be moved by their plight:

we Intended to breed up those 150 goats for Moyah hair & and to experiment in growing Wheat & Cotton we went there to make it a Home which we are forced to leave behind the Well is not marked on the map & the Well could be on our block and there is no other Water in the district So we want our £11 paid back to us as £11 was paid by two parties in a mistake we travelled 200 miles to come on the block through the Desert & now we got to go back with disgust – we are only poor people & only got a few horses & cattle & goats & we could not afford to go to Darwin in Law with Vestey Bros over our Boundary as our means are limited we are only Workers and £11 would be a help to us as we are in a bad way for want of cash as it cost us all we had to bring things on to Hookers Creek thinking we was going to do well and now we are going back to where we came from and penniless and down in Heart. ...

And just in case the Lands Department had not got the message by this time, they added the following postscript:

PS we have had a bad time coming on to Hookers Creek and we got a very bad time going back I let you understand we are gone off the block & at present camping on Mr Owan Cummings block by his permission until it rains as it is impossible to go any further as there is no more Water on our way and very Small Water here if Wave Hill impounded our Stock which he said he would do we have no money to

release them as we spent all we had to bring things on to block 350 Hookers Creek & which we had to leave behind⁶¹

For the Bickleys this was a shattering blow and they were justifiably bitter at the turn of events. Wave Hill was then owned by the Northern Agency, better known as Vestey's, a wealthy and powerful British company with extensive properties in Australia, Britain and many other countries around the world,⁶² so the Bickleys were quite right not to attempt redress through the law. Although it almost certainly was not Lord Vestey who concerned himself with this would-be neighbour, Joe Egan, the then manager of Wave Hill,⁶³ was the face of Vestey's on the ground. For the Bickleys the difference was academic.

It was a classic Australian story of the 'little man' versus the power of money and authority, and of a mean and bullying attitude on the part of the representative of this power and authority, the Wave Hill manager. Egan had been accused of holding a grudge against James Bickley at the time of the knife attack a year earlier, when he was manager of Gordon Downs and before he took over at Wave Hill.⁶⁴ He certainly knew the Bickleys personally and opposed their 'interfering in native matters',⁶⁵ and backed by the power and wealth of the great Vestey Company he probably took any opportunity to cause them trouble, possibly even instigating violence against them.

In the early 1920s Wave Hill comprised 8,000 square miles of country, and carried 61,000 cattle and 1500 horses (plate 130).⁶⁶ Besides Wave Hill, Vestey's owned another ten stations in the Victoria River-East Kimberley region. If the disputed well had been on Wave Hill land as claimed, it is difficult to see what difference it would have made to

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² P. Knightley, *The Vestey Affair*, Macdonald Futura Publishers, London, 1981, p. 26.

⁶³ Egan was manager of Wave Hill for over two years, beginning there early in 1923 (Wave Hill police journal, entry for 16-2-1923, Northern Territory Archives, F292). He had previously been manager of Gordon Downs. Late in 1925 or early in 1926 he was transferred to Ord River station (Wave Hill police letter book, 30-9-1925, Northern Territory Archives, F292). He remained at Ord River until 1948 or 1949 (personal communication, Cec Watts, a Vestey employee for forty years).

⁶⁴ Letter from Cathie Clement to the Stockman's Hall of Fame newspaper (September 2000 issue), citing Western Australian police journal entries.

⁶⁵ T. Laurie to the Chief Protector of Aborigines, 22-3-1924. State Records Office of Western Australia, Acc 430, Item 4871.

⁶⁶ Interview with Wave Hill manager F.R. Taylor in *The Age* [Melbourne], 4-10-1921.

Wave Hill, or Lord Vestey, to let the Bickleys access the water until rain came, and to use the relatively tiny amount of grass their livestock would have required. The ultimate tragedy is that the Bickleys were almost certainly in the right. When the dispute became known to the Lands Department an official there noted that he had camped at the well the previous year, and he was of the opinion that the well *was* on the Bickley's block.⁶⁷

Whether the rent money was refunded as the Bickleys requested is unknown. Quite possibly it was not because they were still in possession of the block in January 1925, and in spite of their terrible setback they had decided to battle on:

We Write to you asking your permission to Sink Wells for Water on our block No 350 on Hookers Creek & to build yards & Huts as we want to make it our Home to bring our Wife & Family to live their if you will kindly give us permission & again we want to Experiment in growing Wheat & Maze & Coton & Fruit trees such as Peach & Apricots & Gordon Armons Oranges & Limons & etc⁶⁸

The Bickleys also wrote to Harold Nelson, MP, explaining what had happened to them on block 350 and reporting on the poor condition of the wells along the Tanami road (see plate 131). They suggested that there should be a reserve of one square mile around each of these wells, including the disputed well on Hooker Creek.⁶⁹

As far as is known, nothing more came of their would-be Garden of Eden at block 350, Tanami, but their dream had not died. Until March 1926 they appear to have retained GL177, their *Gastrolobeum*-infested block around Pingidijarra Rockhole which they first obtained in 1921,⁷⁰ and at some time they obtained another grazing licence for a block east of the Gardiner Range, because in August 1929 they wrote to the Lands Department with a now familiar complaint:

⁶⁷ Note 'for the Land Board's consideration', attached to a copy of a letter from the Collector of Public Moneys to J. D. and E. Bickley, 9-12-1924. Northern Territory Archives, F28 GL 350.

⁶⁸ J. D. and E. Bickley to Minster for Lands, Darwin, 10-1-1926. Northern Territory Archives, F28, Box 12, GL 350.

⁶⁹ J. D. and E. Bickley to Harold Nelson MP, Melbourne, 10-1-1926. Northern Territory Archives, F28, Box 12, GL 350.

⁷⁰ Map dated 17-2-1926 in Northern Territory Archives, NTRS F28 Box 6, GL 177.

