



Stockmen and Drovers

Swimming Flooded Rivers

by

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MANY years ago—indeed, more than fifty years now, long before there was any thought of Aborigines Welfare Boards—I did a great deal of stock work among the cattle in far outback Australia with aboriginal boys as my mates.

I have mustered wild cattle in the scrub, “moonlighted” them, and gone on long droving trips with the aborigines.

I have run brumbies and indeed done all kind of rough and hard station work with the aborigines and, therefore, I know, from my many years of first-hand experience, that the cattle industry in the North could not have been carried on in the pioneer days without the aid of unpaid aboriginal labour.

The aborigines have always made splendid horsemen and bushmen, and in fact, in the Kimberleys, I have often seen aboriginal girls dressed as boys doing stock work, and doing it very well indeed.

One of the best horsemen that Queensland ever produced was the now almost legendary Billy Waite, who was the hero of old-time buckjumping shows and the bushmen’s idol round the campfires outback.



Without any fuss or swank and dressed in just a pair of ragged moleskin pants, Billy would go round the Shows in Queensland picking up a few pounds by riding buckjumpers that were “unrideable.”

In these days, he would make hundreds and would probably be invited overseas to compete in the

world’s great rodeos.

Billy was a great rider and could break the heart of any outlaw. In fact, the bosses of the shows used to ask him not to ride the buckjumpers “out” but to jump off when he had demonstrated that he was master, thus giving the horse “heart” by allowing it to think it had thrown its rider.

To be able to successfully jump off a buck horse is almost as difficult as riding one!

Our aborigines make splendid drovers too, mainly because they are so observant and because they sing to the cattle at night.

Many people think cattle are just stupid animals, but that is very wrong. After cattle have been on the road for a time they get to know all the drovers, and if a stranger rides up they know immediately, for they run together and show uneasiness.

At night the aborigines corroboree to the cattle, and they really like it because the human voice seems to have a great power over them, as with many other animals.



Therefore, the drovers sing to the cattle at night and if a newchum drover is not singing to the resting cattle the boss drover will bawl out from the camp fire, “What’s the matter? Are you asleep?”

Some readers will remember the lines from “Banjo” Paterson’s poem *Clancy of the Overflow* . . . “As the stock are slowly stringing, Clancy rides behind them singing.”

Through the Floods

Aborigines are also very good at swimming cattle over rivers. I have swum some of the largest outback rivers with cattle and indeed I have swum the Georgina, the Diamantina and the Cooper whilst they were in flood.