

Barlow's three buffaloes thrived in Melville Island's tropical heat. Two years later he imported 15 more.

After 11 tragic years of isolation and loneliness in the tropics for their inhabitants, the authorities ordered the abandonment of this settlement, together with that at Port Essington.

When the last survivor of these malaria-stricken territories had gone, there remained quaint chimneys poking up through the tea-tree and pandanus—and the water buffalo!

The buildings soon fell into decay and gradually collapsed, but the buffaloes, left to their own devices, found that northern Australia was a home away from home.

These hardy, magnificent beasts, standing as tall as a man at the shoulder, with horns spanning sometimes 6 and even 8 feet, and with no natural enemies in their adopted country, soon multiplied.

The herds split up, spreading rapidly across the coastal lands of Van Diemen's Gulf, over the Coburg Peninsula, and onward into the well-grassed plains of the Adelaide, Mary and Alligator Rivers. Great herds of thousands of water buffalo, wallowing in the mud, became a familiar sight to the wandering aborigines, who avidly hunted him for food.

In 1857, the beginnings of a new buffalo herd in Australia came by accident. The barque *Florence Street*, chartered to bring buffaloes to Sydney to supply an exceptional demand for meat on the gold diggings, loaded up at various points on the Malay Peninsula and Burma.

On her trip to Australia the ship was caught in a typhoon and driven ashore at Cambridge Gulf, on the north-east coast of Western Australia.

Most of the beasts she carried were drowned, but some swam to the shore and established themselves in the water-meadows of the lower reaches of the River Ord.

In 1885, Paddy Cahill, famous N.T. character, buffalo hunter and adventurer, appeared on the scene and discovered great herds of descendants of the original Timor buffaloes in Arnhem Land. Cahill and three partners started to kill the buffaloes for their hides at the rate of 1,500 to 2,000 a month.

At that time there were, roughly, 60,000 buffaloes about. The rapid destruction soon reduced them seriously. Another hunter rented Melville Island, where there were 6,000 animals, and exported hides at the rate of 2,000 a year.

So persistent were these hunters that by 1923 the Federal Government had to take steps to protect the buffalo. No white man could hunt without a licence, and he was then allowed only to kill bulls under three years of age. However, the aborigines were not prohibited from hunting them for food.

Speaking of food, buffalo meat is palatable; the meat is a trifle pinker and somewhat more spongy than beef, but there is nothing wrong with the flavour.

In the heyday of buffalo-hunting in Australia, 50 to 60 horses were used, both for riding and as pack animals, along with motor lorries, as a standard outfit.

On a hunt, a couple of horsemen ride into the bamboo to flush the buffaloes wallowing in the mud and drive them out on to the open plains. As the animals charge from the tangled vines and sinewy tropical undergrowth, with anger mounting, waiting horsemen take up the chase.

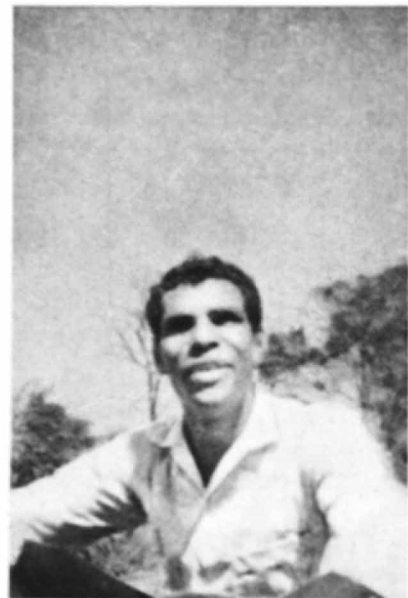
Each of these waiting hunters gallops alongside a bull. Crack! One thousand pounds of buffalo goes down in a sickening, headlong crash, the couplings of the spinal column shattered.

Because a falling bull will quickly disembowel a horse, a well-trained horse swerves swiftly to one side as the buffalo drops, to avoid its great swinging horns. Old hands will tell you that a hunter can make only *one* mistake; the buffalo sees to it that he never gets a second chance.

In certain spots the hide of most bulls is more than an inch thick. Combined with stamina and endurance, this armour-plating makes the buffalo a hard animal to stop. All the power of a sawn-off .303, the favourite weapon used, is needed to fell the beast.

Because hides spoil quickly in the hot climate if dead buffaloes are not skinned immediately, hunters always try to paralyse them by shooting them in the back. In this way, dropped buffaloes stay alive until the native skinners catch up with the hunters.

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A big smile from Fred Marshall, of Nambucca