

DC: C 004 Neil Cunningham

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Del Cunningham taping Neil Cunningham who is talking about running cattle on Massey Creek.

Neil: Around about 1960 when I was about 19, Dad acquired the lease back from the O'Loughlin family. The lease originally was taken up by our uncle Alec back in the 1930s when it was only an Occupation License which had to be renewed every year. After some years old Pat O'loughlin acquired the lease off Alec and had cattle there, then his son Mick ran cattle there & young Paddy until about 1960 when they decided they were finished with the piece of country. Old Pat had died and left it to young Pat who was a cane farmer at Hatton and Dad bought the lease off Pat and we started running cattle there in 1960.

In those days the only way you could muster cattle there, was on horse back. We would take our supplies on a packhorse or a split bag behind our saddle. There was an old hut down on the creek called No Mans Land on Massey Creek and we used to go to there. We built a lap yard on the first sand flat up the creek and we used to muster to there for starters and bring any clean skin cattle we caught and taught to drive we would drive them home to Eungella. We also had a lease on the Diggings block between Broken River and Crediton and we used to put the cattle there. We had shorthorn cattle in the early days and they had to be dipped every 6 weeks or die from the ticks, so it was a constant job. Going there and mustering every 6 weeks, we would spend a week there riding around picking up cattle, branding cattle and calves, dipping cattle with a hand spray. As we didn't have a branding cradle, we had to toss them onto the ground. It took three men to brand the calves, one sitting on the front, one sitting on the back and one to brand, cut and earmark. The bigger cattle that had to be branded were tied up as they were too large to hold down. Then as time went on about ? we put a bit of a track down Pla Creek so we could drive the Land Rover over and back. We built a bit of a hut there and another yard and a few little paddocks, including a horse paddock. Previously when we went there we had to hobble the horses and pick them up the next morning and take them to the creek to give them a drink and then hobble the ones we weren't using that day and let them feed. Once we got a track in there it made things a little bit easier.

A lot of the fencing we did was with pack horses. We put 2 bundles of star pickets in the saddle bags on the pack horse with the ends of the pickets up behind the horses' ears and tied together and strapped to the bags and carted them where we wanted them. It was a pretty painstaking thing getting the posts a few miles down the creek or wherever you were going. The barbed wire, you had to break the coils in half and put a half each side of your saddle to cart them to where you wanted them. It was a job on its own.

Mustering was a constant thing. We were sawmilling at the same time but we just had to go away from the sawmilling when we had to muster, otherwise the cattle would die from the ticks. As time went on we introduced Brahman bulls into the herd, and once you got a content of Brahman blood into the herd, you did not have to dip as often so we didn't have to work the cattle as much and steadily the cattle get a bit wilder. When you went there it was different from when you were going every 6 weeks we had to ride a bit harder, but we still got the cattle. Back in the early days there

was no lantana on the creek and very little rubbish, but as years went on and with our so called cool burn and no burn policies by the Government, lantana completely got away.

Del: About what year did you introduce the Brahmans?

Neil: Probably about 1967. Dad used to go to Rockhampton to buy bulls from the Rae family and other people that bred Brahman bulls and at the same time we introduced Brahman bulls into the Diggings block as well. We used to breed some really nice steers and sell store steers mainly. Those days the agents would come to the yards with a buyer and we sold most of the cattle on the property and then they would send a truck and pick them up and take them away if they bought them.

Del: Could you tell us about building the plunge dip at Massey Creek? How you went about that because there was no access to get a truck in there with cement.

Neil: Well those days we did everything by hand. I don't remember the year we built it. I'd have to ask Del that, as I don't remember.

Del: I do. Robert was only 2 years old and you wanted to take him with you for four days. There was no fridge and I was very worried that he would not survive without milk for four days, so it would have been 1973. (Robert went and survived!)

Neil: We decided to put in a plunge dip. Eric Chelman and Mary came over and camped in the hut for a week. Eric dug the hole by hand. In the bottom of the hole there were big granite boulders, but luckily we had the John Deere Skidder with the winch on. We backed up to the dip hole and put a wire sling around the boulders and lifted them out with the winch on the skidder and rolled them back down to the creek where they really belonged. For sand I made a track across the creek and up to the bottom of what we called the bathtub, a nice big swimming hole with a nice patch of sand beside it. Made the track to there and pushed up a ramp of sand and backed the Land Rover up to it, pushed a blade full of sand into the back of it and carted it over to the dip site, shovelled it out by hand. Then we came back to Eungella and there was a little 500gallon corrugated iron tank that had been concreted. It used to belong to Kaj Sprogoe who owned the Chalet at the time. He had some milking cows and a bit of a dairy and used the tank for a water tank at his dairy. But he had finished with it and we acquired the tank off Kaj and took it to Massey so we would have some water when we were making the cement for our dip. Carted the bags of cement over in the back of the old Land Rover and a hand cement mixer plus a heap of timber to box the dip with, then we mixed the concrete by hand, poured it by hand and rammed it by hand. George Pearce was working with us at the time. We started pouring the concrete one morning and we poured the bottom and sides up to ground level in the one day, then finished off the next day. Had it full of water within 2 days and the dip never leaked. It was a good dip for quite a few years. In the early 80s we had a wet year and a spring broke out on the top side of the dip and pushed the wall in, totally wrecked it, because we had not put any reinforcement in the wall when we built it. When we had the dip working it was much easier to dip the cattle and it kept them much cleaner for longer. And when we went to go mustering there were always heaps of young

fellows who used to just die to get over there and catch a scrubber or two and we always had plenty of extra hands.

Del: Tell us about catching the scrubber mickeys, how did you do that?

Neil: We would be riding around with a mob of quiet cattle with you for coachers, a couple of dogs each. A couple of men would ride in the lead and if you struck quiet cattle, the lead men would ride around them and put them back in the mob. Sometimes they would have scrubber mickeys with them that wouldn't block up and would run up the ridges and one bloke with a couple of dogs would go after them let the old dogs give them a good chase until they started to knock up a bit, then grab them by the tail and throw them on their side, grab them by the top side hind leg and hold them down, pull a strap from around your waist and put a strap on both their hind legs, then go back and meet up with the other men with the coacher cattle and bring them up to where the one was you'd thrown, cut his horns off and get the coachers around him and let him up. A lot of times they would bolt, but the dogs would bring them back into the mob, then you'd just hold them until if they saw you riding up towards them, they would just go back into the mob. By doing that you taught them to drive with the quiet cattle.

The only way to get any of them home from that country was to drove them home. If you were mustering for a week or so, we would draft off the ones we were going to take home a couple of days before we were due to go home and turn the other cattle out and then tail the cattle for a couple of days, water them and drive them as well as we could and then on the day we were going home we would leave the hut at daylight and drove them up the mountain where we had a yard where we could get a truck to. Things haven't changed a great deal since then, aside from the fact that we have a lot more tracks through the country. We have 4x4 utes that will carry a bull up a pretty steep hill out of the rough country and we don't have to drove them.

We got into the darting scene for quite a while. We would drive around and dart bulls, and dope them, tie them up to a tree and then come back with a vehicle with a float on and put them in the back of the ute and bring them home that way. But anyway, the darting scene slowed down because of so called druggies making amphetamines out of the drugs we used to use, so they stopped us from buying it, so we had to go back to the old way of doing it. Either trap them or catch them. In the later years we have made 2 or 3 traps where we catch quite a few. We put molasses in the traps, have a trap in spear and a trap out spear. When we decide to trap the cattle, we just close the trap out spear and go back the next day and the tailing paddocks will be full of cattle and we sort them out from there. Yard them up and take the ones we want and let the others out again.

All the years we mustered cattle everything was done on horse back. Over the years we have had some pretty good horses. We used to end up with horses that people were having a few problems with. Give them a couple of weeks at Massey Creek and there were no problems with them. Great place to take the gas out of a horse with a bad vice. All the time we were there, throwing mickeys and everything else, we didn't have many injuries. Del's brother John, one time got a bit of a poke in the thigh because he rode up beside a pretty horny sort of a mickey. He really didn't want to be that close, but the old horse got up beside the mickey, it threw its head and

poked him in the thigh, he didn't do it on purpose. Those days he was cutting cane and had to have a couple of days off. It went a bit septic on him. I remember another time there was a bull used to run on the creek near the junction of Pla and Massey Creek he'd been there for a while and we rode around him and ignored him, because we were not ready to do anything with him and he used to dodge off into the creek. One day we picked him up on the flat and he went towards the creek. I thought I might be able to bend this fellow today and I got a bit too close to him and he poked my horse in the shoulder, so I had to get the horse out of the way and the old horse was lame. Not a real bad poke, probably about 6 inches into the muscle. We poked along and got the rest of the cattle into the yard and I said to Dad I'm going to catch another horse and go back down the creek and shoot that bull. Dad said I would be lucky to find him but I said "I'm going for a look anyway". I rode back down and followed a few tracks, reckoned he had gone across the junction and up Massey Creek. I rode up the Creek and just coming out the other side he was about 70 – 80 m away. As soon as he saw me on the horse he must have thought he would poke another horse and he came jogging straight up to me. As he was coming, I stepped off the horse and stood beside a tree with the old 30 and when he was close enough I shot him and took all the poke out of him.

As the kids grew up they used to like to go to Massey with us. We had to teach them to stay out of the way of the bulls and if the bull looked like it was going to charge, the only place to go was up the hill, no matter how steep because the bulls would not chase you much. If you went down the hill, the bulls could go like a mail train and 9 times out of 10 they had a big chance of catching you if you went downhill.

In the early 80s we were down there mustering, we had quite a crew that time, Graeme Ware was with us, Gary Ware, Laurie Hansen, Robert, John and myself. We saw a big mob of bullocks that had been dodging us for a while. We had a big mob of coacher cattle on the eastern side of Massey and we left the others there to hold them. Laurie, John and I rode after the bullocks up Massey on the NW side, the Dicks Tableland side. We had put the old block fence up a month or two earlier and trapped the bullocks down on that side of it. We rode up the creek and thought they would be there somewhere and we spotted them and they poked along and went up the creek and onto the fence and they pulled up, which was pretty lucky. We just poked around and I said to Laurie "If these bullocks decided to go I will go with them", not thinking about John, assuming that Laurie would bring John along with him. Anyway the bullocks went and I went with them down and across Massey, I got on the right side of them and went down and put them into the mob of cattle we had blocked up waiting for them. About 15 minutes later Laurie came riding along and he was on his own. Asked him where John was and he didn't know. So I had to go and look for him. I rode back up to where we had left him and couldn't find a sign of him, so I went back to the mob and we had a bit of a discussion and decided we would have to let the cattle go and go and look for John. We rode around for quite a while and couldn't pick up any tracks or any sign of him. He had been riding a good old mare of mine. I wanted him to ride the old pony he used to ride and he didn't want to ride it because he was too dopey, too slow. If he had been riding the pony, he would have never got lost because the horse would have brought him home. Anyway it got dark and we were riding up the creek and it was reasonably moonlight and come to a big patch of rubbish. We were riding along and the old mare I was on was a good mare to ride in the dark and her ears

pricked and she baulked a bit and I said to the fellows with me and I said there might be a big old scrub bull standing in that patch of rubbish and I went "Hoy" and a voice came out of the dark "Is that you Dad?" We had found John. He must have rode around until he could not ride anymore and he tied the old mare up to a tree and pulled the saddle off and he was fast asleep, virtually underneath the mare. Lucky she was a good quiet thing. Anyway we got him back on the horse and headed home and got back to the hut at about 9:30pm. Those bullocks, we never picked them up in a mob again. Over the years, we would pick one up at a time, some we never saw. That's what cattle are like in that country. Bullocks or stags will get together and run together after they get to a certain age, they just leave the old cows and run on their own. It makes them a lot harder to do anything with them when they get to that age. The only bullocks to get to that age are the ones we have missed. You always miss a few.

Back in those days, every night we bathed in the cold old creek and no one worried about it, but now days, we light the fire up and get some hot water for the shower. Too many mod cons.

In the days when we first started mustering in that country there would only be me and Dad and my brother Russell. We would pick up cattle and if they were towey, there was no way you could pull up and have lunch, all three of us had to stay with the cows. There were lots of lunches that we ate a sandwich while sitting on the back of the horse while sitting around the cattle or else you just didn't have any. Some days we'd go to muster and ride out to where we found a mob of cattle and it might only be 10o'clock, but we would decide that before we did anything we would eat lunch and then go and muster the cattle at least that way we had something in our belly, because most times we would not get back to the camp on the creek until dark. A lot of cooking in those days was done in the old camp oven. We would put a roast or something on before we left the camp. We worked out that it didn't need a lot of heat because it would be there all day, so we'd put just enough coals to give it a bit of a cook for starters, then the heat of the camp oven would cook the rest. We would come home about 7 o'clock and all we had to do was get the meat out and throw a few spuds in and in  $\frac{3}{4}$  hour we would be eating a roast meal which tasted awfully good. When you are hungry tucker always tastes good!

Del: I know when our kids used to go over there, they learned to eat stew. They wouldn't eat stew at home, but would eat it at Massey Creek. I think they liked Dad's cooking better.

Neil: Only because I used to make my stews nice and thick, you could stand a spoon in them and it wouldn't fall over. That's the only way to eat a stew, I can't stand these runny ones. The other thing was they were dam hungry when they got fed, that's what made them like my cooking. Used to be pretty good those days, I'd go over there riding around and the three kids would go with me in the 80s to the 90s they all learned to ride a horse fairly well and get around the cows. I remember one time myself and the three kids Leigh, Robert & John were riding around and any cattle we saw we would block them up and sit with them. I had given Leigh an old black pony I used to call Black Jack he was out of a pony mare Bill Johnston had. I think she might have come from old Jimmy Peoples originally and she had a foal by a horse from Turrawulla and he wasn't a very flash looking horse, but he was a hell of a good horse. I had ridden him for quite a few years and he was getting a bit old, but Leigh used to ride him and one day we were there and poking

around a big mob of cattle on the sand flat up Massey and they started to move off a bit and I was just jogging along and a big bull came out and headed off up the creek and this old horse Leigh was riding decided to go too. It gave me a hell of a fright because I thought the horse was going to take her down and get her in to trouble, but anyway she managed to get a bit of a hold on one rein and pull him in a circle and bring him back which was a good thing. But the old horse was going, set on blocking the bull because he knew he should not have been running away.

They used to enjoy that sort of thing and they still do if they get a chance to go. Robert gives me a fair sort of a hand still, he is always there when I am doing something. Noel Strack who married Leigh, comes too when I need a hand and he is a good help as well. Plus there are always a couple of others. The neighbor Troy McEvoy comes too and the Stanieg boys. They have been going over with us for years and I think they are a bit sorry that I have slowed down as I got a bit older and we don't go as often as we should. We do a lot more trapping now than we used to those days. Back in the early days we started off with a few hanging dog types, then we moved onto the blue cattle dogs which were really good dogs, weren't many cattle they didn't bring back and then we graduated to the collie cattle cross and they have been really good dogs for the last 25 or more years. I still have a fair team of them. A couple of older ones, some young ones that are working well and a young pup coming on. You have to have a pup coming on in case an old one dies on you or something happens.

We have had heaps of different types of people been and camped in the hut at different times. I remember when Dad wasn't real good he was in the Base Hospital and got to know a Doctor by the name of Field. He was a relation to the owners of Fields in Mackay, they owned half the town at one time. This Doctor was a grandson of one of those and Dad got to talking to him about Massey and he got to know that there was a hut there. One day he said to Dad that there were a few of them who would like to go over for a weekend, how would he go about it. Dad told me about it and I said that if they want to come up on a Friday afternoon, I would take them over and drop them at the hut and go down Sunday afternoon and bring them back again. There were about 8 or 10 of them a couple of doctors, a heap of nurses and others and I dropped them down there before dark and got a bit of a fire going and showed them how to light the larrikin lamps and then I came back to Eungella.

When I got back over there on the Sunday they were telling me some of their stories of what went on over the weekend. They said that after I left on the Friday afternoon, they all had a few beers and a few wines and whatever else, had a feed and decided to go into the hut and go to bed. It was a real moonlight night and they went into the hut and organized their beds and then blew the hurricane lamps out and they are laying there looking up and one of them asked if they had noticed if the hut had a roof or not because he could see stars. One of the others said that there definitely was a roof on the hut, but it does look like stars. Next thing one of them was out with a broom poking up to see if there was in fact a roof on the hut. After a while they worked out that the stars they could see was the moon shining through the nail holes in the iron which had been used before. About half way through the night a couple of possums started singing out. They had never heard a possum singing out, they make a bit of a funny noise, something between a hiss and a growl, and if you get a couple of them going it sounds like there is a bit of a war going on. That

frightened hell out of them, they didn't know what it was. They found out when I went back down and told them it would have been a couple of old possums having a bit of a yarn to each other.

Lots of times we have been over there and it has come in and rained, but only a couple of times we have had to walk home. Most times we had enough time to stay there for another day. If you get a storm, you can't get up the road that day, but if you leave it until after lunch the next day and you don't get an early storm, you can get home. Sometimes you might have to wait 2 days, but there weren't many times we had to walk out. I remember one time we had to walk out. Del & the kids and a couple of our workers and I went over and it was stormy weather. We took two cars and left one at the top of the hill, only about 1 ½km from the creek. We went down the creek and did a bit of fishing and it stormed and we couldn't drive home. I said we could stay and go home tomorrow, but Del wanted to get home because she had to work the next day, we had to go. We walked home and I think if ever we get stuck there again Del will wait for as long as it takes and drive home in the car before she walks up the hill again.

Del: I'll die there before I walk home again!

Neil: It is not a very good walk unless you are pretty fit. It is not that far, but on the altimeter I think it is about a 600 ft climb in 1 ½ km, and very steep going most of the way. Amazing though, where a 4x4 will go. The old Land Rovers revolutionized the ability to drive around the bush and of course the later ones with suspensions that make you feel like you are driving on the bitumen most of the time.

Another time we were over doing a bit of fencing. It was after Russell got killed and his son Owen had gone to Sydney training with Manley Sea Eagles Football Team. He came home for a holiday and we were over there fencing from the old hut up to the Eungella Station boundary, it is pretty steep country. Everything virtually had to be carried by hand, the star pickets carried by hand, driven by hand and the wire had to be pulled out by hand and we were pulling it up the hill which is fairly steep. We were working away there one day and Owen was really fit from his football training and after a couple of hours he said "I'm buggered and you old buggers are still pulling the wire up the hill. They ought to bring the footballers up here to do their football training, they might get fit, proper fit. "

Over the years we've had different fellows that used to go over there with us, they would stay at the hut different times and do the cooking for us while we were away mustering. Gregory Burgess was one of them and he wasn't a bad cook either, but anyway he had a feed ready for us one evening when we got home. Bill Johnston was with us that time too and we walked in and Bill asked what was for tea and Greg said it was curried meat balls with a bit of chilli. Gees, Bill said, "I won't be having any, I don't eat chilli or curry." Greg said to him by the looks of you, missing out on one feed won't hurt. Bill just looked at him and half grinned, but didn't eat any of Greg's curried chilli meat balls but everyone else did and they were pretty good. We have had others. Dave Weick used to go with us a bit too and he was cooking some fish one night and he forgot that when you are cooking on a wood fire you have to keep stoking the fire to keep the fat hot. We ended up with a few half raw fish, but other than that he wasn't a bad cook either. He used to muster with us a bit and he worked for me for a while too, he wasn't too bad.