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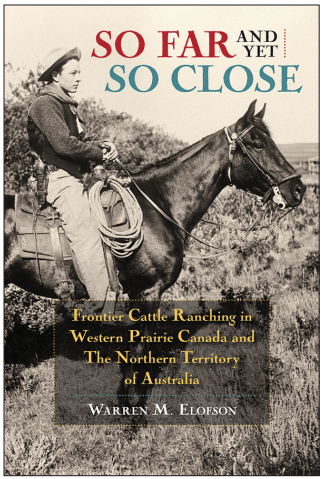

SO FAR AND YET SO CLOSE: FRONTIER CATTLE RANCHING IN WESTERN PRAIRIE CANADA AND THE NORTHERN TERRITORY OF AUSTRALIA

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THE HORSE TRADE

Many of the first ranchers in both the Canadian West and the Australian north believed that, along with beef cattle, they could produce quality equine stock within just a few years using the open range system. "Cattle and horses thrive well, especially the latter," the Government Resident in the Northern Territory wrote in his quarterly report of May 1886. He was expressing the widely held opinion that, because horses are more mobile than cattle, they are better able to withstand a difficult environment. "In dry seasons they are able to travel further from the water for feed . . . and the same applies to travelling to market." It is only rarely that

> the road to a market is open for travelling stock throughout its entire length. When the first 500 miles is opened by rain, the other half suffers from want thereof. I am of opinion that . . . [the Territory] will eventually be the chief horse-producing district of Australia. Its contiguity to the tropics renders horses more hardy and better able to cope with the heat and other drawbacks attaching to a tropical country than animals bred further south; . . . horses can always be travelled . . . in the most unfavorable season yet experienced. In the course of four or five years, no doubt large numbers will be sent for shipment and use in Northern Territory.[1]

There was merit in the argument that horses were able to adapt to the rigours of life on the open range. In both Australia and in Canada a

sizeable wild horse population emerged without human intervention. Some of the first Australian horses were brought from Timor to Port Essington, on the northern tip of the top end, by late eighteenth- or early nineteenth-century British settlers. These were the Timor ponies. Some of their descendants escaped and roamed the Coburg peninsula thereafter like any other feral species. Horses were introduced to southern Australia at about the same time as the Timors, and some of their descendants also escaped or were released from captivity when it was discovered that the camel, which arrived in 1840, was better suited to dealing with desert conditions.[2] Eventually these horses interbred with the Timors to produce what came to be known as the "brumby."[3] Today the majority of the 300,000 feral horses in Australia as a whole are in Queensland and the Northern Territory. They have adapted to the rank vegetation and erratic elements in arid regions. They have little to fear from predators or disease in the outback but can experience high mortality during drought. Still the population has continued to grow. Mares breed in spring to summer and on average produce one foal every two years.[4] In the nineteenth century, pastoralists in the state of New South Wales began domesticating brumbies, breeding them to Old World species and turning them into both harness and saddle horses known as "Walers." Equine historians tell us that the Waler was considered the finest soldier's horse in the world, gaining international acclaim for its stamina and reliability during the Indian Mutiny, the Boer War, and the First World War.[5]

Under at least equally difficult conditions, a similar lot of wild horses survived in the foothills of Alberta. The Canadian herds have not grown as spectacularly as the Australian herds in the century or so since the first of them escaped from the frontier ranches because the animals are at times rounded up and "harvested" by entrepreneurs and conservationists. Wolf predation on newborns and illegal hunting by humans have also taken a toll.[6] Moreover, the human population in this region is considerably more dense than that in the Australian outback. Current estimates peg the number of wild horses currently in the foothills at between five hundred and a thousand.[7] On both continents the stronger, heartier representatives of the species have been able to acclimatize to the surroundings and pass their durable qualities on from generation to generation.

Considering that horse populations were able to adapt on their own to the natural environment on the two continents, it at first seems curious

Australian Waler horse encampment on Mount Olivet and Mount Scopus near Jerusalem, 1918. Library of Congress, LC-DIG-ppmsca-13291-00108.

that the early pastoralists had very limited success in breeding them for commercial purposes. There were two basic types of horses that they tried to produce. One was the purebred (or nearly purebred) – heaviest set animals with a very powerful-looking, well proportioned, and elegant body. These they hoped to sell principally to breeders who desired graceful animals for the show ring or for pulling stylish carriages; or to the British or Indian military for their highest ranking officers or for hauling their most cumbersome long-range artillery. The other type was less elegant but sturdy working horses of mixed ancestry that ranchers needed to control their range herds or that farmers required to plough and cultivate their fields or that ordinary soldiers required in times of war. History would prove that the latter types could be raised on the open range but only if the foundational herds were solid. It was in attempting to produce the former type on the open range that virtually none the ranchers on either frontier succeeded. The reason was simple – in the short term, at least, it is almost impossible to efficiently raise mounts of that sort without close, hands-on management and control.

The Walrond papers in the Glenbow Archives in Calgary provide significant insights into the well-bred horse business in western Canada. Dr. Duncan McEachran raised pedigree Clydesdales on his farm at Ormstown, Quebec, and in the 1880s he began sending out Clydes and Shires to the western ranch with the aim of building up a herd of the

Working ponies, Spencer Brothers' ranch, Milk River Ridge, Alberta, ca. 1900. Glenbow Archives, NA-2927-1.

highest quality stock, which he hoped would supplement the cattle business. His enthusiasm is evident in the letters he wrote to his head office in London. "The mares and foals are doing well," he reported, "and I am of opinion agreed universally here that this . . . range is the best horse range in Alberta or anywhere else. I hope arrangements will be made for 200 or 300 fillies with stallions for next spring as they are" almost certain to be "immensely profitable."[8] By 1894 McEachran had a core of 546 of these animals on the ranch.[9] For the next few years he ran between 130 and 170 geldings, which he hoped to market in Canada and Great Britain, and 315 to 375 mares and fillies, the most productive of which were for breeding purposes and the rest for selling along with the geldings. The ranch also maintained several stallions, and each year the operation produced well over a hundred foals. The methods gradually developed for nurturing the animals brought modest refinement to the open range system. The older pregnant mares with the younger and frailer foals were cut out of the herd as winter set in and fed oat hay so they would be in better condition and produce more, and more nutritious, milk for their offspring.[10] However,

such measures only temporarily protected just a small percentage of the animals from environmental conditions. All the rest felt the full brunt of those conditions. Among them resurgent wolf populations were the most destructive.[11] After all the horses had been rounded up in the fall of 1894, David Warnock reported with obvious incredulity that "we have only gathered forty-nine yearlings out of one hundred and one turned out in May last . . . [We] have thoroughly ridden all the surrounding country within a radius of 20 miles from the ranche and are satisfied that we have found all that are alive . . . The number of wolves in this part of the range at present is I think unprecedented."[12] All the Eastern horses, he noted, are "entirely devoid of the instinct of self-preservation."[13] The ordinary mixed-breed riding horses that were used for working the cattle herds and which had for generations been born and raised in the West were faring much better. The "cayuse[s] are afraid of wolves," and "will fight when cornered." They "seldom get bitten."[14]

The other major challenge confronting the business was the difficulty of producing animals on the open range that showed well to discriminating clients. Buyers of the highest-quality steeds expected them to have a prodigious, powerful-looking body and a smooth, well-groomed, healthy coat. The Walrond animals repeatedly fell well short of the buyers' expectations. From a strictly cosmetic point of view a great impediment was simply the brands on their hides. Branding was necessary under the open range system for reasons not limited to the need to cut down on rustling. Because livestock wandered, and mixed and mingled over a wide area, branding was the means of indicating not only which horses belonged to which ranches but also age and ancestry. The animals were often marked on the flank, the shoulder, the cheek, and under the mane. Eastern buyers viewed this as a form of disfigurement and reacted accordingly. "It is a great pity to number and disfigure the young stock with so many brands," Warnock grumbled. "Some of the best fillies and geldings are branded in no less than four different places – in fact they are covered with brands like a bunch of Texas steers – and their value in the best markets much depreciated in consequence."[15]

Another problem was that, for the animals to exude a very muscular and healthy build, weather conditions needed to be almost perfect. Often, of course, they were not. During the warm summer months, horses, along with the cattle, would overgraze the grass along natural water sources to

such a distance that it would become necessary for them to travel almost constantly to satisfy both thirst and hunger. They thus also could end up walking off more energy than they were able to take on. "Although the wolves have not bothered any of them lately the mares and foals are not as fat as they should be," a Walrond employee noted; "Some of the foals are getting footsore with traveling. The days are getting shorter now and the mares do not get as much feed as they should."[16] When the animals went into winter in a poor state the cold weather was bound to cause a higher death rate than would have occurred were they corralled, stabled, and fed. The ones that were most at risk on the plains were those that were imported and then almost immediately left on their own to fend for themselves. In the winter of 1888 one of the recently acquired fillies fell sick due to "exposure to the cold." The men "blanketed" her and gave her "a dose of linseed oil" but to no avail.[17]

The losses to cold weather, though relatively speaking significant, do not seem to have been as great as those from wolf predation. Compared to cattle, horses are reasonably well equipped to survive the harsh elements. They grow a thick coat when temperatures dip for prolonged periods and they are adept at scavenging for food. Unlike cattle, they will "paw" through deep coverings of snow to feed on the grasses below. Consequently most of them managed to get enough to eat on the open range to sustain life. But after going into the winter in less than fit form they certainly were unlikely to improve. Their digestive systems were not capable of ingesting enough energy as they scrounged overgrazed winter pastures to keep them in pristine condition. When they were brought in from the ranges in the spring, their coats were usually dull and their bodies a little on the gaunt side. This problem was compounded by the fact that, before wells and pumps were utilized, the natural water supply was usually not ample in the wintertime, when the creeks and streams froze. "The majority" of the horses "are now on Callum Creek," Warnock told McEachran in January 1894.

> [While] there is good footing . . . the creek is giving a lot of trouble again and today three of us are all . . . chopping a hole [in the ice] for the calves and foals to drink . . . We had to open a new hole and had to cut through ice fully three feet thick to strike water and then cut grades on both sides to

> allow the animals to reach water. In spite of all the time and labour spent the stock do not get sufficient water. It requires some one to watch the . . . holes continually as calves and foals are constantly falling in and if not immediately rescued would drown.[18]

Horses, like cattle, can get by without water by eating snow. However, this is not ideal and, in combination with a less than perfect food supply, it negatively affected how they looked. "The 5 years old geldings . . . are rough in their coats, and would not compare favorably with Eastern horses. If they only had three weeks of green grass they would have quite a different appearance," the men would typically warn their manager in the spring.[19] Oscillating temperatures sometimes proved tough for the horses to adjust to as well. "Up till the last night or two, very hard frost has prevailed," Warnock reported in 1895, and "the changeable weather has been extremely trying to stock, of every description . . . I find that our horses are nearly all coughing, and not looking well." A "bad form" of the disease known as "strangles . . . has broken out amongst the yearlings, and I am afraid we will lose several of the weaker ones."[20]

Records are not available to indicate the Walrond's reproduction rate, but considering the quality of the pasturelands it could not have been good, as proper nutrition during the gestation period is so important. One thing is beyond doubt: along with hide disfigurement, poor conditioning consistently kept the overall value of the ranch's equine stock down. Time and again the managers offered the best of the Clydes and Shires for sale, and in nearly every case discussed in their papers either they or their clients were disappointed with the results. In April 1894 McEachran concluded an agreement with Major James Bell to supply the North-West Mounted Police establishment at Indian Head in the Assiniboia region with 16 head of Clydesdale mares.[21] The men selected "the pick of the not-in-foal" mares for the deal. Later Bell complained that they "were too light" and just "not the class he expected." Warnock responded to his complaints by insisting that the Major needed to "take into consideration the fact that these mares had just come through a hard winter. By the middle of June they would have averaged 150 to 200 lbs. heavier and would have had altogether a different appearance."[22]

On a number of occasions McEachran and his onsite manager put some of the finest animals through Eastern sales rings. In November 1893 they tried Glasgow. When Warnock heard the results he expressed his surprise that they had "received such small figures."[23] In the autumn of 1894 they sent geldings overseas and Warnock once again was "very much disappointed" that they had "sold badly."[24] In the fall of 1895 they decided to try the Montreal market in hopes that farmers in Quebec would want the horses as beasts of burden. The men cut out "a very nice lot" that were "well broken" and "fit to go into hard work."[25] McEachran held the horses in Montreal for several months to feed and groom them before the sale.[26] When it was over, he and his manager were "extremely disappointed that the horses . . . met with such a poor demand."[27] Attempts to market the second and third best Walrond animals proved every bit as discouraging. The ranch, like any other frontier breeding operation, always had quite a number in its inventory that could be described generally as "small, unsound or bad doers."[28] This was, in part at least, because of the difficulty of preventing the indiscriminate mixing of herds. Stallions can sense when mares and fillies are in heat and, unless kept in a barn or a corral with a very strong and high fence, they are almost impossible to control. Thus outside stallions often of dubious quality managed to access the Walrond females.[29] Warnock was able to sell most of the resulting offspring locally but at very low prices and in some cases only by offering credit to less-than-credit-worthy brokers.[30] Ultimately McEachran became discouraged with the horse business and decided to abandon it altogether.[31] After some small sales at mediocre prices,[32] he unloaded the bulk of his prized animals – some three hundred head – to local buyers W.H. Fares and Patrick Burns for fifty dollars each.[33] This was just ten dollars per head more than ranchers were paying for "grade" saddle horses of mixed ancestry.[34]

The Walrond experience was typical. When speaking of the attempt by the neighbouring Quorn ranch to supply first-class animals for the British army, local rancher Frederick Ings summed up the problem for all such ventures rather succinctly: "These imported mares were not used to rustling on the range, they were not given the care they needed, and though they produced some pretty fair nags, they were not good enough to make" this kind of breeding program "a success."[35] One partial success that ultimately very clearly illustrates the point was George Lane's

purebred Percheron operation on the Bar U ranch. Lane started breeding Percherons in 1908 and he produced some fine animals that won numerous awards in horse shows across North America and in Europe. Two things need to be understood about Lane's program, however. Firstly, on one level it was not an example of the open range or profound neglect approach. All the animals he expected eventually to offer for sale or to show were treated with the greatest possible care and attention. To quote the Bar U's modern chronicler, Simon Evans: "In the spring each youngster was carefully inspected, those showing potential being retained as stallion prospects, while the culls were altered and developed as geldings. Entire horse colts were grain fed even while at pasture during the summer. They ran in large pastures surrounded by fences of woven wire. Feed bunks were installed in each pasture, in which colts received their daily ration of grain." A series of barns and birthing stalls built on the Bar U home place ensured that the marketable animals could be nurtured and fed indoors and generally kept in top condition at all times. Lane must also have used these facilities to practise selective breeding and to carefully time breeding so that the colts were born in the moderate spring weather.

In other words, Lane protected the most valuable of his Percherons from the range summer and winter – in essence he saw to it that they were insulated from the elements that constantly plagued the Walrond Clydes and Shires. That could not be said about the mares that made up his brood herd, however. These were treated with the same loose-handed approach as those on the Walrond. The result, not surprisingly, was about the same. "Weaning fillies were well cared for the first year and then turned out on native pasture, receiving no grain from then on. Brood mares were never pampered. They ranged the hills west of the ranch in the summer and were moved to the Bar U flats for the winter" where they "grazed the prairie wool never receiving hay or grain." Lane paid dearly for this part of his program in lost stock. In any reasonably sophisticated breeding program, one would expect annual reproduction rates of no less than 75 and as high as 90 percent. In the three years for which Dr. Evans was able to find breed books the Bar U produced eleven foals out of fifty mares in 1912, fifteen foals out of forty-six mares in 1913, and thirteen out of forty-two in 1914. By 1913 nine of Lane's original mares had died, 32 percent had not foaled even once, 52 percent had had only one foal, and 16 percent had had two. In 1915 eighty-four foals were born, seventeen

died at birth or soon afterwards, one drowned in a slough, and one just disappeared.[36] These are truly dreadful statistics reflecting, one supposes, poor nutrition during the gestation period – particularly in the wintertime. They also, beyond doubt, represent very great financial losses for Lane's horse business as a whole.

The Walrond, Quorn, and Bar U outcomes do not mean that none of the early ranchers in western Canada was able to make money in the horse business during the frontier period. A.E. Cross in Alberta claimed, after the turn of the twentieth century, that it was that side of his operation that had been successful enough in the early days to more than make up for calamity on the beef side. After the disastrous winter of 1886–87, it apparently "paid the total capital invested in three years besides 50 head to the good."[37] Two facts need to be considered about Cross's approach, however. One, he knew his market and had access to the kind of expertise needed to supply the kind of animals it demanded.[38] Two, and probably more importantly, he dealt in the other type of horse mentioned above – the rougher but sturdy type required mainly by neighbouring ranchers and farmers to work their herds or fields. He "did very well" with these by "always watching the *local* demand" and having his "horses ready for any purchaser that might come along, and never lost an opportunity of making a sale if any fair price was offered."[39] In other words, what he was *not* trying to do was supply the very elite animals for the most discriminating, in many cases Old World, buyers.

All the first Canadian cattlemen had access to good working stock from the beginning, which came north with their first cattle from Montana. These horses had descended from Texas origins. They were the ones David Warnock referred to as "cayuses" – a mixed breed that had survived on the open range since the eighteenth century. As the cattle frontier had moved north along the eastern edge of the Rocky Mountains, ranchers had mixed these relatively small (and fast) cowponies with larger varieties, notably Thoroughbreds and Irish Hunters that the big outfits brought in from the East and overseas via the transcontinental railways. The progeny were relatively large and could carry a cowboy loaded with heavy winter clothing and camping gear through deep coverings of snow. They were of sturdy, commercial (rather than pure or nearly pure) stock that had gone through much the same process of natural selection as had the wild horses of Alberta or the brumbies of Australia. Though they

Working ponies, Elbow Park ranch near Calgary, Alberta, ca. 1890s. Glenbow Archives, NA-128-4.

would not have shown very well against prized animals in Eastern auction rings, they were exactly what was needed to open the West. Many were also good for draught as well as riding purposes, and when mixed and grain farmers began pouring into the northern extremities of the Great Plains, these animals were crucial to ploughing up the virgin prairie soils.[40] Brokers also apparently bought up quite large numbers of them for British regular soldiers, particularly in the Boer War (1899–1902).[41]

Ultimately one can say that, if managed properly as a relatively low-cost commercial venture aimed at supplying local demand rather than the more prestigious and discriminating national and international markets, the working horse business in western Canada could, at least at times, be a viable supplement to raising cattle that helped to pay the bills.[42]

Even that statement could not be applied to the horse industry in the Northern Territory of Australia. In the beginning at least a number of stations there seem to have agreed with the would-be pundits' optimistic

Roping horses in roundup corral, ca. 1890s. Glenbow Archives, NA-766-1.

assessments, and some anticipated breeding to the highest standards.[43] Alfred Giles incorporated a breeding program at Springvale soon after setting up operations for W.J. Browne;[44] in April 1881 Abraham Wallace arrived at his Elsey station, some three hundred miles south of Katherine on the edge of the river after which his station was named, with about "1500 well bred cattle and a mob of well bred horses";[45] in the Alice Springs region, Sir Thomas Elder was stocking his Owen Springs run by 1886 with 1,000 horses apparently hoping to produce a "class" of offspring good enough "for the Indian market."[46] And at approximately the same time, owners of Mount Barrell station brought in 1,500 horses that they felt would attract national and international attention.[47]

Few if any of these undertakings were successful. Many of the early investors seem just to have given up the business soon after starting. Elder abandoned the Northern Territory, and the nearly 2,000 horses he left on Owen Springs were offered for sale in 1893 at the incredibly low price of five shillings per head. They must have been in very bad condition, as none of the hundred or so buyers attending the sale was prepared to

Horses at Dunbar ranch west of Fort Macleod, Alberta, 1888. Glenbow Archives, NA-2033-1.

take them.[48] Three years later Sidney Kidman bought the run with the horses still on it. Kidman eventually took most of the stock to the urban centres of the south to sell, probably at auction. However, he had first to pasture a large percentage of them for a year at Oodnadatta, presumably in order to bring them up to condition.[49] He sold Owen Springs in 1901. Unquestionably, part of the reason for failure, generally, was due to the market. Asian demand did not materialize as hoped and in the early 1890s the domestic horse market plummeted as the country sank into depression. However, the northern environment was also a key factor. High humidity during the wets was conducive to the development of the condition known as swamp cancer, and at certain times of the year flies attacked the horses relentlessly, causing them tremendous stress. The major impediment, however, was that horses suffered like the cattle when the grasses became overly coarse.

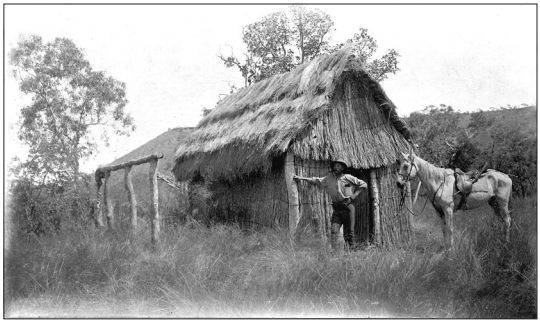
The attempt by the experimental farm at Batchelor, around sixty miles southeast of Darwin, to breed purebred Clydesdales emphatically illustrates the latter problem. "The experience . . . during the past 17 months," the director reported in 1913, "has been that while horses stabled and not allowed to depend on natural pasture for sustenance can be maintained in excellent condition," those placed "on the indigenous rank grasses starve." He went on to document the incredibly high casualty rate among the stock that had been turned loose. "Of the . . . Clydesdale mares which arrived from South [Australia] in August 1912, ten were in foal on arrival . . . Of the pregnant mares one died 25th August 1912 of arsenical poisoning en route to the Farm. One arrived at the farm in very bad condition and died 21st September 1912; a third fell away" until it looked like "a scarecrow." It "got fatally bogged while drinking at a pool on 23rd December 1912; and a fourth died 20th January 1913 from the after effects of foaling." One of the mares that gave birth died in 1913 from "swamp cancer." The director also detailed the low survival rate for the offspring of the mares that lived through gestation: "One foaled 21st October 1912 and the foal lived 10 days; one foaled 21st October 1912 and the foal died within a week; one foaled 27th October and the foal lived only 24 hours; . . . one foaled on 9th Decmeber 1912 and the foal died 10th February 1913; and one foaled 20th October 1912, and foal survives." The director recognized that "fly-time" – when marsh and buffalo flies preyed on the livestock – was a major source of stress for all the animals, and that they "suffered from insufficient water, as the natural holes were too boggy at that time of the year for horses to drink." However, he was also "firmly of the opinion that until the country" had been "improved and stocked heavily enough to change the character of the grasses," it would be "a perilous undertaking to attempt to carry horses on country similar to Batchelor."[50] Interestingly, the answer, he believed, was an intensive agricultural form of production. "Secure paddocks, abundance of wholesome feed, good water and the same personal attention to which farm horses bred for generations on small holdings are accustomed will," he felt confident, "ensure success."

Batchelor is in the top end, where the grasses tend to be the most coarse and unpalatable at maturity. Other parts of the Territory faced long dry spells at least once or a few times virtually every year and then wet, boggy periods at other times. So the environment throughout the Territory

was less than ideal for producing breeds which, like McEachran's Clydes and Shires and Lane's Percherons, had over the centuries become highly domesticated and accustomed to pampering. On the Tableland, in the Victoria River region, and around Alice Springs, the grasses usually do not grow quite so tall, rank, and coarse as those in the top end. Therefore the animals were able to survive in those districts without much human intervention, but they tended not to thrive.[51] Sidney Kidman, who dealt a lot in the horse trade (particularly through his celebrated annual auction sale at Kapunda in South Australia), once estimated that quality animals could not be bred successfully in any part of the Northern Territory north of the MacDonnell mountains, which flank Alice Springs in the most southern pastoral region.[52]

Another critical problem, along with the ecological factors, was that breed selection was impossible in the Territory. A "very serious difficulty that has confronted us and, I think, also everyone who has to use horses . . . is that stallions of any and all kinds are allowed to run at large, and it is impossible to obtain at any time of the year a mare that is not in foal," the Bachelor director complained."[53] As late as 1913 a report to the Minister of External Affairs on livestock in the Borroloola and Roper River area stated that "with one or two well marked exceptions, all the horses used as sires on the holdings inspected" are "of inferior quality. . . . Horse-breeding" is "indiscriminate. Mares and stallions" are "turned out into the bush, and the sires" share "chances with the brumby."[54] Some of the stations actually took up a campaign of extermination, principally by gun, in an effort to rid the ranges of roaming animals. This included the brumby males, which, however robust and well adapted, did not live up to the highest Old World standards of body type. They also commonly tempted domesticated mares away from the stations to run off with their feral band.[55] The campaigns could be somewhat successful in some localities but they could hardly rid the Territory of all the horses running at large.

As in Canada then, the production of well-rounded, muscular, and elegant-looking beasts that discriminating foreign buyers would consider suitable for all forms of public display, as well as for the more elite and onerous military duties, was simply unrealistic in an open range system. Unlike in Canada, however, few northern Australians were able even to establish a viable business based on raising the sturdy working horse used by pastoralists and farmers and by rank-and-file soldiers. Demand for that

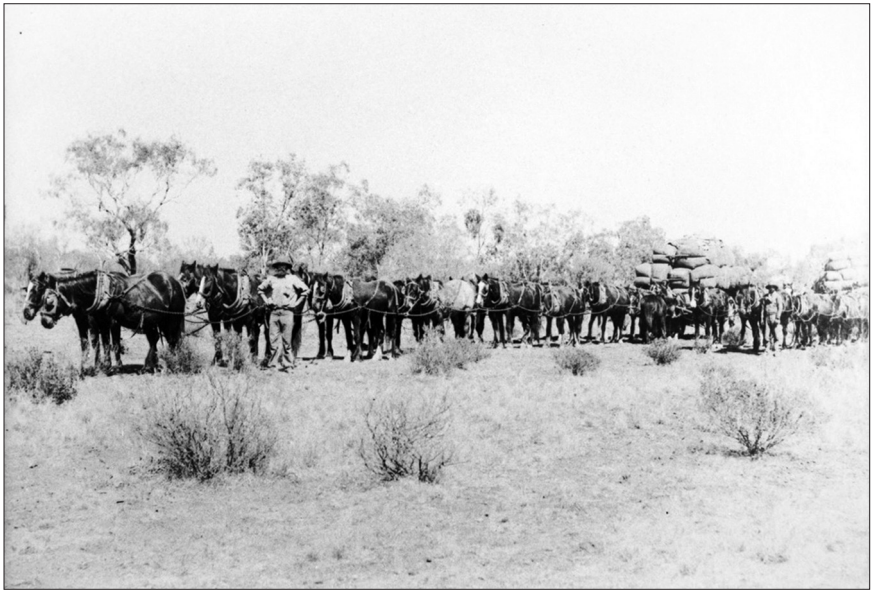


Very light pony, Northern Territory, 1912. State Library of South Australia, PRG 280/1/14/501.

type seems almost always to have been brisk, but anyone who hoped to find an abundant supply in the Territory was almost invariably disappointed. The director at Bachelor observed that "the most serious problem that confronts the settler . . . is the scarcity of draught horses." He said that when he first arrived, he "made strenuous efforts to procure . . . a team" for the government experimental farm. "I set out to get horses of any description" but I "found the utmost difficulty in procuring three horses," even at the high price of "twenty-one pounds per head," that would be acceptable for hauling "light spring carts." After a lot of searching, he purchased fifteen horses including mares with foals at foot, and from these, teams were selected to haul supplies and fencing material, and to do a little cultivation. "It took six of the best of the horses to haul a single furrow plough." The director stressed that this situation prevailed throughout the northern frontier. "One has only to observe the teams in any part of the Territory to come to the conclusion that the draught horse as it is known to the southern farmer does not exist" here. "I have seen a wagon with 5 tons of loading . . . with twenty three horses . . . and when one approaches the camp of the ordinary teamster on the road," it has "the appearance of a horse sale."[56] The animals in the photographs below are the sort of creatures to which he was referring. They are very small and rather gaunt for draught or even riding purposes.

From the 1880s onward, the number of horses in the Territory, which included all the regular working and cartage animals on the stations, just barely surpassed 24,000 while cattle numbers rose to more than 500,000.[57] By comparison, southern Alberta and Assiniboia had some 100,000 horses in 1901 along with approximately 350,000 cattle.[58] The dearth of good working horses in the Territory was certainly also due to environmental

Buffalo hunters and horses, Northern Territory, 1905. Northern Territory Library, Darwin, PH0200/0457.



Horse teams and dray, Northern Territory, 1904. Northern Territory Library, Darwin, PH057/0011.

factors. Coarse grasses, low-quality "scrub" stallions, and uncontrolled breeding affected quality at all levels. However, it was to some degree as well a reflection of a relative scarcity of good "grade" stock countrywide. In previous decades Australians had not produced anything like the quantity of regular horses that had originated in Texas and then spread north to the northern Great Plains of North America. Experts repeatedly commented on this shortage from the later nineteenth century on.[59] In 1879, a speaker at the Agricultural Society of New South Wales lectured producers about the need to breed out so many of the defects domestic horses were showing in order to get a type "capable, with suitable mares, of producing a class . . . very useful for general purpose, and with sufficient bone and substance to undergo a large amount of work." These qualities, he said, would be "essential to counteract the weediness which neglect in breeding has permitted so many of the colonial horses to fall into."[60] Five years later, the Director of the Army remount operations in India wrote a letter to Australian stockmen advising them on how "the light weedy horses now being bred in Australia should be improved." He made a number of recommendations that suggest that, at that point, the industry in general was growing at a rapid pace but without much substance. "It cannot be expected that you can change at one moment the mare from which you have been breeding for years past," he wrote, but you really should "look far enough ahead and consider the benefits the next generation might reap."[61] In a 1900 article, a newspaper reporter spoke of the difficulty the military was having finding soldiers' horses in Queensland. That state had recently experienced a great influx of domestic horses, and the writer felt that when they had mixed with the brumbies they had, if anything, actually brought the overall quality down.[62]

> According to the latest returns, there are in Queensland 480,469 horses, yet there has been some little delay in finding a thousand nags . . . [for] our mounted infantry . . . Station owners have made liberal offers of horses, but when experts were sent out to select those suitable for campaigning they found some difficulty in obtaining as many as they want. This was on stations where we had imagined good thoroughbred entries were kept for sires . . . When we consider the kind of sires which roam about the country, and the weedy herds

> of brumbies which infest the scrubs, we can well understand that great deterioration is going on. To be kept up to a proper standard, the horse must not only be well and carefully bred, but he must be properly fed. Generally they are allowed to run at pasture in this colony till they are ready for breaking in and it is to be feared there is not that attention given to the character of the grazing ground which seems to be desirable.[63]

It is important to acknowledge that *not all* the regular mounts on the early cattle stations were inferior. The working pony was as necessary to the Texas system in northern Australian as anywhere. Even a relatively small spread like the Elsey, which ran a total of only about 1,500 cattle, had more than 200 head of horses for mustering, droving, pulling supply wagons, and general cartage.[64] "We sat among the camp fires" when out on the range, Jeannie Gunn wrote in her famous memoir, *We of the Never Never.* In the background was the sound of "our horses clanking through the timber . . . forty horses and more, pack teams and relays for the whole company and riding hacks, in addition to both stock and camp horses."[65] The "stock and camp" horses could have matched the general run of working horses on the Canadian spreads. "Frequently, possessing exceptional adaptability for the work," they were kept mainly for their skill and expertise in the cutting corral. Many of them must have been some of the better Walers that had not been taken by the army. These horses usually were not turned loose on the ranges between musters but enclosed in pastures close to the station headquarters and watered and even hand fed wild hay when conditions dictated.[66] They had to have what cattlemen often called "cow sense" as well as the "cat-like" physical agility to "wheel around as on a pivot" over the course of hours when performing their duties in the cutting pen.[67] The observations quoted above and many others illustrate, however, that these better cattle ponies were a relatively small minority on the individual stations and throughout the country. For that reason the average quality of the regular working horses in northern Australia would not rise to the standards in the Canadian West during the frontier period. Ironically, only the pedigree types could do so. That was because, on both continents, standards for those animals were almost universally low.