

# **The Little Desert**

**By**

**RG Hicks, AM, MBE (1970)**

I have been asked as one who has lived a lifetime, now over 50 years, within 16km of both the Big Desert and the Little Desert in the Wimmera region of Western Victoria, to write an article on this area.

To the locals, the North Scrub and the South Scrub have been more appropriate titles. When the North Scrub, including part of Block 40 (500 square kilometres) was developed by the Australian Mutual Provident Society in the 1950's few locals became interested in occupying the area until the pastures began to flourish, and flourish they did, and many locals who made purchases and worked in this area in conjunction with their open country were quite satisfied with their investment. But then many realised that no areas were set aside as reservations, and no portion of it left in its natural state. Even the Vermin Proof Fence, almost two-metre-high wire netting, commenced in 1887, and some 180km in length from the South Australian border to the Murray River, a "preserve and maintain at all costs" item to keep the rabbits, dingoes and kangaroos north of the line, was now just heaved over amongst the rubbish by the developers.

To the south lay the Little Desert, the 100,000square kilometre political football, to be stirred into real life in the last couple of years, and to become a breakfast topic in many suburban households and city clubs.

As far back as 1852, J. McLaren, Deputy Surveyor-General of South Australia, surveyed a proposed route for the Gold Escort across 24 kilometres of the eastern portion and just recently from the field notes kept by his Corporals Dawson and Crooker, this route has been superimposed on a present-day map. With this reconnaissance Commissioner Alexander Tolmer, South Australia Police Commissioner, was able to leave Adelaide on 10<sup>th</sup> February 1852, travel over part of McLaren's route the 544km to Mount Alexander (Castlemaine) diggings by 19<sup>th</sup> February, and return to Adelaide by 19<sup>th</sup> March with £42,000 worth of gold in a police cart for 318 families of miners at the diggings. By December 1853 eighteen such journeys were completed, approximately half a ton of gold a month carried – a total value exceeding £2,000,000.

On Saturday, 7<sup>th</sup> August 1886, the Lawloit footballers rode their horses the 32 km to the "usually quiet township of Goroke". Having replenished the 'inner men' at the Royal Mail Hotel, the visitors donned the red and white, and indulged in a quiet practice, and in the afternoon defeated their southern opponents, "who in their costumes containing as many colours as Joseph's coat appeared in poor form". The correspondent's last recollection of a wonderful day was Mick Healy called for another verse of "The Trumpet Sounds"!

In February 1892 the Coroner, Mr William MacDonald, J.P., recorded that Charley Ah Kar had died from exhaustion caused by want of water on the evidence of Mr. John Livingston, the Lawloit school teacher and Mr. John Pressey, local farmer, the discoverer of the badly decomposed body at Chinaman's Flat. They found the body on Sunday afternoon some five kilometres from the Goroke track, probably while they were enjoying their weekend sport. Also in 1892 Mr Alf Warner poisoned rabbits and kangaroos, "the blimey rotters", with strychnine and chaff in a trail along the northern fringe. But he had a different smile when he mustered the big mob of wethers he had bought at a shilling each in the 1914 drought and sold them before the next shearing at twenty shillings each. He just put them out in the scrub on his leasehold block to live or die, and live they did, and for water, he said, they lived on the dew produced by plants overnight. He was not particularly worried about the second muster — sheep fed into the wind and after a week of wind from the one direction can be mustered at the windward end of the block — for he had already made a reasonable profile from his dealings for that financial year.

In August 1913, St. Eloy D'Alton, the Shire Engineer of Lowan (Nhill), wrote in the "Victorian Naturalist" of the unusual formation of red sandstone, later known as the Crater, and listed 230 species of flowering plants. Our only interest in the Little Desert, as children, was to see the large columns of smoke mushroom into the sky in late November or early December when the scrub was set on fire to make new growth in the trees and shrubs, feed for sheep in the dry months of March and April. It was also a popular place at weekends in June and July on horseback with the assortment of staghound and greyhound dogs each family invariably possessed. Our only trophies were a couple of kangaroo tails brought home for soup or just souvenirs, and at odd times a couple of fractured ribs, a reward for being careless enough to run into a rabbit warren at full gallop or one of the odd one metre high fences which had only four plain rusty wires and a narrow flat iron post at each chain (20 metres) length. Old Herman Kramer with his flowing beard and horse of nearly the same vintage was much in demand, to "just come out with us", for he was one of the few who knew every fence and burn where kangaroos were most likely to be. Herman's dogs also appreciated getting off the chain and the opportunity of being able to catch next week's rations.

To many members of the RAAF stationed at Nhill during World War II, this area was a practice bombing range, and today, still yields an odd dummy bomb or two to remind the finder of its former splendor. Gone are the many kilometres of copper wire used for communications in that area, as did a couple of mobs of sheep, and not even the local police or CIB with all their local knowledge have solved these mysteries.

In September 1952, Dr. Melville of the Royal Botanic Garden, Kew, England, was a visitor and with Mr. Frank Morris of the National Herbarium, Melbourne and Mr. Alex Hicks, a local naturalist, collected plant specimens. My only contact was to spend the odd hour or two, late at night, in the upstairs room at the Commercial Hotel, Kaniva, sitting with my feet on the press. Every few minutes they were raised to allow another set of precious specimens, properly

notated, to be placed in the press to dry out, and yesterday's harvest to be placed in fresh newspaper, six hundredweight being supplied for the purpose.

To Stan Hodge, the fair-haired English migrant of 1914 and by 1960 a battered rugged Aussie bushman, it was home. Alone in the years between, he was able to split eighty to ninety buloke posts a day. He spent all the daylight hours, and I repeat ALL, working for nearby farmers and his only tools of trade were a razor-shape axe, a six-foot (two metre) crosscut saw, wedges, crowbar and shovel, and still in 1970 there are fences and posts — memorials to a craftsman. The large strainer posts that he erected singlehanded will certainly see a few more summers. In later years when unable to work he lived six kilometres from the northern edge, near the Gold Escort Route. His modest hut he kept neat and tidy even to sweeping the leaves away from the entrance with a bough. It was he who was able to take the rare visitor, whether by day or night, to the Crater, or show them any of the unusual plants, the odd emu's nest or Lowan's mound. He knew the Desert - and the kangaroos and emus were not just nodding suburban acquaintances, they were personal friends. To him, the male emu sitting on his eight week's vigil it was a family affair and both eagerly awaited the expected additions. Each kangaroo he knew by his Christian name, and daily he patrolled his domain to see that all was well. His only contact with the busy world was every other Friday to walk to Lawloit, obtain a ride to Nhill to get his next fortnight's provisions, and late at night with a sugar-bag on his back walk along the path back home. In 1960 he moved to Barham, NSW, to read the river gauges, and the Little Desert lost one of its greatest guardians.

To the centre lies Boughton's Waterhole. Is it a muddy hole, or is it as claimed by Mr. PL Williams of Miram, the present member of his family to hold title to this eight hectare plot, a now partly silted-up spring, never dry, and originally dug by Chinese migrant labourers on their way to the Victorian goldfields and the banks carted away in wheelbarrows? It was certainly used as to water sheep being moved from Lemon Springs in the south to the northern stations, and probably John Brown Broughton who died on 10th February 1882, and was buried in a private cemetery at Lemon Springs could tell many stories of this area as he moved his 100,000 sheep around his stations.

To the local lads of the 1930's the "Middle Dam" was a proving ground for that brand-new 12 gauge shot gun, for provided the gun lived up to the maker's specifications, roasted bronze-wing pigeon would be on the menu after a visit on a hot late summer's night. To Miss Helen Aston of the National Herbarium, Melbourne, in November 1966 it was a wonderful country. In her study of aquatic plants, 1.8km south-east of Boughton's Waterhole at Wild Dog Spring, she found sea-grass (*Ruppia maritime*) which only grows in saline water.

To Mr. WAH (Tony) Molesworth, the ICI Fertilizer Research Officer, it was a challenge to produce wheat. In 1966 on Mr. WGA Coutts's block on the northern fringe, with the use of Higlod 18, he was able to produce in plots ten bags of wheat to the acre (2.05 tonnes per hectare) - raw sand to golden grain.

To Dr. Peter Attiwell and Dr. Malcolm Calder of Melbourne University and their botany students, it has been a wonderful country. On their many visits to

the area they have been able to gather specimens of *Westringia crassifolia*, known previously only south-east of Chinaman's Flat in 1965 and the Whipstick State Forest near Bendigo; also a rare bush pea *Pultenaea vestita*, south of Stan Hodge's camp. They have yet to find any plants which the "4L" man of Civil Defence fame (the learned likely local lad) has not been able to identify.

To be the third occupier of a development block is the one with fewer worries than his predecessors. Progress has substituted the sweat, tenacity, long hours, strong hands and lots of time of the nineteenth century for bulldozers and a cheque book with plenty of black ink. In have come the experts -economists, tax and farm consultants, agronomists and the like. The third occupier will have forgotten all these struggles, and the walk-in walk-out prices will be one where maintenance, repairs and replacements, and carrying capacity will be a reality not fantasy. His property, no longer called "Omiah" (Old Man in a Hurry), will be "Omiad" (Old Man in a Dream...or is it a Daze?) or some similar name to attract buyers of his produce. The only disturbance to the pastoral scene will be the cows being relieved of their vealer calves, and the old bull wondering when he will be branded SNLR — artificial insemination has come this way. The sheep without footrot will have no other irritators than shearers and crutchers in their usual hurry. The old cobbler will be simmering with expectancy for he knows that he will arrive on the board when the 'ringer', practicing his important political speech, will have reached question time and be answering the curly questions submitted to him — and these are difficult moments at the best of times. Today, scientific surveys are being made and you may find a member of the unique desert mouse family *Pseudomy*, whose only claim to fame is that one of his cousins, recently deceased, has his intestines being unraveled in a laboratory in Melbourne in an endeavour to analyse his diet during the last days of his earthly existence. Or he may enquire of his great uncles and aunts who were first snared in 1956 by Mr. Clive Crouch of Kaniva. One cousin became the pride and joy of the Sibson household and one of the Hicks'. They lived in a 'house' 75cm by 400cm by 10cm with all the 'mod cons', sand and a sprig of silky teatree (*Leptospermum myrsinoides*) from their native land, and fresh apple and sunflower seeds the only alteration to their diet. The Sibson family decided that maternity may be a means of relieving their monotony, and it was only after some twelve months that parents and family of three (not in plague proportions!) were able to make good their escape. Of the Hicks family, their attempts to escape were foiled by their captors with 'hotted up' reflexes. After twelve months they decided that death was the only way out.

To "PL", it will always be an opportunity to show that quality of hospitality and friendship which comes so easily to most country people, and assist in every way possible those in the Desert. He has stories to tell, such as the night when driving around the northern fringe in his Landrover he kept saying as he turned his headlights "Where is he?" Hans, his German farmhand, kept replying "He is gone from here", but it was only after PL has asked the question many times, unable to find his prospective prey, that Hans, in desperation, finally replied "Gims agone from here". Both now realized that they had been on different wavelengths, for in the manoeuvre Jim Hicks, the passenger in the front seat of the jeep, had fallen out and was some half mile away discharging his shotgun to attract attention to save a long walk home.

And so, one might say that in the last couple of years quite a few people interested in the Little Desert have been on different wavelengths. One may have on his mantle with the ten volumes of newspaper cuttings:

"Somebody said it couldn't be done'  
But he with a chuckle replied:  
Maybe it couldn't, but he wouldn't be one  
To say so until he tried".

Is the large blank space on the present-day map ever to awake from the political anesthetic it has been given? Will those interested in having a look for themselves still damage their late model sedans over the rough tracks, having to obtain the services of a nearby farmer and tractor to bring them back to the highway? Or will they hire a four-wheel drive, or as some investigators have done, hire a light aircraft to fly low over the area before becoming experts on the subject. Or will the Jumbo jet drop a few thousand feet in height and every passenger be supplied with another coloured brochure, a map of Victoria with this area marked in green, 100,000 hectares, over 600 species of flowering plants, 140 species of birds, 25 reptiles, 12 mammals and the commentator remarking "wonderful country"! But when they tour the area they will find the conditions much more primitive than their ancestors when they came out to get some Colonial Experience.

Far be it for me to start another campaign, possibly the twenty-fifth, to have another north-south sealed road with an east-west one running through the whole area, for someone will possibly find that I am agitating for something to benefit one of my friends — when to the best of my knowledge and belief my only business association with them was to barter a couple of staghound pups before the third last war, and in those days to both of us this was a big deal! Even though our great monster has finally been put to sleep, "dead as a dodo", as Sir Henry Bolte recently stated in Parliament, many have contributed to bringing this blank space into real life, and many for their own particular reasons are remarking "wonderful country". Some may join "the gnarled knotted trunks Eucalyptian", but even they cannot really say:

"Alas! Alas! My labour is lost".