

Running a Mixed Farm

It may sound as if we lived quite self-sufficiently, but that is not so. There were always bills to be paid, from household expenses like clothing and medicines, to farm expenses, like fuel and crop seed. And, like everyone else, my parents had to pay taxes.

So, there was a constant battle to earn enough income. Ours was basically a mixed farm, with its income drawn from a combination of the dairy, the piggery, and beef cattle. The dairy and the piggery gave small but constant returns, while the cattle paid poorly in drought times but well when the weather improved.

The dairy was a 365-days-a-year undertaking, with the cows having to be milked morning and evening. Someone had to be up before dawn, saddling a horse, collecting the cows, and not all of them were keen to be brought to the milking shed. I did that job sometimes. I woke to the sound of a jangling alarm clock, and dressed by the light of a battery torch. I dragged on hat, coat, and gloves if the weather was cold, and ventured outside. In frosty weather, I even added a balaclava for extra warmth.

No matter how early and dark the hour, the dogs always met me at the gate. They always knew when there was something happening. Depending on the temperament of the individual,

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they followed sedately, or danced around under my feet, mad with excitement.

In the gloom, I walked to the harness shed to collect a bridle and saddle. Sometimes in winter, there would be long icicles hanging under the dripping taps near the shed, and the frost on the grass would crackle under my feet. Carrying the bridle, I went to find my horse. If he was known to be hard to catch, he would have spent the night in a yard. But usually, he would be loose in a small grass paddock. Then I walked through frost-damp grass that reached my knees, and my trousers were soaked by the time I cornered the horse, bridled him, and brought him back to be saddled. His coat was coated with the frost, and chilly under my fingers, and the girth of the saddle was stiff as well.

We set off into the pre-dawn light, or the thick mist, the horse straining to see the path, the dogs following at a run. The brisk morning air brought water to my eyes and a glow to my cheeks. There were always different personalities among the cows as well. Some would be very obliging, ready to head for the milking shed as soon as I disturbed them. Others were more reluctant, refusing to move until the horse was quite close, or the dogs nipped at their heels. Others would try to hide among thick trees or in patches of heavy mist. I had to keep count of the animals to be sure that I had found them all.

I followed the cows back to the shed, closing the gates behind them. I took my horse to the water trough to let him drink, sometimes having to help him break the layer of ice that had yet to melt in the sun. Then I tied him to rest under the big box tree near the yard.

In the dairy, Dad would have the engine running, and the first cows were already connected to the milking machines. I took my part in the routine: moving the animals into empty

stalls ('bails'), connecting the chain behind them, tying one rear leg with a rope to restrict any sudden movements, washing dirt from bulging udders, and slipping on the cups with their strong vacuum suction. When the machines had removed most of a cow's milk, there was often a little remaining in the udder. Then Mum or Dad would take over for manual 'stripping'. This involved rhythmically squeezing and pulling on the teats, much as a calf would have done, with the milk descending in a thin stream into a bucket held between the worker's knees as he sat on a low stool. If the cow kicked in protest, then the bucket could be sent flying. That was why we pulled a back leg away with a rope; it made the cow unbalanced and less likely to kick. Stripping needed strong muscles and quite a deft touch. I never mastered it, but then I never tried too hard to learn. Once you had a skill you were expected to use it regularly.

Soon thereafter, Mum would walk down from the house carrying a big brown enamel teapot filled with black tea, mugs, and slabs of hot buttered toast. If I was still cold, I drank my tea in front of the open fire in the outside galley, sheltered under half an upturned rainwater tank, where water was heating to be used in the post-milking clean-up. As the sun rose and the light grew stronger, the cows waiting their turn stood quietly in the yard, their breath forming thick white clouds in the crisp air.

And all the time the diesel engine laboured, providing the power that sucked the milk from those udders, and sent it pulsating up pipes into small glass indicators, before carrying it away to the separator in another room. There the thick cream was siphoned off the top and drained into strong metal cans, and the skim milk flowed through a funnel, and away through another series of pipes to the pigs.

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Once delivered to the pigsties, the skim milk was stored in a number of big, recycled oil drums with the top cut out. From these, Max carried it to the troughs in buckets. If the drums were not emptied within a few hours, the sun's heat would sour the milk. Then thick crusts of yellowish curd would rise to the top, a great attraction for the hordes of black crows which lived near the pigs. They would perch on the rim of the drum, slicing deep gouges through the curd with their strong beaks. The pigs were usually fed grain of some sort as well, and the crows would try to get the scraps of grain too.

Once all the cows had been milked, and all the milk had been drawn through the separator, came the clean-up. That was mostly Mum's job. All the parts of the milking machines had to be scrupulously cleaned. Hot soapy water was sucked up through the pipes, the cups were dismantled and their rubber liners scoured, the collecting tank for the milk was washed and emptied, and the separator dismantled into its various components and cleaned. Often, there were thick creamy deposits lurking in the separator, so Mum scraped these out with a finger and flicked them to the waiting dogs. And the empty cream cans returned by the carrier had to be washed and cleaned before they were filled. A big job twice a day every day of the year.

Dad was usually the one who cleaned up the bails where the cows had been standing. As long as I can remember, these had a concrete floor. First, he would use a shovel and stiff broom to remove any mud, urine, or manure, and then use the hose to clean up anything left behind. All this was necessary to be sure that the cream we sold was of the highest quality and brought the highest price.

While still fresh, the cream had to be delivered to the butter factory in Chinchilla, fifteen kilometres away. There was a regular

‘cream carter’ with a large truck who drove along the main road from Chinchilla past Seven Oaks, three times a week in summer and twice a week in winter. On his outward journey, he left clean empty cans from the factory at our gate. It was our job to deliver filled cans to the shelter at the gate before he returned. In hot weather, keeping the cream cool between his visits was a bit of a problem. The initial solution was to stand the metal cans in a trough of cold water in a dark shed, which kept the cream cooler. Later, after the arrival of town electricity, Dad invested in a large refrigerator to store the cans. Later still, the carter would drive right up to the dairy to collect the cream.

When the cream arrived at the butter factory, it was tested for quality. Several things controlled the way the farmers were paid. First was the amount of butter fat it contained. Jersey cows were extremely popular as they were known to produce very high fat content in their cream. The factory also checked the cream for freshness, and its aroma. During springtime, many of the paddocks became infested with mustard weed. There are lots of different varieties of this weed in Australia, some of which may be toxic to cows. However, our animals did not suffer ill effects as they ate it mixed with large amounts of natural grasses. But as the name implies, when the cows ate it, it made the milk smell and taste of mustard. Sometimes we could not drink the fresh milk, and sometimes, when the cream was very smelly, the factory could not use it to make export-quality butter. In that case, the farmer was paid less for his cream.

Dad did not breed the bullocks we raised either. He bought young cattle from farmers who specialised in breeding, and kept them on the farm for months or years while they grew and fattened. They were fed solely on natural grasses, and if the rains came regularly, they had lots to eat. Of course, if the rains failed,

grass was in short supply, and they did not fatten. In drought times like these, Dad would usually sell a proportion to ensure that none of them starved and died, or rent another farm at some distance (called having cattle 'on agistment') and move some of the stock there until the rains fell.

Usually, we sold the bullocks in Chinchilla at a cattle sale. This involved Dad, Max, and I mustering the cattle from the back paddocks into the yards beside the dairy. There, Dad would choose those beasts he felt were ready for sale. We had the fun of 'drafting' them, which meant allowing the bullocks to pass in single file through a gate while Dad, standing in the open gateway and armed only with a long stick, decided which of them would stay and which would go. Include in the situation excited dogs, who would bark and rush at the wrong time, and excited cattle who did not want to be separated from their mates. It sounds simple but was decidedly the opposite.

Sometimes the drafting was done on horseback. A rider would move his horse into a mob of cattle, and try to separate one bullock from the group by getting behind it, and pushing it towards the gate. The bullock wanted to stay with his mates, and attempted to turn back into the mob. It often became a battle of wills between the bullock, the horse and the rider. The excited horses loved the fun of making a bullock do what he did NOT want to do, and the riders enjoyed it as well. Sometimes the language of the men doing the drafting became more colourful, and I would be banished to the house until things settled down. How disappointing.

Sometimes, an agent of the meatworks (that is, the abattoir) would visit the farm to inspect the bullocks while they were still on the farm. He would ride Dad's horse among the bullocks as they stood in the yards, while he decided how much he would

offer for them and how many to take. This must have been a difficult decision for Dad to make. He would save on the cost of driving the cattle to the sale and be sure of the price they achieved. But he had to balance that against the possibility that a different buyer would offer more money at the cattle sale. Sometimes he sold on the farm, other times he didn't. I never knew the reasons behind each decision. But if he sold on the farm, we would still have to go through the drafting process. Only this time the buyer made the decision about which beast stayed and which went.

The routine was always the same. Sometime during the day, either as soon as the agent arrived or after the drafting was finished, Mum would provide a special afternoon tea for our visitor. A lace cloth was laid on the table, on which the best china and silver teapot sat, and her lightest sponge cake and savoury scones were served. It was one of the few times I remember her going to such effort to entertain.

Whether Dad chose the bullocks to be sold, or the meatworks buyer did, the next step was always the same. Early the next morning, usually before sunrise, a visitor would be in our kitchen, lighting the fire in the wood stove, and filling the kettle. This was our favourite drover, Bill, who loved to get the kettle boiling before we were up and dressed.

'Always knew you were a sleepy-head, Ray,' he would tease my father. Little did he know that both Mum and Dad had heard our dogs barking when he'd arrived, and had stayed in bed to let him have his little triumph.

After many cups of tea and slabs of toast, Dad and I would saddle our horses and help Bill drive the bullocks for the sale out of the yard where they had spent the night, down through the cultivation paddocks, across the creek at the bridge built by Mum's father, Grandad Harry, and out to the main road. All the

while, Dad and Bill yarned, and I made sure that none of the stock lagged behind. Finally, through the gate onto the main road, we waved 'Goodbye,' and Bill took the cattle to Chinchilla, while Dad and I rode home.

As the years passed, droving fell out of fashion. Instead, big trucks would drive up to the yards and cattle would walk up a ramp onto the truck. So much more efficient, but much less fun.

The paddocks for the milking cows were those nearest the house, so less time was wasted in collecting them twice a day, but the beef cattle roamed in the paddocks farthest from the house. To reach them, either to supervise them, or to gather them for some purpose, we rode horses. Horses were my favourite animals on the farm.

My very earliest memory concerns the day my first and only pony arrived on the farm. I could not have been more than four years old. She was small, glossy black, with a white blaze on her forehead. I can remember Dad lifting me onto her back, while the branches of the poplar-box tree near the cow-yard waved overhead. She was called Midget.

Like most ponies, she had a strong personality. When her rider was young or inexperienced, she was steady and reliable, keeping her rider out of trouble. But when her rider was experienced, she showed considerable cunning in trying to get out of work. She had learnt how to open gates and could climb between the wires of many fences. It was exceedingly difficult to keep her where she did not want to be.

You could never ride her through water. She would walk into the water, stop suddenly, then her knees would fold slowly, and she would lie down, dumping her startled rider. No amount of training or punishment ever overcame this habit. After one or two examples of this trick, I learnt *never* to give her the chance to

repeat it. But at times, Max rode her as well. He was convinced that as he was five years older than me, and already similar to Dad in build and strength, he would get her to walk through water without lying down in it. I can still remember him coming back to the house with wet trousers when the pony proved that she was stronger than he was.

There were other horses I remember as well. Dad had an ex-racehorse called FourX, named after Queensland's favourite brand of beer. Dad was teetotal, but never renamed his horse, and rode it for years. And later there was 'the mare' who never had another name. But Dad loved her and she adored and trusted Dad. She would follow his lead into scary situations where no-one else could convince her to go. She loved working with cattle and would get excited whenever there was the chance to interact with them. That happened the one time I rode her, and she was too strong for me to control. Dad arrived by car to find out why I was taking so long to get a bullock through a gate, and I was glad to let him take over. She knew what had to be done and was quite capable of doing the job, but I knew I was not a good enough rider to stay on her back while she did it.

Dad usually bought pigs soon after they were weaned from their mothers, and then kept them for a few months while they grew and fattened. He bought and sold them at the weekly pig and calf sales in Chinchilla. If he intended to buy, he would be driving one of the farm utilities with a special cage sitting on the back. But at least once, he bought when he was driving the car. Always one to think outside the box, his solution was to put each piglet into a sack. With their heads free and the sack tied tightly around their necks, he placed them into the car boot. But sometime on the drive home, he could hear noises that suggested at least one of the pigs had found its way out of the bag.

‘Can I borrow the boys?’ he asked the teacher when he stopped at our school. ‘I want then to stand around behind the car while I open the boot. If the pig is loose, they can help me catch it.’

The boys were quite disappointed when the pig did not escape. I guess Dad was not.

Dad did not keep breeding sows, but when Max was living on the farm as a young man, he developed a Berkshire piggery and for several years baby pigs were born there. Baby pigs make quite appealing pets. They are small, clean, and quite intelligent. They will suck your finger, slobbering over it, while nibbling with their sharp little teeth. But they tend to squeal loudly when you pick them up. That brings their mother to the rescue, and she is large, strong, and determined. It is not wise to be in the pen with her when she is upset, as she has sharp teeth in a large mouth. A strong fence is a must! The boar is also a doubtful customer, and I always gave him a wide berth.

In recent years, I have been looking through Mum’s photo records of the farm. To my surprise, I found that in one of the last years that Dad managed the farm, he grew a crop of wheat. There are photos of it being harvested. So, I guess that grain was also sold. And since new managers have taken over, many crops of watermelons have matured and been sold. Another couple of sources of income for the ideal mixed farm.