

## Elsie RAGGATT & Cliff WIK

### Elsie's diary — a tale of a shearer's cook

Anecdotes as published in 1985 & 1995

*Elsie is the second child of Archie and May Raggatt, now Mrs Cliff Wik of Horsham, who has won many prizes at country shows for her excellent cooking. She enjoys reading and is a talented writer. Elsie wrote of her experiences when she and Cliff joined a contract shearer's team in New South Wales during the 1950s, Elsie as cook. This is her story, in her words.*

Perhaps I had better explain what a shearing team really is. Firstly you have the board boss or expert. He keeps an eye on things generally, also keeps the shearers' combs and cutters in order. Every so many sheep, the cutters are changed and it is the expert's job to sharpen these, or 'do the grinding.' The owner of the sheep brings them to the shed and yards them. From then on, the onus is on the contractor.

Usually, at the big sheds, there is a penner-upper. Sometimes at a smaller shed, 10,000 or so, the expert combines this job with his own. From the big outside yard, the small pens in the shed are filled, each holding say, twenty sheep. There is a pen for each shearer. When the bell goes at 7.30 a.m. the shearers dive into the pens, catch a sheep, a quick twist turns a sheep over and they are dragged out on to the board beneath that particular shearer's machine. It is marvelous how still these sheep lie. Of course there are exceptions - some persist in kicking all the time. These usually end up pretty sore from the nicks it is impossible not to give them. Mostly, though, they sit as though hypnotized.

I once had a vastly superior, in her opinion, city lady ask. 'What drug do they give the little dears to make them sit so quiet?' The only drug I could think of was the lurid language hurled at them if they didn't sit quiet. However, I didn't spoil her ideas about the 'little dears.'

When shorn, the bewildered sheep are pushed down a chute; if very obstinate they might be helped on their way. This chute takes them into a pen and from here the board boss, at every two-hourly break, counts them out. Thus he keeps each shearer's tally.

Usually, there is quite a bit of rivalry as to who is the gun or top shearer. The average per day per man, I'd say, is from 120 to 160 sheep. When you get a man doing 200 or more, you've got an expert. This number may be done on one day, or perhaps two, but the test is to do it every day.

So much for the sheep. Now the rouseabout. These poor unfortunates must pick up the wool as the sheep is being shorn, run with it to the tables, throw each fleece so that it remains in one piece, dash back to the board and sweep all dags and other bits of wool away before the shearer gets another sheep out — no mean task, believe me. Then, should a sheep be extra restless and get a bad cut, there is a yell — 'tar!' The rousie then rushes up with a can of disinfectant and a brush, or if need be, the shearer stitches the cut with a special needle and thread. Should the sheep be fly-blown, it is also the rousie's job to come running for the particular stuff used for flies. Big sheds have up to four or five rousies, but the average, six shearers, is two.

When the wool is thrown on to the tables it becomes, for a few minutes, the property of the rollers. These men work on each side of the table, trimming the inferior wool from around the fleece. The fleece is then rolled into a ball and put on the table for the classer. The bellies and pieces are put into bins on their own. The classer is usually a well-educated and brainy chap. He has to be, because he has to attend classes to qualify for his job and the wool may be, and often is, classed into up to a dozen different classes. There are fine, superfine, medium,

locks, bellies and many more. The pieces skirted off the fleece by the rollers are passed on to the piece-pickers. Their job is to pick out the best of these pieces and put them in a bin for each class. Inferior bits go on their own.

From then on, the presser comes into the picture. He puts the fleeces into the press, climbs in and tramps them down — if the press is hydraulic this is not always done — then presses the wool. If it is a hand lever, it is hard work; if engine or electric driven, not quite so bad. When you would think the bale could not possibly hold any more, yet more fleeces are put in and pressed down. Some graziers like a fairly light bale, say 350 pounds, others up to 400 pounds. The presser is generally on contract, that is, he receives approximately 10/- a bale for hand pressed, 6/- or more for power. A good presser can press between twenty and thirty bales a day — some more, some less. It is still good money, but darned hard work.

Last, but by no means least, is the cook. This unfortunate must provide a good breakfast, on the table by 6.45 am, 'lunch' of sandwiches and cakes fresh too at 9.30 a.m. and at noon a good dinner with three vegetables and sweets. Another lunch at 3 pm and, at 6.30 pm or thereabouts, a whacking big tea. This is the meal the team really does justice to. I usually provided roasts, pies or stews, when cold; when hot, cold meats and salads. Soup for tea is a must, even if very hot; scones, tarts or anything else you can possibly think of as well.

A cook gets approximately £32 a week for up to thirteen men; after that, £2-10-0 a man over that number. Sounds big money, but unless you are fortunate enough to get a local shed where the shearers all go home at weekends, it means a seven-day-a-week job. The usual time of rising is 5.30 pm and time of retiring, say, 8.30 pm or 9 pm. Remember, you must wash all dishes, prepare all meals and vegetables, lunches by yourself, so it isn't such wonderful pay. If there are about twenty men, the cook might have an off-sider, but the cook must pay him out of his own wages.

Many are the tales told of shearers' cooks - and some are true. One station I was at, they told me there had been a male cook the year before; he was a huge fellow, over six feet and about sixteen stone in weight. It seemed his cooking left much to be desired. Many were the grumbles about it. Cookie heard about this and one evening while eating their tea, the men were surprised to see the cook standing in the kitchen doorway, arms akimbo, muscles showing to their best advantage and in his hand was a huge carving knife, its cutting edge shining, evidently freshly honed up. Then, in an awe-stricken silence, the cook's voice thundered out: 'Well, you bastards, any complaints?' He was hurriedly assured there were none, so he returned to his kitchen and slammed the door. That's what I call carrying the fight into the enemy camp.

One winter we were privileged to see the mighty Murray River in flood near Mannum, South Australia. Normally this river is about five or six chains in width. When we saw it, it was five miles across. Running parallel with the river for many miles are the rich Murray flats. These are usually dairy farms, and the immensely rich soil grows excellent fodder and runs a large number of cows. To supply the irrigation, numerous windmills are dotted over these flats. Imagine the queer sight of windmills literally up to their necks in water and still turning!

We were on the Darling River again, at yet another river-bend station. Right at the back door of the huts was a large billabong. I tried my hand at fishing there, in my 'spare time', with no luck, though several Murray cod had been caught just before we came. Some were up to twenty pounds, but all I caught was yabbies. Yabbies are freshwater crayfish, averaging six to eight inches long. The usual and most entertaining way to catch them is to tie a piece of raw meat on a string, throw it into the water then, when you see a tug at the bait, work your line in gradually until you can slip a fine net under the yabbies hanging on by their big claws. This reminds me of a true story. I knew of some small fry who went yabbing once and were compelled, much against their will, to take their small sister. Now, when a yabby gets hold of anything with his claw, he sticks to it and can inflict a very painful nip. When the mother of these particular angels heard some terrified shrieks, she rushed to the bank of the river and saw her youngest, standing petrified. All around the skirt of her little dress yabbies were hanging. The rest of the party were fishing, quite innocently; too innocently for that mum who knew her kids. After getting rid of the dress decoration, Mum attended to business.

I had an uncle who prided himself on his riding ability. He wasn't modest about it either and everyone got a bit sick of it. One day when Uncle was up in the top paddock some distance from home, he started out to walk then spotted an old ex-racehorse which had been pensioned off out on the farm. At some time she had evidently broken her leg and was known as 'the crooked leg mare'. Hopping on his steed bareback, Uncle set out for home. He imagined he was riding the cup winner back to scale . . . 'just listen to all the applause. 'Drawing his knees up and holding imaginary reins, and acknowledging the cheers, his thoughts were far away. Suddenly, while going past a bush, something rustled, the crooked leg mare squealed and shied. She shot Uncle gracefully into the air. A clump of thistles received him with open arms. Getting up and picking the prickles out of himself, he looked around to see whether anyone had seen him. No one in sight, so he put the rustling down to a large lizard and walked home, never mentioning the incident. That night at tea, he piped up again about his riding abilities. From down the table came Grandfather's voice: "Why don't you try the crooked leg mare?" Uncle looked at him suspiciously, then said: "You old devil, you did that." So it proved. You see, a few days before, Grandfather had given Uncle 5/- to buy him a dog from a neighbour. Uncle bought it for 2/6d but pocketed the change. Grandfather found out and bided his time. It just happened that he was near the bush at the time of the riding episode, so they were quits.

This is the story of the journey to *Mungadel* on the Murrumbidgee River in southern New South Wales — Dry, dusty and hot though it was, we loved every moment of that trip. Scattered over the plain were dozens of madly turning windmills. These were situated at the bore or tank sites, without which it would be impossible to run stock up here at all. Much as we enjoyed the trip, we were very pleased to see the township of Hay come into sight — it meant we could have a cool drink, a wash, and we should have only about ten miles to go. Hay always seems to me like a town out of a western movie. It is very old, but has quite a few good modern shops. It too was once an important river port, this time on the Murrumbidgee River. These days are brought to mind by the fact that it has eight pubs, and I believe that is only about half of the original number.

After inquiring at the cafe about the shed to which we were going and getting typical directions ending with the usual 'you can't miss it', we set out on what we thought to be our last ten miles for the trip. We generally managed to 'miss it'. Ten miles or so and there she'd be! Well! We travelled twenty miles and saw nothing resembling a shed; another two miles and to our joy, there was a shed. Through about eight gates we went, all hard to open and even harder to close. On reaching the homestead we were told it was the wrong shed. It seems we missed our shed because it was right on the river bank, about a mile from the road and hidden in the trees, a small fact our informant in Hay didn't mention. Back through all those darned gates went a very disgruntled pair of travelers. About half an hour later we arrived.

*Mungadel* is a very old station. It is also a famous merino stud. The shearing shed, to our weary eyes, looked huge; so too did the quarters. These consisted of numerous men's huts, dining room, kitchen, laundry and shower room. All were built right on the bank of the river. Staggering into the kitchen, we saw it was some fifteen feet wide and much longer. As for the dining room, there was a broth of a room — fifteen feet wide about forty feet long, tables stretched right down the centre and, at the far end, a fireplace capable of taking logs up to eight feet long. I saw all this and wailed 'I wanna go home'. Cliff said, 'You can damn well walk then; you wanted to come, don't forget!' So began my chequered career as a shearer's cook, 'babbling brook', 'flour disturber', take your pick, they all add up to one thing; darned hard work.

Being a day early, we were able to get settled in before the men came. Just as well because, after they came nothing was ever settled. They were not a bad lot, some of them we never got really friendly with; eight or nine however, were to be my 'shiralee' for months to come. They were full of life and devilment, but a better lot of mates we never had nor wanted. They came to me for advice, first-aid, and any help I could give in the pranks played on their long-suffering fellow workers. That was *Mungadel*.

One of the things I like about shearing is the element of surprise. You never know what you will find at the next Shed. Perhaps this is just as well; otherwise you might make tracks for home. It is the law that everything must be clean, and ready for occupation, but no doubt opinions differ: Some kitchens are unswept, pots and pans dirty, and no wood. Should this happen, the team is quite within its rights in refusing to start work until things are better.

One station we experienced had mud-brick quarters. This wasn't so bad if they had been clean, but we found the fowls camping in the kitchen and plenty of evidence that they'd been there for some time. We had arrived two days in advance of the men, intending to have a spell. It took three of us — Barbara was on holidays with us at the time — all of those two days to get it clean. Great was the scrubbing and scouring that went on. I don't know who was more surprised, the fowls at being kicked out of the kitchen, or the owner when cook forgot she was a lady and told him exactly what she thought.

Arriving at *Guthal*, we had a pleasant surprise. Everything was clean and shining, the table set and, on the sink, there was a big basket of mushrooms, already cleaned.

When you get really into the mallee scrub, it is impossible to see further than a few chains. We had been told, 'there is only one track, the telephone line runs beside it, you can't miss it!' We saw at least ten tracks, all in use, and spotted the telephone line twice. While travelling through here we got our first glimpse of the big red kangaroo. They are beautiful, standing up to eight feet in height. With their lovely golden red coats, they look part of the scenery somehow. How anyone can shoot these animals for 'sport' I don't know. They are very trusting and will sit up only a few feet away and watch you — a perfect target for your 'sportsmen'.

On our way to Ivanhoe in New South Wales we had time to notice the surrounding country. Every ten miles or so we came to a small rise. This, in contrast to the country on each side, was quite heavily timbered, mostly with box, pine and hop trees. Here we saw the lovely Major Mitchell cockatoos. They look as though they are in full dress-uniform of pure white, showing a flash of salmon pink about the breast, deepening under the wings. There are also black cockatoos, larger than a crow and as black, except under the wings where they are blood-red. The one most common in the south, but also found in the north, is the sulphur-crested white cockatoo. All are highly sought-after as pets because they quickly learn to talk. They have big rubbery-looking black feet and when they walk are definitely pigeon-toed. To see a flock of perhaps 500 feeding on the ground, looking like strewn confetti, is quite a sight. Always in a nearby tree two or three birds will remain while the others are feeding. How they work out their roster for sentry duty is a mystery. The man who keeps watch for the police during a game of two-up, said to be Australia's national game, is called a cockatoo. The blacks have an interesting legend about this bird. Unlike its coat, the cockatoo's voice is not lovely — it is a harsh squawk. Back in the Dreamtime cockatoos did have a beautiful voice. They became conceited, cruel and greedy and never associated with other birds. This angered the totem gods, so they took away the lovely singing voice and to this day, cockatoos can make only a harsh, grating noise.

The Ivanhoe shed *Abbotsford* was a fair way from the house so we expected to be lonely, but it didn't turn out that way. All around the huts were trees, box, buloke, graceful wilga trees — these always remind me of the willows — and leopard trees, so called because their smooth, light trunks have dark spots on them. Not unlike a leopard skin. It was a lovely setting, at least we thought so after our experience of sheds on dry, hot plains.

The sun never shone directly on the kitchen so even though the temperature topped the century, which it did day after day, the eating rooms at least were fairly comfortable. We soon found we were not alone, as we first thought. One day there was a terrific commotion at the door. We rushed to investigate and saw eighteen pigs, three sows and fifteen imps of Satan in the form of piglets. For about half a minute we gazed at each other in silence; then with a buck and a squeal they were gone. It seemed, or so we learned from the station hand, the pigs were semi-wild and, so he said, not at all friendly.

At this shed was a huge brick oven. There was a fuel stove, so evidently the oven hadn't been used for years. Having time to spare, we decided to clean it out and try our hand at bread-baking. We stacked it full of wood that night, then in the morning scooped the ashes out and it was ready. Now, it was some years since I'd baked bread. I gave my first batch a decent burial that afternoon under a leopard tree. The pigs immediately dug it up and ate it — we didn't see them for three days. After this, I was much more successful and soon I was baking all the bread and buns for sixteen men in addition to my other chores. The night the men were expected I, like a fool, left seven large loaves of bread and six dozen buns on the kitchen table for lunch on the morrow; at least that's how I planned it. The men however, arriving cold and hungry after a long trip, went to the kitchen for a hot drink. There

on the table were beautiful fresh buns. 'Good old babbling brook, she always was good to us'. The stinkers scoffed the lot!

We moved to another property some thirty miles further north. It has always been my boast that I don't panic but by golly I nearly did while I was here. The day dawned hot and sticky. Before noon the temperature was 110 degrees in the more or less cool of the dining room. There was an air of expectancy, the leaves of the trees hung limp, not a breath of breeze stirred. Sparrows, usually so chirpy under the eaves, were absolutely silent. Everyone felt uneasy and tense, then to crown it all the dogs started to howl. I wore a minimum of clothing; even then I felt over-dressed. Suddenly in the west I saw a huge black cloud approaching and, thinking it was a thunderstorm coming, I was rather pleased, hoping it would at least clear the air. How wrong I was, I soon found out.

I could hear the wind long before it arrived. It roared, whined and shrieked. It tore limbs off the trees, tossing them in the air like pieces of straw. I stood fascinated for a minute, then I remembered the washing on the line. I ran out and had nearly succeeded in gathering in all the clothes when the storm struck. As I said, I wore the minimum of clothing. Well that wind caught my dress and up she went over my head. I grabbed my skirt, thereby dropping some of the clothes. I often wonder what became of a shirt. I last saw it about sixty feet up in the air. Perhaps some kangaroo might wonder what animal had a blue skin with a green patch in its tail. Red sand came in everywhere, through cracks and down chimneys until everything was covered. The men came up to see how things were. We all looked like Red Indians. I went to the meat house to get some meat for tea and this was when I nearly panicked. There in all their glory hung three emerald green sheep carcasses and talk about stink! I didn't know what to do . . . The dogs got the sheep and we had a roll made with salmon and potatoes.

Next, we went to a station called *Tyldon* near Balranald. This was run by some of the nicest people we ever came in contact with. Usually the homestead people never come near the huts but quite a few, when they found the cook was a woman, came to see us. Evidently I passed muster as they came again and we enjoyed a good gossip. This certainly helped me as, no matter how good the men are, there are times you'd love a good natter with one of your own sex.

The huts in this case too, were right out in the heat, but only a few chains away from a swamp which was kept full of water from a nearby bore. Around it grew those friendly old trees, the box. These are found almost all over Australia. They are very scraggy, looking like a woman when her perm is growing out. There are grey box and swamp box, common in the south, and black box which thrives in a different climate. What a paradise for birds, kangaroos, foxes, emus, sheep and rabbits. Often I would sneak over to the swamp in the evening and if I kept very still I was entertained for hours. This was the time everything came for a drink, after a hot day on the plain. Galahs were a sight to see for they have rose colored breasts and smoky-grey backs. At all times of the day galahs can be seen in twos and threes, but it is in the evening that, by some instinct, they gather in mobs, then fly about in formation. With every change in direction they take on a different color. One moment they will be flying down the light, like grey ghosts, then they will whirl and you will see a mass of soft pink against the sunset.

To descend to the more sordid side of life, we had while here, a plague of blowflies, big green brutes. The sheep suffered badly with maggots sometimes being far into the flesh. Not content with this, those horrors blew the waterbags, blankets and the men's jumpers. No matter how I tried, I couldn't keep them out of the kitchen. We had wire doors, window screens and fly wire over the chimneys but still they managed to sneak in. I used to be driven frantic trying to serve the meals.

As there were plenty of rabbits near here we often shot some to vary the menu. Otherwise it was mutton seven days a week. One weekend the men went into town and, knowing our men, we knew we were free until late Sunday night, so decided to dine out. We headed for the Homebush pub, set on the main road between Balranald and Ivanhoe. At least there'd be a change of menu and, most importantly, I wouldn't have to wash up. Sitting in the spotless little dining room, we were the only guests. The waitress handed the menu to Cliff and I thought there was a funny look on his face, then I knew why. It said: 'roast mutton or braised rabbit.' But I enjoyed the meal; it was beautifully cooked, by someone else, and I didn't have to wash up. That evening we drove to a red sand-hill about five miles away and there we saw the hop bushes. I had only seen these in groups of about a dozen, but

here were hundreds of them. They grow to about ten feet high and we were lucky to see them in flower. It's a lovely sight: the flowers or hops are light green at first, then emerald green, yellow, pink and bronze. This, with the red sand below and the blue sky above, made a glorious picture.

Being so far from anywhere at some of these sheds, we had to make our own fun and very well we did it too. We always carried hookey, quoits, darts, monopoly, draughts and dominoes with us. Keen was the competition and fierce the arguments on most nights. I remember one game of monopoly starting at seven o'clock and ending with a loud shout about two am.

- SOURCE : This diary was from page 187 of "History of Ewen & Rachel McDonald & Descendants" by Jill McDonald which was originally published in 1985. It was republished as part of "The History of Donald & Christina McLean and Their Descendants" in 1995.
- COLONIALISTS : Christina and Donald McLean and their ten children migrated from Argyllshire to South Australia in 1837. This was in the earliest years of the colony. The McLeans initially settled near Adelaide where they grew the first wheat crop in SA. Then in about 1840 they pioneered the Strathalbyn area. There are now well over 20,000 descendants spread across Australia and elsewhere.
- CHANGES : Please contact us with additions, corrections or suggestions about any part of this family tree.
- CONTACT : Visit our website [www.christinaanddonaldmclean.com](http://www.christinaanddonaldmclean.com) or Strathalbyn Museum phone 08 8536 2656 to discover more about your family – and about privacy and copyright.