

2110
INTERVIEW WITH DICK SCHOFIELD
IN COOMA, NSW
27/5/1989
(focusing on Gavel's Hut)

by Dean Turner

BACKGROUND: Huts on and about the Nungar Plain

(Sources: This interview, the Huts book and interview with Leo Crowe by Graham Scully, 7/10/1988)

Brayshaw's to the east
Crowes and Gavel's to the south
Schofield's to the north

Schofield's

This iron hut was built by Dick Schofield's brothers Stan and Wallace in the late 1940s after a reshuffle of the snow leases. Its outstanding attribute is a large 16-pane window.

Crowes

Built in nearly one day in 1942 by William Crowe, the hut was made of fibro, sawn timber frame with a galvanised iron fireplace at one end. The hut wasn't lined and it had a dirt floor. It was located about 3 miles south of Circuit's hut.

Gavel's

The present weatherboard hut is located at the southern end of the Nungar Plain between Gang Gang Mountain and Bulgar Hill. The hut was built by Dick Schofield and his brother-in-law, Ray Rawson about 1931.

The first hut was there when Dick first moved to the Nungar. It was built with corrugated iron and it had a flat roof (a picture of this hut has been provided by Dick, taken around 1930). The hut could have been built in the 1920s by Gavel. Tom Taylor camped in the old hut while dog trapping in 1929. "You would roast in the daytime and perish in the night. I'd have to put my butter in a wet bag and hang it in a tea-tree in the nearby creek". The last people to hold the lease were Arthur Yen and Greg Welch.

Brayshaw's

This is a tiny rectangular weatherboard hut below Big Bugtown Hill; access is off the Circuits hut firetrail along a largely indistinct two-rut track. The inside has a wooden floor timber lining as well as a burnt out cast iron stove. The hut and nearby sheepyards are in reasonable condition; and are said to have been built by Roy Brayshaw and son in the 1950s.

According to Greg Russell, Brayshaw's was an old school and the freehold block of 1000 acres which it is situated on was selected by his father Frank Russell.

Sanko Smith, a well known local, and former mailman for the Grey Mare Mine, had a son who hanged himself nearby with his stockwhip.

Circuit

Circuits, Doosies or Fells hut is located on the Circuits hut firetrail about 5km from the wall of Tantangara Dam on the edge of Gulf Plain. More of a homestead than a hut, the four-roomed structure was built by the Australian Estates Company in the 1930s.

THE INTERVIEW

If it was Jimmy Gavel that died in the snow, I did not know him. The Gavel I knew who owned the snowlease on the Nungar came from Condoblin. James T. Gavel with sons Max and Jack used to come up with about 4000 sheep onto their lease for the summer months in the 1930's. I used to have four brothers who used to go to Gavel's place every year shearing, we knew them really well.

The Jim T Gavel I knew who had the lease on Nungar died in a motor accident near Condoblin, he had both legs amputated and died a bit later. This was in the 1930's and he was an old man.

I remember the story of Mick Shanley from when I was working up there until December 1935 and I have an idea that I knew him. I never heard the Gavel story until I read it in the Huts book. It wasn't the Gavel from Condoblin, the man I used to look after sheep for.

The Gavels would shear the sheep at Condoblin. They'd drench them and dip them, then put them on the road and they'd arrive up in the mountains around about November and there was always someone stayed up with them all summer until April. That was my job. We'd muster them up and draft them all out in Autumn and put them on the road back to Condoblin. They would get them back there and shear them, drench them and dip them and they'd be on the road again to come back. All the sheep were wethers between 2 to 5 years.

The snow lease was 5000 acres on part of the Nungar Plain. It had a marsupial netting fence around it six feet high; "Frank Russell told me that he could remember a fall of snow there and they could ride out over that fence and wouldn't know they were over it (prior to the 1920's).

When we shifted our sheep (Schofield's) Gavel's sheep would be put on the road and sent back, and we'd stop up there probably for another week or so. Before we left we would go right over all that country and burn it, we'd drop matches all over it and burn it right out. Then the next year when we went back, there was a beautiful sweet green pick.

There was never a bushfire in the years that I was up there that went through that country. Now they've got that much rubbish in there and this National Park is doing nothing about it and its building up and up and up. When a fire does come through that area it'll do a lot of damage.

Dick was born in Cooma in 1907 and he started going to the mountains in 1930 and he was there for about five years all summer. "I haven't been back there since 1945."

There used to be a telephone line running along the boundary of Frank Russell's property (Rock Forest) to Cungarama. No-one lived there but Frank did have a hut there. When Dick used to go up he used to go down and get the telephone and run a line up to Gavel's hut straight across the flat.

I used to go off riding into the mountains with Frank Russell looking for cattle. Frank had a property at Providence and he used to have his cattle yards there and brand all his calves. I can remember one day I was over there with him to brand these calves; he drafted them all off and left a couple of cows in the yards with them to quieten them down. They were branding them there, I was just lookin' on, and Frank had a chap there on the neck. Frank got a bit annoyed with him, he couldn't hold 'em they kept on gettin' up, they were damn big hereford calves! He said, "For god sake's Dick, come in here and help me brand these calves, get on their head and hold them down".

Jack Bell was there on the tail and when we felled the beast I'd get the head and bend it back round and hold it and Jack would get down and sit on his backside and he'd put one foot up against one hamstring and he'd get the other leg up on top and he'd pull it back and that's how we held 'em'. We never had a rope. God I was tired that night. We did about 70 or 80 calves there that day. My god it was a long days work.

We got no more than 4 pound a week for wages. But mind you, you could buy a pair of boots for 15 shillings and trousers for a pound.

Gavel's hut, the current one, was not built in the 1920's, but in 1932. Dick has a photo of the old one; flat roof, very big old chimney and out near the front door was a great big set of old rams horns, by gee they were a big set! Someone had put them on the wall. It had a dirt floor in it. From the new hut it was virtually straight across the gully to the north of the front door.

The first hut was there when Gavel arrived, and must have been built many many years before we came in. The old hut was still there when the new hut was built.

Dick spent a year or two in the old hut while looking after sheep brought up from Spring Downs. "It wasn't worth doing up the old hut, it was beyond it. We built the new hut, more than anything, to be near water. Tom Taylor was right about the old hut being cold!

I dug down in one part of the creek there where the banks break off it, where it was fairly steep. And I dug a hole into the side of the bank and I put some sticks in there with hooks and hung the meat in a hessian bag and put bread and butter and stuff in there. It was four or five foot wide and then went a fair way back into the bank.

My brother-in-law, Ray Rawson, and myself built the present hut and a chap named Hayden Pagram, he carted the timber and iron from the Badja sawmill in 1931. It was easier for Hayden to get the timber from out near where he lived out at Peak View and go straight up from that side. We knew the Broadheads very well.

Hayden took all the timber and iron up in a little 4 cylinder Chev truck and I went up with him, and I remember we went in through Rock Forest. We used to have to go up a steep hill there, a hell of a steep hill, and he had the timber on and some of it was sticking back out over the tray of the truck. We started up this hill and he got on a green patch of grass and the truck started to skid, he couldn't get up. Anyway he put the brakes on and this locked up his wheels but that didn't stop us from skidding back. And right behind us was a flamin' great big tree and one of the pieces of timber that was sticking out the back, hit the tree and drove the timber straight up through the cabin of the truck and it went between me and him. If anyone had been sittin' in between us they'd have got killed as sure as eggs! I'll never forget that.

Going up the hill we had to zig zag all the way. It wasn't a track at all, it was more like just drivin' in between the trees, pickin your own way.

I think Schofield's hut was built when I was in Tasmania some time after 1942 by Stan and Wallace Schofield, soon after Gavel's lease was split up.

When I first went up there, there was a dingo roaming in those hills killing sheep and one thing and another. Anyway they couldn't catch him, they had dog trappers from Cooma and Tumut and all around and they couldn't get him. So they decided they'd have a drive for him.

They got together about 60 blokes, 20 or 30 were drivers and the rest were shooters. They drove from away out near the Kiandra road, the other side, just about Rock Forest there, and they came right through that Estates block up the hill. Right through that and out onto the Bugtown Road. They never got him, nobody ever caught sight of him. The shooters were all told not to fire a shot unless it was at the dingo. And there wasn't a shot fired, so they knew he hadn't been spotted.

Anyway, a lot of them, about half of them, decided they wouldn't stop for another drive and they'd go home. And I said to them there, I said to Frank Russell and one or two others while we had our dinner there on that road, "listen, if that dog is about," I said, "he's in that Bugtown Hill!" Anyway, they ended up agreeing with me.

Because, how I reckoned he was in there was because every time that a mob of sheep came up that road and into a paddock or anywhere on the Nungar Plain there would be sheep killed; on the same night they were put there. So I said, "that dog's not travelling very far, he's close at hand. He comes out, out of that hill," I said, "onto the road and he gets the smell of the sheep and he follows them in".

So they went round and they had the drive and they drove that hill out and out he came. And Aub Russell, that was an uncle of Greg's, he was standing sort-of on the road and he was looking up the road to where some of the other shooters were. And this dog came out and he sat up right in the middle of the road and old Aub just happened to turn round and saw him and he gave him one, knocked him over, and he gave him another one before he could get back onto his feet. He got 60 or 70 pounds from the fund donated by the people who had the leases up there. That was about 1933.

That was the only dog we ever had trouble with and we knew it was only one dog that was doing it all because every time we found a sheep that had been killed or bitten he'd been caught in the hip just down below the tail and when you skinned that sheep, right behind the ears on the neck you'd find all the teeth marks of the dog. He'd also open them up in the flank and all he'd take was the gall fat out of them, he wouldn't take anything else. And they found out when they caught him why they couldn't trap him. He'd been caught in a trap before and he had two or three toes cut off where he'd just got nipped by the trap. He was too cunning for them. They used to set the traps on trails and things like that and they could track where he'd come right up to the trap and then walked right out round it.

When our sheep were ready to come home and after Gavel's sheep went we used to go trapping then for rabbits for the skins, and we'd have up to 3 or 4 hundred traps out. There were four of us and each one of us would have 80 to a hundred traps. We used to set half in the same place and move half of them each day.

After we set our traps and skinned our rabbits we'd go out with the tin whistles and whistle the foxes up to us. You only had to go into the Estates block in the afternoon and each one of us would shoot 2 or 3.

One year I went up with the sheep and took up a dog that I'd only had down in the low country. Anyway he cleared out after two days and I was in a bit of a stew, although I had another good dog with me, I didn't want to lose him either. I could track where he went down the trail towards Rock Forest. He wasn't down there and I thought that he would have gone on to home. But he didn't go down to Chakola to Spring Downs, a property we had there, he went straight on through and finished up at Peak View on our property out there. He did 70 to 80 miles. They said when they found him there at Peak View he was really footsore and as tired as ever he could be. He just decided to lit off home.

Other parts of the Nungar Plain

I didn't know much about Sanco Smith (who's son hung himself near Brayshaw's hut) apart from he was a bloody scoundrel, no doubt about him. He was one of those blokes you'd have to be careful of if you had any stock about. He used to camp at the old hut (what was it called?) at the foot of Nungar Hill.

Circuits hut was built by the Australian Estates Company not the Australian Pastoral Company. Looking straight east over the fence from Gavel's is the Australian Estates block of land where I used to come up through to get to the hut. Big Jack Miners used to look after Circuits hut and mind the Estates Company's stock. I knew him and his family very well. Big Jack used to work for the Broadheads and he was one for playing practical jokes (he had a hell of a big hand).

The Broadhead's Badja Sawmill

I remember the little Jack referred to in the Broadhead's book. Alan was his right name but they had a nickname for him (Jack the Ripper).

I remember when we were going out there once to the Badja, when we used to have a place out there. We were going from Countegeny homestead, the road went down round past Stan Stuarts, and old Jack's walkin' down the road, and we had a great big Buick car (7 seater 1926 model). Anyway, we were going down the hill lettin' it run along very quietly, we weren't travelling very fast, and Jack is right up along the edge of the road and there was a bank beside him nearly as high as a door. And we got right up to him and we tooted the horn. Well holy smoke he took a dive. He went straight down over the bank and when he hit the bottom he rolled! My god we had a laugh at him.

The Broadhead's only had one mill at the Badja. Turn left at Countegany, its on a bit, close to the road on the right. Harry, Tom, Frank and Bert used to run it. Harry made the tennis rackets and cricket bats. Frank used to cut a lot of timber but he left there for Goulburn where he had a grocery shop, he was the only one, other than Bert, who married. Roy Blyton still lives out at the mill.

Jim Broadhead used to have a flour mill just before the airport and the arable turnoff.

My father (John) took the steam engine with a team of 18 to 20 bullocks from the Kylloe copper mine to Broadhead's at the Badja around 1914. We carted all the timber and cables at Kylloe and used them to make a big suspension bridge over the Murrumbidgee at Dromore station owned by the New Zealand Australian Lands Company. We had a mile to go after a week of rain and it took us over a week to go the distance. A couple of times we had to unload everything to get out of the bog.

I can remember seeing the white pegs for the railway line pegged out right down to Dalgety when it was going to be the national capital.