

TRANSCRIPT OF AN INTERVIEW WITH MR J.A. TYRELL

This interview was held on 30 March 1991 at Mr Jim Tyrell's home in Corryong, in north east Victoria. Also present were Mrs Ruth Nicholas (my mother) and Mr Jack Tyrell, nephew of Jim Tyrell. The purpose of the interview was to record information on the early grazing of Geehi from the time of the Tyrells' arrival in 1889 to the sale of the lease to the Nankervis family in 1926.

Mr Tyrell: I remember a man [Klaus Hueneke] came to interview Errol Scammell, and he wrote a book on the mountains and all the huts - they were only the recent huts, the last 50 or 60 years. He hadn't heard of Tyrell's hut. You've got to remember the first hut was built by Dad when he first selected Geehi back in 1889. The first one was burnt down by a man by the name of Bob Seaton. And he built the second hut on the same place, and that one over the years deteriorated. They don't last long in the mountains you know; it's very poor timber.

Then we built the third hut. That was built by Jack's father (Bill) and a first cousin of ours, when they were only in their teens. Jim Emmerson was the cousin's name: his mother and my mother were sisters. He had a bit of a flair for building. He was only about 20 and Bill would have been about 18. Now it's disappeared (from that site). Jack knows where it is.

Jack Tyrell: Are you sure Nankervis' didn't pull that one down and put it down there where it is now by the stone hut?

Mr Tyrell: I think that's what they did - part of the old original Tyrell's hut. I daresay they used the roof off it, as it had an iron roof on it. The iron was packed in on horses over 'the wall'.

Jane: When was the third hut built ?

Mr Tyrell: Brother Bill was 18, he died in 1964 when he was 60: that makes it 1922.

Jane: Where was that hut originally?

Mr Tyrell: The first two huts were built on Bridge Creek. The third hut was built on what we call Frank's. Where you've got the sealed road and you drop down to where the bridge is now, immediately before you drop down onto the flat it would be about 140 yards as you go down the hill, on your right. [Coming out of the trees, the site is roughly in line with the stone hut seen down on the flat].

Jack Tyrell: The last hut was built on an entirely different place on the other side of the Geehi River. They used to call it the Geehi Creek [the Swampy Plain].

Mr Tyrell: The Snowy Mountains Authority changed its name. I often thought of writing, and putting in a protest to the powers that be, of why they changed it from the Geehi Creek to the Geehi River. Now the Geehi Creek was always known as the Swampy Plain River, right from the source to where it ran into the Murray or

Indi River. But the SMA switched it when they took over, and called it the Geehi River. We always referred to it as the Geehi River; but if someone asked about the height of the Geehi River people knew full well you meant the Swampy Plain, but because you wanted to know about the river at Geehi it got called 'the Geehi River'.

Jack Tyrell: The first hut was located between the two creeks. You cross Bridge Creek, where the flat comes to a point between the two creeks. That was their old horse paddock. Across onto a little flat, where there are a lot of round boulders. The hut was up this little flat, walking distance from the Geehi Creek - that's where they got their water from.

Mr Tyrell: I hadn't been there for 60 years. Jack took me up one day. I wanted to go back and see if I could find any traces of the old hut. We looked and looked and couldn't find anything. Sometime after that the family had a reunion up there, and we all had a pretty good search. Some found a few old rusty nails, some old pottery and a bit of old camp oven. After we left there I was remembering that as we came out of the door of the hut we used to drop down a little rise to the creek. And that is just where we had been looking.

The second one was built right where the first one was burnt. The first one wasn't there very long at all. Old Bob Seaton camped in it, and went away and left too much of a fire going. I think he and Dad then had a court case over it.

The first two huts were built mainly of narrow leaf peppermint. There were some very nice trees up there, and still are - very free splitting. The first two huts were log cabins, they weren't slabs. What they call chock and log, where one's cut out on the ends to fit into one another at the corner. The chimney was vertical logs or saplings, and the roof of each was bark. You used to take the bark off the tree when the sap was travelling, then wet it and weight it down so that it dried flat. Those log huts are rare in the mountains now.

When they selected in those days the wife had to do three months residence in 12 months, and the selector had to put up certain improvements such as scrubbing and ring barking. The first hut, Dad wasn't married then and it was just a single room. The second one he built was a double room because Mother used to spend three months up there. She got exempt in the finish, which was a clause in the folio, when you had children and wanted to take them away to be educated.

The last time I remember her being there with us as kids was 1914, I remember that quite well.

Jane: Why did they choose another site for the third hut ?

Mr Tyrell: It's pretty hard for me to tell you what the layout was in those days, as before the Snowy days the layout was quite different. When you left Khancoban you went down the bridle track down the Geehi wall - not the fire track, just a bridle trail. You got to Bogong Creek and you had to cross the river three times going up the flats before you got onto Bear's flat. From Bear's flat you could go to Bridge Creek without crossing the river again.

Now many, many times the river was in flood when they got there, so Dad decided he wouldn't put up with that any longer, and that's why he put the new hut on what we called Frank's. There was an alternative route when you crossed the Bogong Creek: instead of going along the flats and crossing the river three times you went over the hill and came down much where the sealed road comes today.

Ruth: Why was it called Frank's ?

Mr Tyrell: You go back to selection days again. The Duffy Land Act came in 1860 and they were allowed to select 320 acres which is a half mile square; 320 in your own name, 320 in your wife's name and 320 in the child's. As a matter of fact it was a very common occurrence for a child to have 320 selected before it was born. If it was going to be born that was enough. Dad selected Frank's in his brother's name - that's how we got the name 'Frank's'.

And Bear's Flat - that's the good flat in Geehi. He didn't select that, he bought it off a man named Bear. It was the last known leasehold mentioned in Dr Andrew's book [The History of the Upper Murray], and he wrote in the 1880's. So whether Bear's was freehold when he bought it I don't know. Bear had a property in early times, somewhere near Berringama.

Anyway, Dad really only selected Bridge Creek and Frank's. You paid something like 7'6 an acre, and after a few years if you stopped on it and paid your rent, it reverted to freehold.

In the meantime he bought Khancoban, where the Murray 2 Power Station is now, and he sold that in 1926 to Chisholm and sold Geehi to Nankervis'. He had 640 acres at Khancoban, a lot of it where the pondage is now. It was a pretty good home in those days, a beautifully built place.

Geehi was only growing country and every year he would bring the cattle out. He always what we call 'wintered' about 150 there, and in the spring/summer time about 500 or 600 head. He'd bring them out, leaving 150 or so behind, and he'd stock up Khancoban and the rest would go down to Bonegilla. They would never come back again, they'd be fattened up and sold. He'd buy them around Corryong or Albury as stores and take them up to Geehi, and keep them there until the winter came on.

Mother and father were married in 1901. Mother was born in 1872, and she was reared and educated by Mrs Urquhart of Cudgewa Station until she was 14 years of age. Mrs Johnny Pierce - that's the original Mrs Pierce - was my mother's father's sister, Mum's aunty, and she didn't have any daughters of her own. She had five sons. Mother went to live with Mrs Pierce when she was 14 as a companion helper. Dad previously came to work at Greg Greg station when he was 12 years of age in 1884. He left home, he was reared by his aunt, and they were real poor.

He came up on the coach to Tooma and the story goes that he was a pretty energetic little fella and he sat up on the outside of the coach with the driver. Of course in those days it wasn't roads, it was all gates, and when they'd come to a gate he'd jump down

and open it. The driver took a liking to him and asked him where he was going. Dad said he was going to Tooma, and the driver asked whether he had a job. He had a shilling; that was all he had in the world. Remember those big red handkerchiefs they used to put round their necks? He had all his worldly belongings tied up in one of those.

He said "you won't go very far on a shilling", and because he'd been so good opening the gates, he bought him up for nothing, so he still had the shilling in his pocket. When they got to Tooma, George Lloyd was the mailboy there waiting for the coach to come in. The driver said "when you go back to Greg Greg you tell Mr Pierce that I've got a very good boy here who's looking for a job. He said to Dad "you stop here, I think they'll be back for you". They sent George back with a pony to bring him back. That was in '84.

Well, he was a pretty good rider and pretty light in those days and it wasn't long before he got into the stables, and that was his main line of work.

When Mother went to work there, as so often happens a romance started and they were married in 1901. When they were first married, all he had was Geehi and they lived out at Towong Upper where the Findlay girls are now. He rented that property for four years off old Mrs Findlay.

All this time he still held Geehi. In 1905 Bonegilla station was cut up into subdivisions. He bought Bonegilla and worked Geehi and Bonegilla until 1917, then he bought Khancoban. Mum used to go into Geehi to do her three months, and I suppose at times she did more than three months because there was a hut in there, and until they bought Bonegilla she had nowhere else. Even then she used to have to go back periodically. The last time I remember her being there was the 1914 drought.

Ruth: And once you had paid it off presumably there was no stipulation about residence?

Mr Tyrell: Once paid off it was freehold. It was next door to nothing really, it didn't take him long to pay it off. In between times he had a property out at Thoughtla, young Hughie Sheather is on it now. He also owned that property at one time where Roy Brown is now, it's on the title deeds. Considering that he left home with a shilling in his pocket he didn't do a bad job.

Ruth: Where did he come from?

Mr Tyrell: If you go down towards Wodonga there's a historical marker where the old Tallangatta township was. You go across the bridge and follow the weir on the other side in the opposite direction to Wodonga until you come to a locality called Springvale, just before you get to Bethanga. That's where his Aunt lived.

There were two brothers came out from England, mining engineers and both pretty clever men too they tell me: John and Sam. John was killed at Yackandandah going home one night.

Dad in his family had 10 - five boys and five girls, and his mother died of childbirth when she was 32, and no wonder that she did. Dad was the second youngest, he was only two years old when his mother died. Aunty took him and the baby and reared them until he was 12. So he's had a bit of a colourful history.

I always look back to Geehi from a romantic point of view. It was a hell of a place to get to, particularly for a woman with kids, coming down that wall. I tell you it's not the wall that people know today. It's well worth having a look if you want to see tree ferns as they grow in their natural state, 40 to 50 feet high in that gully that the track used to come up. The old track comes straight up what we used to call a draw, instead of going around where the fire trail goes today.

Ruth: Jack showed us once and said you used to bring your cattle out and straight up, with dogs on either side and almost rush them at the hill.

Mr Tyrell: Yes, a good dog was essential unless you had two or three good men, because it was natural for the cattle to want to go around the sides rather than go up. If you let them get around the sides it was a hell of a job to get them back again. I bought 120 bullocks out on my own once and I still defy anybody to do the same. I had two good dogs.

Mother carried me down that wall when I was four weeks old and Bill six weeks, and Dad led the old pony, so she did a fine job.

Ruth: They're the great unsung heroes of Australia, the pioneer women, because they worked outside and inside and they bore the children as well.

Mr Tyrell: Yes, that was the big thing then because they had no doctors or nurses, so they had no one to run to. I don't think in those days the kids got so sick as they do now.

Ruth: And did you have many people coming through? You were sort of the end of the line out there.

Mr Tyrell: No we didn't, although the track was always there. Greg Greg came through with their cattle every year, and very very occasionally there'd be a walker, but you wouldn't get one in 12 months. Of course there was no gold at Geehi or Groggin, so there were no miners travelling through either. Towards the latter end of it there might be one or two parties - Joe Evans might bring through ten or a dozen or so on horseback in summer. And then trout fishing came in 1918 but previous to that it was very very quiet.

Ruth: When would Groggin have been opened up?

Mr Tyrell: That's a debatable question. Some people will tell you Groggin was taken up with part of Benambra in about 1835, but the earliest that I can trace were people by the name of McFarlanes. Even though they were the first to come across from Monaro to Benambra, I think they took up Groggin sometime after 1835.

The first I know had it before Pierces were people by the name of Worcester (spelling unsure) from Omeo. Johnny Pierce took it from them in 1871. There was a chap by the name of Barry: I can't find out whether he owned any of the Victorian side but he did own the NSW leasehold. He also had a block at Khancoban, all that country where Roger Mouatt is now. Really the first people that had Groggin and stuck to it were Pierces in 1871, and they held it up to about 1930 when they sold it to the Nankervis family.

Groggin and Geehi adjoined so Nankervis' then had all the way from the top of the wall. Our boundary was at the top of the wall. There was a fence there, the only fence between Khancoban and Groggin, separating us from Bringenbrong station. If the fence hadn't been there I don't think the cattle would have gone up or come down the wall to Groggin without pressure. And of course the Nankervis' had the snow leases, and went right up over the top of Kossie.

They used to send out an Inspector of selections, a chap by the name of Chesterman. He used to come around periodically to see that Mum and Dad were living on the lease, and you got to know him quite well. Years later Chesterman became Surveyor General of NSW.

The name Tom Groggin - now the old chap [Pierce] bought it in 1871, and when Tom, his son, got married he gave him Groggin. They lived up there, Tom and his wife, for three or four years. Their first child was born; she was about three year old and his wife was pregnant again when he died of typhoid fever as a young man, before the second child was born. You might remember Vera Pierce who died in the Corryong hospital recently. She was very close to 100 years old, and she was that child.

Jim Pierce died young, and Bill died when he was about 17 or 18. That only left Johnny, the eldest boy and Kerry, the youngest boy. When Johnny died he left Groggin in his will, and that's how Kerry got hold of Groggin.

Bringenbrong came to be subdivided by the executors, who included Chesterman. The place was slipping, and they put it on the market but it didn't sell. So Dad asked to have his pick of the land before it was subdivided. That's how he got Indi. A lot of people will tell you that Dad bought it off Pierce and Hannel and Rogers but that was wrong.

Upper Indi started just where Norm Sheather's house is now. Upper Indi was bought by Rogers, Hannel and Pierce. They didn't have any experience and eventually they went broke, and they sold it to Scott. He cut it up and sold it. Rogers bought the homestead paddock on his own, 998 acres. Later he sold that to Sasella's. All that country was selected at one time or another, and if you get the old maps you'll find that a lot of the blocks are still in the original selectors' names.

Going back to Geehi, Bill and I were pretty young when we used to go there. I remember one time when Errol Scammel was there; he was eight, I was ten and Bill was 14. Now today that age is not dry behind the ears, let alone put away out in the mountains on

their own. I'll never forget this day there. Our horse paddock didn't have a gate but it had sliprails, and of course with sliprails you only took down one end and jumped the horse over it. Errol was only eight, we were a bit older and we could ride pretty well. Errol jumped his horse over it, but he didn't come down again in the right place. He missed his horse altogether!

We used to cart salt into Geehi; there's two hundred pound in a bag of salt, and you used to put half a bag on each side of a packhorse. It's a pretty big lift for kids you know, but we were expected to do it and had to do it. You didn't only put it out once a year, but it was the easy way to bring in the cattle when you wanted to do the yearly muster. They were used to being salted. You'd put the salt out and sing out 'salto salto' and see them coming from all directions. You could put salt out on the river flats at Indi and it would be there from rain to rain, but you put it out in the mountains in the forest country and they'd clean it all up. It must be the different grasses.

In those early days you took up a selection of 320 acres, and a fella wouldn't make much money at all. He'd probably have about enough to pay the first rental, and things were that tough that he couldn't find enough for the next rental and he'd have to forfeit, and he'd walk off. But in the meantime he's built a hut to live in. Then somebody else takes the lease, the next door neighbour maybe who would have no use for the hut, and the hut would disintegrate and disappear.

Now you take the Round Flat at Geehi. When Dad selected Geehi, old Sam Whitsed did a lot of ringbarking and suckering and scrubbing, and he selected the Round Flat. But that was all he did. It wasn't big enough to make a living off and he forfeited it in 12 months. Mum and Dad used to often refer to it as Whitsed's flat, but the name died out.

The Long Flat was a lovely clean flat. Dad never owned that - it was part a travelling reserve. Anybody could camp on it, but we used it. When we sold out Geehi in 1926 there was a little patch of blackberries that we used to salt the cattle on. It was a little stunted patch, it never grew any higher. And it was the only patch of blackberries that I knew of between Khancoban and Groggin, but look at it today.

Postscript

The day following the interview Jack Tyrell took us out to Geehi to visit the sites of the original huts. We located the site of the first and second huts, leaving the Alpine Way on the second track after the bridge on the left side of the road heading towards Thredbo. There is little to see other than a pile of stones which was clearly the remains of a chimney and fireplace. Judging by the dimensions of the rectangular pile, the fireplace must have been fairly large - about 10 to 12 feet in width. When one considers that Mrs Tyrell had five children out at Geehi at one time, including a baby with all the attendant laundry that an infant involves, the hut must have quite substantial in size. A

few pieces of broken camp oven, broken bottles and strips of iron also remain. As Mr Tyrell recalled, the hut is on the edge of the flat where it drops down sharply to the creek about 20 or 30 feet away.

Nothing remains to be seen at the site of the third hut except a pile of stones which could have been the chimney (if you use your imagination). We questioned the location of hut so far from the river, but apparently there was a reliable spring about 30 metres south of the hut. However we weren't able to confirm the location of the spring because of the thick blackberries that now cover much of the area.

DETAILS ON EARLY TYRELL HUTS AT GEEHI

(Kobowaku)

Grid reference 062 707 : the first hut was built in 1889 by Henry Tyrell on his selection. It was burnt down soon after, and a second hut was built on the same site. The first was only a single room, while the second had two rooms to accommodate the growing family which spent at least three months out of each year on the selection. Construction of both huts was 'chock and log' with a bark roof. All that remains now is a pile of rocks marking in the outline of the fireplace, and a few pieces of glass, camp oven and a few nails can be found.

062 734

Grid reference A: The third hut was built in 1922. Nothing now remains except a few pieces of wood and a shapeless pile of rocks. This hut appears to have been horizontal slabs with an iron roof (according to the photo now on display at the shelter near the airstrip). It was relocated down beside the river by the Nankervis family after they bought the lease from Tyrell's in 1926.