

A DAY ON A DAIRY FARM

The cow I was milking was called Cherry. She had that name because her coat was an even red-brown colour. I was given Cherry to milk because she had big teats; teats that an amateur milker like me could get his whole hand around to squeeze and see the milk flowing easily. My cousin Bruce, ten months my senior, milked the cows that were harder to milk. He did the milk daily before he went to school and knew what he was about. I was a visitor and inexperienced in the job of milking. After a day or two, I was given Brindle to milk. She had small teats and it was one finger and a thumb to milk her. I guessed that milking her was viewed by the local experts as part of my in-service training.

Milking time began at first light each day, about 6 am in winter and 5 am in summer. Boys are not that keen on waking up early, but once you got out of bed and walked out into the crisp air it was OK. In fact, it felt good to be alive.

The cows would be standing by the milking shed gate. They knew the drill. When you called “C’mon Cherry”, Cherry would march quickly into the bail, presumably because she knew that there was bran for her in the feed trough. When she stuck her head through the frame to feed, you pulled a heavy board on a hinge and fixed it in place with a steel pin so that the cow was unable to back out. The cows did not seem to mind this, as long as they were eating bran, any more than they objected to your attaching a leg rope to their back leg to prevent them kicking over the milk bucket.

Resting your forehead on the warm skin of a cow on a cold morning is not a bad thing to do. The smells were interesting. Fresh cow dung was the dominant aroma in the air, but this was balanced by the smell of the bran in the feed bin. In the peace of that environment you felt that all was good with the world and you would think on good things as you got

on with the job of milking. The only disruption that I remember to such soliloquising was finding drops of milk falling from the shed roof above me. The first time this happened it took me some time to recognise that this phenomenon was the result of Cousin Bruce squirting milk with great accuracy in exactly the right spot on the roof to have the desired effect. He was a good mate, and one had to enjoy the immense pleasure he seemed to get out of such outrageous behaviour! Simple pleasures were our portion in those uncomplicated days.

Once the nine cows were milked, the milk was carried down the track to the house. Most of the milk was poured into large milk cans ready to be taken to the dairy factory, but about a gallon or so (5 litres) was kept back for separating. The separator was an ingenious machine. It had a vessel at the top into which you poured the milk and a tap at the bottom through which you could release the milk at a steady rate into the separating machinery. While this was happening, you turned a handle at a steady pace, about one turn per second. When you were turning the handle at the right speed, a bell would ring; 'ding... ding... ding! There were two outlet spouts. Out of one came cream; out of the other came 'skimmed milk'. A brilliant machine!



Milk Separator

Once the separator operation was completed, all the utensils, including the milk buckets and separator parts, had to be washed in hot water.

The hot water was always pre-heated by my aunt in a copper boiler while we were milking, so that it was ready when we needed it. It was quite a job pulling the separator parts apart for washing; not an easy thing to do.

Once the washing was done it was breakfast time. My aunt had a very large table at which Bruce and I sat on a bench with our backs to the wall. Breakfast consisted of oaten porridge, scrambled eggs on toast, and always slices of 'hi-top' bread spread with copious amounts of apricot jam and separated cream. A more than an ample breakfast for growing boys and an appropriate reward for completing the job of milking!

The pressure being off, breakfasts were extended times of social interaction in which stories were related, jokes were told, and plans made. The only thing that would interrupt this relaxed activity would be the arrival of Uncle Herb in his ancient Chevrolet Buckboard, to pick up the milk cans and deliver them to the pick-up point.



A 1926 Chev Buckboard Ute in somewhat better condition than Uncle Herb's!

Uncle Herb was about seventy-five years old when I knew him. He was the oldest of four brothers. He was short and had a massive walrus moustache. He was an all-round good man, full of positive

conversation and encouragement to all. He has passed on these many years and his small property has been sub-divided for a housing development. I miss him. He was a type; the eldest son of a Scottish immigrant, who lived a simple but completely satisfying life. The Uncle Herbs are no longer with us, and we are not the better for it.

After breakfast, events on the farm were varied. Some days we would take the ferrets out of their cages, put them in a carrying box and walk down the paddock to find a rabbit warren. String nets would be placed over every hole in the warren and secured with a steel pin driven firmly into the ground. When this was accomplished, one ferret would be released down a rabbit hole and we would await the result with keen expectation. Very soon we would hear a rumbling sound and a rabbit would come hurtling out of a hole and be caught in the net. The rabbit would be quickly extricated, and its neck rung. Sometimes several rabbits would appear at the same time, leading to quite a hectic operation to get them in the bag. The biggest problem with ferrets is that they would sometimes decide to stay down the hole and have to be dug out. That could be quite a lengthy operation, taking maybe an hour or two to accomplish. It was normal practice for the digger to be heard giving a non-stop account, to no-one in particular, of the unsatisfactory and tiresome behaviour of ferrets! With the ferrets once more in their carrying case, we would return to the farmhouse and spend a half hour or so skinning and cleaning the catch.



Our friend the ferret

Rabbits are good eating. People started eating them during the 1930s

depression. They held a commercial value until quite recently and for some people, selling rabbits was their sole employment. Such people used to be common in our cities; they earned the title 'Rabbitohs', as this was their cry as they drove up and down the suburban streets.

The rabbits I am talking about were wild rabbits introduced to Australia from the United Kingdom soon after European settlement. They became a massive scourge and remain so to this day. There have been numerous attempts to eradicate them by introducing species specific diseases like Myxo-mitosis, but they seem to become immune to any disease we throw amongst them. Why we do not eat more of them these days is a mystery. If food gets short again we might be glad we have a few rabbits running around and get the ferrets out again.

One alternative to catching rabbits in the mornings for Bruce and me was to walk up the gully to a neighbour's property. This neighbour had two farms about thirty miles apart. He lived on 'the other one' and only visited the property next to my aunt's farm when he needed to check on his sheep, which was not very often. Around the house at this property was a significant patch of orange trees and in season the oranges were about as good as they get. On many a morning Bruce and I would enjoy a lazy time lying on the grass in the warm sunshine, consuming very good oranges.

Lunch times on the farm were carried out with a minimum of fuss. I remember eating a lot of tomato sandwiches that tasted magnificent because the tomatoes used were ripened on the bush and the bread used was from 'hi-top' loaves of outstanding quality, about twice the height of modern highly processed bread. These days when I go to Africa, the first thing I do after leaving the airport is to buy some tomatoes from a roadside stall, to remind myself what tomatoes are supposed to taste like. I also head to the Wonder Bakery, to get bread like that we knew on my aunt's farm and indulge myself in a little sandwich nostalgia. If food is of high quality you do not need so much

of it to be satisfied. Obesity is a problem these days; the reason is that the food is bad, and people eat too much trying to feel filled.

At one time, my aunt had a well dug in the flat land below her house and used the water to grow her own tomatoes for eating and for sale. She grew some corn and other vegetables too, and Bruce and I often found ourselves pressed into weeding and irrigating these crops when we were not quick enough to slip away after breakfast. Not that we minded; it was great to get your hands dirty and drink cold well water when you were thirsty. Well water has a distinctly earthy taste, but it is not unpleasant. The well was only about fifteen feet (5m) deep as I remember it, but it had a good supply. We would empty it out in a few hours of pumping, but it would be full the following day. The soil was black and friable – as good as you can get I later found out. These were good experiences for a boy who was destined to become an agricultural scientist. Book learning is OK but getting your hands dirty is essential for people wanting to make a serious contribution to the provision of food for the masses.

One of the special things we did in the afternoons was walk down a long gully to the South Para River. On the way we would explore numerous small abandoned gold mines. At each site there would be stones with a bright blue colouration, due to the presence of copper scratches in the side of a hill that had been dug by Cornish miners who came to Australia in droves from 1866 onwards. The two main sites at which they settled were Moonta and Burra, but they were enormously active in mining exploration over the whole state. It is said that every hill in South Australia had a scratch mark in it made by a Cornish miner eighteen months after they landed in the country!

Investigating mines was not the main purpose of our trek to the South Para River. The main game was fishing. Like many other Australian rivers, the South Para only ran after a storm in the catchment; most of the time it consisted of a series of stagnant pools in which could be



Cornish miners at Moonta Bay

found an abundant supply of fresh-water fish. Sadly, in my time, native species had long been fished out, but there were ample supplies of an introduced species, English Red-Fin Perch, that could be taken if you knew how to catch them.

One way to fish was with a rod and bread for bait. We caught quite a lot this way over time. One frustration was that we never seemed to catch the big ones that we could be plainly seen swimming around at the bottom of the pools. To catch them required a quite different technique called 'tickling'. I never perfected this art but Bruce's older brother Les was very good at it. Tickling required considerable patience. First of all, you had to locate a fish hiding under the bank by the side of the pool. Then you lay down, being careful not to let your shadow fall on the pool, and quietly slipped your hand down the bank and into the water. Very slowly you would move your hand until you touched the fish's side, being careful to move your hand gently from side to side. This tickling motion seemed to convince the fish that you were not a hostile agent; but this was a very wrong conclusion because you would suddenly grab the fish and throw it up onto the bank. The first time I saw this happen I was as surprised as the fish. Great fun to watch and even better to accomplish I should think.

The return trip to the homestead in the late afternoon we pleasant

enough. It was quite a long walk so you were beginning to feel pleasantly tired by the time you got home. We usually had Digger the grey-hound dog with us, and he would be tearing around chasing imaginary creatures. Digger was a big dog. My uncle, when he was alive used to shoot foxes and send Digger to collect the carcasses. Digger could jump a fence with a dead fox in his mouth.

The evening meal on the farm was usually roast lamb with vegetables and gravy cooked on my aunt's wood stove. To say it was tasty is to miss the mark. It was magnificent. The potatoes would be cooked to perfection in a roasting pan and the gravy was without peer in my experience.



A wood stove like the one that my aunt had

Keeping the stove going required a lot of wood. Fortunately, the farm had many large red gum trees that were always dropping branches, so the supply of wood was not the problem. The problem was that the wood had to be cut to sizes that suited the stove, and this was almost a full-time job. I had a go at wood chopping myself from time to time. It was a good skill to learn, learning to chop to maximum advantage with the grain of the wood

My aunt's house was made of timber and corrugated iron. It had four

rooms and an enclosed veranda at the back. There was an unfinished porch on the front which had an earth floor and no roof when I knew it. One of the front rooms was my aunt's bedroom. The other was the lounge which was furnished but never used. The back rooms were the large kitchen and the 'boy's room'. My aunt had four sons and when I was there the five of us all slept in the same room. Our beds were army issue; that is, they were steel frame with fold up legs. A perennial trick was to arrange someone's bed so that it was standing but the legs were slightly folded inwards. When the unsuspecting person jumped into bed, the bed collapsed to the great amusement of the rest of the clan.

The back veranda was interesting. At one end stood the copper in which soiled clothes were boiled. Towards the entrance was an enclosed area that acted as the bathroom. The door to the bathroom was a curtain, ideal for throwing a glass of cold water on people taking a bath. From some reason adults seemed to enjoy this prank very much. As for me, I could do without it.

The farm consisted of forty acres of prime land, slightly hilly with a large flat area that I have mentioned previously. In summer the grass in the paddocks turned brown and bushfire were always a distinct possibility. Just after Christmas one year, my cousin Les had an argument with his mother and to work off his frustration he went out and cleared a twenty-yard strip around the house. The next day, a fire came over the hill with flames 30ft high. The house was saved by Les's unsolicited action. Was this a miracle or the result of some intuition on Les's part?

I revisited the farm some time back. Thankfully it has not been subdivided for housing like some of the other farms in the area. In fact, it looks exactly as I left it some seventy years ago, with two exceptions. The house is gone; white ants I was told. And the dairy shed had collapsed; it was all there but the roof had fallen in and the stone walls

were broken down. As I walked amongst the wreckage I could still smell fresh cow manure and bran as we did in the early mornings many lives ago.

JSP