Chapter 7

WINDING DOWN: CHANGING SOCIAL, ECONOMIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL CIRCUMSTANCES

The decline phase of snow country grazing commenced in the 1940s and really gathered pace after the 1970s. It is commonly believed that grazing was regulated into decline by increasingly tight government controls. That is certainly true up to a point – but there were many other forces that gradually sapped the collective vitality of the bush grazing community, and in the end this natural devolution made it possible for politicians in 2005 to deliver the *coup de grace* for grazing in that part of the snow country within the alpine national park, after more than 30 years of bitter struggle.

Amongst these 'real' underlying reasons for the decline of snow country grazing were broad changes in the post-war Australian economy, specific on-farm influences, and changes in the management and condition of the forests. I will tackle these issues in reverse order.

As mentioned in an earlier chapter, a major setback for snow country grazing was the prohibition of graziers' cool burning activities. Bush graziers relied on regular burning of the forest floor to remove scrubby vegetation and promote the growth of fresh new grass shoots. They had a practice of burning the snow country in autumn when they were bringing cattle off the mountains, and they burnt the lower altitude bush runs, where livestock were commonly wintered, in spring or early summer after cattle were sent to the mountain tops. While these burns were meant to be 'cool', government forest officers of the 1920s and 1930s believed that even cool fires compromised future log production by killing seedlings and saplings, and they were also concerned that cool burns might go out of control and become destructive hot fires. In the 1920s and 1930s forest officers in the Mansfield forest district were particularly successful in preventing graziers lighting fires in forest reserves, and after the 1939 wildfires strong and effective action was taken to prevent graziers burning Crown land anywhere in the mountain region. This had disastrous long term consequences for bush graziers as they were robbed of their main rangeland management tool. They had used it to great effect to keep the bush suitable for livestock; now without that tool they witnessed the progressive closing up of the bush as shrubby undergrowth was able to flourish, and the forest grasses were gradually crowded out. Carrying capacity of the lower winter grazing runs quickly declined to the point that, by the 1970s most were no longer very useful. Up in the snow country, the forests and woodlands also became choked with regrowth - only the productivity of the open grassy plains and ridges remained largely unaffected.

Scrubbing up of the forest floor took place over some decades, except where areas of forest had been consumed by wildfires. In the latter case dense post-fire regrowth was evident in a few short years. As we heard in a previous chapter, snow country graziers lamented the rapid and apparently permanent transformation of previously open and grassy forest floors into impenetrable scrubby thickets after the 1939 bush fires. The transformation was indeed dramatic. But it was taking place, at varying speeds, almost everywhere they looked, either because the bush had not been burnt for some time, or because the burns were very, very hot. Additionally, wherever the Forests Department harvested mature stands of woolly butt, which it did with increasing frequency in the alpine region during the 1950s, '60s and '70s using the clear-felling method (i.e. logged areas were totally cleared and the residue burnt on-site), the thick post-logging regrowth was really not much different to post wildfire regrowth.

The inevitable consequence of this 'de-grassing' of the forest floor, in the lower forests and in the snow country, was that individual graziers needed to either find new pastures, reduce the size of their herds, or get out of snow country grazing all together.

From the perspective of the collective – the community of snow country graziers – a major consequence of de-grassing was the closure of a popular recruitment channel. From the 1870s to the 1930s enterprising individuals had been able to make a living simply by grazing cattle on rented bush runs. Many famous snow country graziers started their careers this way – and some completed them having never actually owned much land. In other cases, families with small and otherwise unviable homestead selections were able to stay in business by renting nearby bushland for grazing. As the forest floor became choked with undergrowth (that graziers were no longer permitted to burn away), useful wintering country was lost and with it went the opportunity for relatively poor families to become snow country graziers. This really was the end of an era. It was no longer possible start with virtually nothing, and build a pastoral empire on the back of cheap rented forested Crown land. For a snow country grazing block to be useful one needed somewhere to keep livestock alive during winter. For many, if not most graziers the low altitude bush runs were the key to maintaining a snow country grazing business. From the 1940s it became increasingly necessary for new and continuing graziers to winter their livestock on more expensive privately owned lowland paddocks. With this higher barrier to entry, fewer people were interested to become snow country graziers.

Another factor contributing to the decline of snow country grazing was rising productivity of lowland properties. From the 1930s the increasingly widespread adoption of improved pasture – imported perennial grass species, clover, and top dressing of paddocks with superphosphate fertilizer – resulted in significant increases in carrying capacity of cleared paddocks. The more cattle that could be kept on the home paddocks the less need there was for bush grazing, in winter or summer.

> *Generally, people who were short of land ran stock in the hills. Economics would push you out there…. The 1939 fires were very fierce, and afterwards scrub came up, so the quality of the runs deteriorated. And with the advent of super phosphate (increasing the carrying capacity of the paddock country) it became uneconomical to use the runs. We were glad to get out. We were finished with it by the early 1940s. (Jean Carmody, Appendix F)*

An even bigger boost to lowland productivity occurred when biological control – the use of disease – was successfully deployed to end the century long rabbit plague. Release of the myxoma virus in the 1950s, followed by the calici virus in the 1990s lifted the constant drought-like shroud that had afflicted the nations pasture lands, and also put an end to expensive on-farm control works like rabbit proof fencing, laying of poisoned baits, and ripping and fumigation of burrows. As we saw in an earlier chapter, the rabbit plague had motivated many graziers to use the snow country at the beginning of the 20th century; abatement of the plague now reduced even further grazier's dependence on the snow country. By this time access to the snow country had become an optional convenience for most graziers, rather than a necessity.

Quite apart from the waning carrying capacity of bush runs, and the growing productivity of home paddocks, broad structural changes in Australia's post-war economy also contributed to the decline of snow country grazing. Diversification of the economy – away from primary industry – created new employment opportunities in manufacturing and services, so young people who had grown up in rural areas could move away and follow other careers. Also, the advent of unemployment benefits in the late 1940s, along with other social welfare reforms, created a different attitude to participation

in low paid work. Previously, many rural folk scratched a living by grazing a few cattle in the bush, simply because they had to engage in some kind of work to survive. For a few enterprising people this was the first step on the road to becoming a snow country grazier. Low paid work lost much of its appeal when a viable alternative was to stay at home and get paid for it. So for these two reasons – other well-paying job opportunities, and the dole – there was less interest in the rural community to join the ranks of bush and snow country grazing.

Yet another contributor to the longer term decline in snow country grazing was the expansion of motorised road transport. An ability to rapidly move fodder – hay and grain – to drought afflicted areas made it unnecessary to relocate livestock to other regions. Grass could be brought to the sheep and cattle, rather than taking livestock to the feed. This meant that the snow country was no longer required for emergency drought relief for livestock outside the region – particularly the NSW Riverina. It also undermined some of the logic behind large pastoralists' traditional strategy of maintaining chains of stations in different climatic zones. By 1960 the last big NSW pastoralists[1] had exited the Victorian snow country, further shrinking the community of interest.

Bulk road transportation also created opportunities for some graziers to sell cattle at a much younger age, which profoundly changed the size and composition of their herds. Traditionally mountain cattle graziers grew cattle to three or four years of age, and then sold them to fatteners who prepared the animals for slaughter. These animals were walked some distance to a rail head, for transport to the abattoirs. A taxing journey which mature cattle were strong enough to endure without losing too much condition. However, the advent of large cattle road trucks that could be driven to the farm gate made it practical for graziers located long distances from slaughter houses to sell younger stock, even calves for the vealer market.

By selling cattle at a younger age, graziers could reduce the total size of their herds, and simplify their overall farming operations. For example, a farmer with a few bulls and 100 breeding cows might produce 70 calves per year. By selling bullocks and speyed heifers at 4 years of age the total herd size would be 100 + 70 + 70 + 70 + 70 = 380 head. A typical snow country grazier of yesteryear – say pre-1940s - would have wintered the breeding stock on the home paddocks, and the rest of the herd in forests nearby. As many stock as possible would have been taken to the snow country for the summer. In contrast, breeding calves for sale required no winter forest grazing and fewer cattle needed to be sent to the snow country for summer. There is of course a very big difference in the size and weight of a four-year-old steer or heifer, and a calf - the former giving much more meat than the latter and thus commanding a much higher sale price. However, young cattle may return a premium price by weight; and there are many costs associated with raising cattle to a much older age, particularly when they are grazed in the bush: costs and inconveniences of mustering in the bush, of taking stock to and from the snow country, and casualties due to misadventure and freezing weather. In a changing business environment, where grazing of forests in winter was becoming impractical due to de-grassing; and where major improvements in productivity of lowland paddocks were being experienced because of pasture improvement and the end of the rabbit plague, the option of selling very young cattle at a premium price by weight was another potential opportunity for snow country graziers to consider. To the extent that some recalibrated their operations and sold

[1] Naughton Brothers, who had a chain of pastoral properties stretching from the Riverina through to Monaro, and Cobungra station. They purchased Cobungra in 1930, along with the right to graze many snow country runs.

livestock at a younger age, their interest in and commitment to snow country grazing inevitably diminished.

> *In the early days we had yards at Ryder's Lane (near Tawonga hotel) & Thomas Hollonds sold from there. Later when Thos H died we had Allen's Flat & sold 10 month old calves to the Adams people for years. Sold them in the paddock. Adams grew them for about 2 years & then fattened them. Most were taken to Melbourne. Hollonds were the first to start selling calves; the advantage is that you don't need to keep so many cattle. If we kept cattle to 3 or 4 years of age we would lose a few in the process, especially on the high plains. After we began selling calves Thomas Hollonds had very few cattle.* (Stewart Hollonds, Appendix F)

> *We used to winter cattle in low hills in the Kiewa valley. I started going out 55 years ago, nearly all my career. Today you go for agistment. In the past you couldn't sell calves; had to keep them & sell as bullocks. Now calves are sold & they don't do well in the bush.*
> *In the past you had to run a lot more cattle; when I was young they sold at 3 or 4 years; then 2 years old; and you kept heifers for breeding purposes. Now you don't need so many cattle or the lowland winter runs. (*Sid Ryder, Appendix F*)*

> *Cows and weaned calves were turned out into the bush; cattle were sold at 3 years' old. But now we sell the calves at Myrtleford & others buy them to fatten; that's better as you can run more cows and don't have the calves on your hands. Buyers come from NSW & if the calves are good enough they are slaughtered; otherwise they are bought for fattening. Harrietville is too cold for fattening; can't buy calves from warmer areas & expect they will do well; but calves bred in the cold will do well elsewhere.* (Jack Keating, Appendix F)

> *In the past we carried a lot of cattle as at that time there was no market for calves. What we did then was sell 4 year olds to fatteners. In these circumstances leasehold land was needed. We lost a lot of stock in those days. There were plenty of poor cattle in winter; everyone had poor cattle then. (*Brinny Fitzgerald, Appendix F*)*

> *All our beef cattle were bush cattle. Up till 20 years ago we sold bullocks at Tallangatta. Now we sell calves. Price 4 years ago was $155 for a 10-month old calf; this year it is $66. Sell at Myrtleford calf sales*. (Bill Hodgkin, Appendix F)

> *Maddison's have always been breeders of cattle. We used to sell 2 & 3 yo bullocks to fatteners. Now we sell calves at 9 – 12 months old; today we must sell the calves as we can't carry the quantity. Bulls now stay in the lower country. Cows calve in Jan – Feb on the high plains, & they sell in the autumn; this year will sell 25 – 30 calves*. (Jack Maddison, Appendix F)

Although the number of graziers remained stable from the 1930s through to the 1970s, for all the reasons now discussed, numbers of livestock grazed in the snow country each summer began to fall, and as it did graziers' collective resolve to continue on began to ebb away. Whereas once holding a snow country grazing license was essential for economic survival, over time it became more of an optional convenience, and as it did the hardships of bush grazing began to weigh heavily on the minds of some. Cold and wet conditions; time away from home; camping out in damp, musty huts; the time, effort and dangers associated with mustering cattle in the bush; the loneliness and

isolation – these challenges did not appeal to everyone, and some were happy to opt out when on-farm conditions improved. In a letter to the Lands Department in the 1950s Bogong High Plains stalwart Bill Batty acknowledged that he wouldn't continue going there by choice if conditions on the home paddocks continued to improve.

> *We sold most of our cattle in November 1951 and are now going in for pasture improvement. We were only wasting time and money going to the high plains and running stock in poor bush country in winter*.[2]

For most snow country graziers, taking cattle to the mountain tops had not been a lifestyle choice but a necessity. When the economics changed, so did their motivation and commitment.

[2] Lands Department grazing license file (Wangaratta) 162/121, Bogong grazing block 24A