

THE SHEEP AND CATTLE STATIONS OF THE KIMBERLEY IN 1916

On 3 August 2005, Dr Cathie Clement spoke to the Kimberley Society about the sheep and cattle stations that existed in the Kimberley in 1916. This summary is drawn from the PowerPoint presentation in which Cathie, a self-employed historian, used photographs and segments of maps to take the audience on a virtual tour.

Why focus on 1916? The year is important because it yielded comprehensive information about Western Australia's pastoral industry. That information includes photographs, maps, and reports. Many of the photographs were taken between April and June of 1916 when the Honourable Rufus Underwood, the Minister for Aborigines, and A O Neville, the Chief Protector, toured the Kimberley. Some of the photographs, which are held by the J S Battye Library of West Australian History, were taken on Kimberley stations.

In 1916, the Department of Lands and Surveys published a map that showed the principal sheep and cattle stations in the Kimberley, North West, Eastern, and Central Divisions of the state. That map, based on information collected over a three-year period, was accompanied by lexicographical lists of stations and their owners' names. The lists record approximately 300 pastoral holdings, providing the names and owners for 237, and only the owners' names for the remainder.

A copy of the map and the lexicographical lists were placed on a departmental file (6180/10), which is now at the State Records Office of Western Australia. The map and the lexicographical lists contain litho numbers that identify the 300 chain to an inch plans that covered the state's pastoral regions. Those numbers, which appear in red on the map, make it possible to locate the positions of the stations mentioned in the lexicographical lists.

While the department was producing its material, the stock and station agent Elder, Shenton & Company Limited compiled a report that listed more than 270 stations. That report, which was for private use, covered stations scattered throughout an area extending slightly further south than the departmental map.

The Elders report surfaced last year when Mr Jack Maslen, who had held a copy for almost 50 years, approached Hesperian Press to see whether the press would publish it. Peter Bridge, the owner of the press, considered it well worth publishing. He invited Cathie to write an introduction, and, on looking into the report's format and coverage, she realised that the presence of the litho numbers in it indicated that the firm would have used it in conjunction with the Land Department's map.

Only two copies of the map appear to have survived and, utilising segments of the one that is now in the Battye Library, the audience “boarded” the State ship *Kwinana* to make the trip north. Broome had a few motor vehicles in 1916, mostly for use in the town. The Elders report tells of six stations and a mission in the district but the map shows only four stations and the mission. It would have been interesting to take a T-Model Ford out to Streeter and Male’s Roebuck Plains Station and then swing south to Thangoo, but, with the ship due to continue on to Derby, no one could risk being stranded out of town. A reading from the Elder’s report had to suffice.

Today, people can read about Thangoo Station in Richard Ferguson’s *Pearls of the Past* or S M Kelly’s *Proud Heritage*. A lot of information about other stations in the Broome area has disappeared. “Stations” might be too grand a word for those holdings but their owners felt that it was warranted when they submitted their entries to the ‘Pastoral and Agricultural Directory’ that formed part of each year’s *Post Office Directory*. The Elders report mentions some of the small holdings, and the surveyors Hope & Klem recorded some on a station map produced in 1921. Frazier Downs is on their map as is Cherry and Flack’s lease, which became Nita Downs.

Back on the *Kwinana*, the audience followed the path of early travellers and, after passing Cape Leveque, sailed up King Sound to Derby. From there, the travel options were varied but basic. The Derby to Fitzroy Crossing mail coach was available but someone had to jump off and on to open and close the dozens of gates en route. The road ran along the north side of the Fitzroy River and the coach called at Yeeda, Mt Anderson, and Liveringa. Each of those stations is mentioned in Dr Battye’s *History of the North West of Australia*, which was published in 1915.

The coach did not pass Robert and Ellen Bell-Blay’s Ellendale Station. It was one of the stations omitted from the Lands Department’s map but shown on the Hope & Klem map in 1921. The Bell-Blays, who were generally known as the Bells, were one of the first married couples to obtain work on a Kimberley station. They worked for the Duracks on Argyle in 1900, and then for other Fitzroy River station owners, before they secured the Ellendale lease in 1906. They lived very simply and frugally and, in later years, they were best known for the many tiny dogs that were their pride and joy at Ellendale.

The 1916 gossip on this part of the river was very much about the activities of the Bell’s neighbour, George Layman, from Calwynyardah Station. Billy Wells, the manager of Ben Copley’s Oscar Range and Brooking Stations was sure that George Layman was rustling cattle but he could not get a conviction. The floods were also topical because the 1914 flood was the highest on record. The Emanuel brothers’

Noonkanbah Station, the next stop for the mail coach, lost 1500 sheep, all of its donkeys, and nearly all of its working bullocks. It is hard to comprehend that volume of water coming down the river because, by September, the bed of the Fitzroy tends to be largely sand. That meant that few motor vehicles could cross the Fitzroy unless people, donkey teams or anything else that was handy dragged them across.

It is obvious that life on the stations was no picnic. The homesteads were mostly primitive affairs, built from either the local stone or timber and galvanised corrugated iron. Each station had a large Aboriginal workforce and, regardless of whether it ran sheep or cattle, it could not have existed without the labour of those people. Their labour had always been important but, with the Great War taking experienced stockmen away in 1916, station owners and managers were more reliant than ever on their Aboriginal workers.

The virtual tour stopped at Fitzroy Crossing because, in 1916, the mail coach went no further. Unless people made their own way into the East Kimberley, their knowledge of such stations as Lamboo, Springvale, Argyle, and Hillgrove was likely to come from maps, lexicographical lists, reports, or articles.

The material mentioned above, excluding the photographs, will be published by Hesperian Press this year in a volume of source documents on Western Australia's sheep and cattle stations. Cathie Clement and Peter Bridge are editing the volume.