

Coorong National Park *secrets*



Personal Stories Series **Don Cameron**

What is your connection with the Coorong?

Dad, Alan Cameron, used to be a stock agent when he first started. In 1929, I was born in Redhill to the north of Adelaide. That's where Dad met Mum (Dorothy) - she was working in her uncle's grocery shop there. Dad was manager of stock at Elder Smith Goldsbrough Mort in Redhill. We were up there for about two years. Then Bennett & Fisher stock agents posted Dad to manage a place called Elgin just out of Beachport because the Sutherland brothers were in dire straits. They got Dad to manage it and get Elgin back in the black. He got them fixed up and going.

When Dad finished up there, Bennett & Fisher posted him down here to take over at Cantara to get the Galls out of a mess. That was in 1933 or 1934. The Gall family owned the Cantara property and Dad managed it. I remember seeing Joe Gall but I was very young then. Old Joe Gall gave Dad his Scots kilt. Dad was a Cameron so he used to wear it. He gave it to the Kingston History Group. We always had a soft spot for Kingston because we use to go there every Saturday.

What are your earliest memories here at Cantara homestead?

I remember the fire. Dad said that when he was posted here, there were only 2,000 sheep but there was over 200 horses running along the coast. Dad's job was to try to lift Cantara out of financial difficulty. The only way to do it was to burn all that scrub over there so they could carry more stock. It had never been burnt for years. Anyhow, he burnt it alright, at one Christmas time when he should not have because it was 95°F.

He threw a match over the side of the ute at Salt Creek and kept in the car and drove back to Adelaide. The police were looking for him. The fire stopped at the Granites when it ran out. Of course, no-one lived there and no-one was in danger but it just kept burning, what with the big north winds. But no-one knew who had started the fire.

We were in Adelaide at the time, and Dad went down to light the fire and then returned to Adelaide. I was about four when the fire happened. Dad hadn't been here very long. So from then on he would burn a section and that's how he went from 2,000 to 12,500 sheep when we left, which was a big lift in the numbers they were carrying.

They never used the sand dunes up until the time we came here. They only ran the stock over the other side. When we first came, today's main highway did not exist. The old Princes Highway used to run right

past the Cantara gateway here, so the Cantara road was the old Princes Highway. Now when I think back, the Loop Road was also part of the old Princes Highway. I honestly cannot remember coming into Salt Creek from that outside road - we always came round the edge of the water and into Salt Creek.

Another early memory is of my sister Mary (who was 18 months older than me) and I riding horses right from when we could walk. Mum did not know where we were half the time. Mary and I would spend a lot of time over on the beach. We used to find all sorts of things over there. In 1941 we found a mine, and we came home one night and said 'Dad there is a great big ball down there with spikes on it'. Dad said 'You didn't go near it?' and we said 'No, no, we didn't go near it!' So Dad got on his horse and went down to check before he reported it to Adelaide. Straight way he could see it was a mine and he saw our pony tracks where we had been riding around it.

We had a telephone because Mum ran the Telephone Exchange here in the little room at the back corner of the house. People would come to Cantara to make a telephone call or to send a telegram. Mum used to do morse code - that was one of her jobs. Every time Mum would be doing something in the kitchen and the telephone would go, she would have to run right down the passage to the little room on the other side of the house.

What was school like in those days?

We did correspondence school. I only ever had three months attending a public school. That was only to get my Qualifications Certificate. I did lower and upper grade 6. Upper grade was more or less grade 7. This was at Glencoe after we moved from Cantara.

At Cantara, we had a schoolhouse near where the generator room used to be. There were only the two of us who did school work. My sister and I would get a parcel in the post every fortnight for our schooling. It went on to become School of the Air after we had finished.

Mum also had to teach us. A lot of the time we finished the work in a week. If we finished our schoolwork quickly we could put more time into catching rabbits. It was the only time we were keen to go to school but it was a good experience.

My wife and I once went to a reunion of the Correspondence School and School of the Air at Norwood Hall. We met some teachers - we hardly ever knew their names. We met pupils from stations all over South Australia. They knew us. Up on the wall, in the hall, was a picture of me on Dot the pony.

I also remember having governesses. Most could not ride a horse so Mary and I used to tie them on the horse. How we never killed them I will never know. One governess was Gertie Flohr who married Waller Tapfield. She was the only governess to come twice. Most did not stay long - probably did not like being tied on a horse.

What was it like living in the area?

We had a great life here.

I have an early memory of ice cream. Mr and Mrs Drage used to live down near the embankment, on the flat. Mr Drage was a beekeeper. They were across the other side of the track, before where you turn to go down to the 42 Mile. There is a big flat that goes up along, and there is a woolshed down the end of it on the left hand side. Mr and Mrs Drage lived there. We kids would ride all the way over there to get an ice cream because Mrs Drage had a kerosene fridge and she used to make her own ice cream.

In the early days we did not have a fridge, we had an old Coolgardie safe. Water came down the side of it. I thought there was a cellar in the Cantara house passage but there does not appear to be one now. This place used to keep so cool, even in the summer time, with these high ceilings.

We would kill a sheep, and we would only have two meals of fresh meat. All the rest would be salted. Some of it dry salted (salt rubbed into it) and some in brine. It was mainly mutton, rabbits, teal duck, Coorong mullet and sometimes malleefowl we used to live on.

We used to get bags of flour, sugar and a box of twenty-four tins of jam all through the stock agents. We would put an order in and have enough for months when it came. The train used to come to Kingston from Naracoorte. I think we used to pick up the order from the railway station at Kingston.

Saturdays we usually went to Kingston by car. Dad played football for Kingston against Lucindale, Reedy Creek or Naracoorte. Then Dad used to go to the Buffalo Lodge nearly every Saturday night. Mum and we kids would go to the pictures at the old Kingston Institute Hall. On the way home, we kids would be

curled up sleeping in the back of the ute, all rugged up with blankets. The ute had sides on it. When we would get to the sandhill near home, nine out of ten times we would get bogged. We would have to walk home from there, which would be a good mile, at about 1.30 in the morning.

As you grew up, how did things change for you here?

When the Kingston show was on, Dad always showed horses. We would take the horses into Kingston on the Friday, have the show Saturday, then bring the horses home again on the Sunday. Sometimes we would ride on the beach all the way to Kingston. Other times we used to meet the Goode's and the Tapfield's up at the corner, near the Granites, and would all come in together. Kingston used to be a big show. We used to compete in the show on the horses then ride them thirty-six miles home on the Sunday.

What do you remember generally about earlier days on the Coorong?

When I was about ten or eleven, my sister and I were setting about forty rabbit traps between us because we were not doing any school work. At one stage we were buying our own clothes and banking more money than Dad was earning in wages looking after the place. He was always going crook at us because we had more money than he did. Rabbit prices were high because the army needed the skins to make hats.

The cart used to come through from Kingston to Meningie every day to collect the rabbits. We used to pair them and put them on a pony's neck and take them out. Dad would hang a hessian bag on a pole and we would put the rabbits in the bag to keep the flies off. I think it was fortnightly on a Thursday that the rabbit cart used to have payday. I can guarantee that Robin, my cousin, was always out there on payday when he stayed at Cantara on holidays. There was always an argument about who was going out to get the pay.

One morning we got a beautiful fox in the trap and I skinned him. When we went to peg him out I could not pull the tail off. Mum tried and next thing she broke it off. So we skinned the tail off and she sewed it back on, then pegged him out. Of course, Dad knew about it and he was always the devil for telling somebody about something. He told Wally Smith, the skin buyer, about this sewing of the tail on the fox skin. Wally said 'That's saved me - I won't have to get any cotton'. That was Dad - he was the devil. We wanted to bolt.

Fox skins were worth a lot of money back then. We did a lot of spotlighting and were getting ten to a dozen a week. Some of the foxes were worth £1 each. We used to peg them out on a wall of the old cowshed. We would stretch them out and put nails in all the way down. After two or three days they would be dry, then we would take them off and they would be ready to sell. With rabbit skins we would put them on a piece of wire and a bow. At the end of the war the rabbit skins were worth a lot of money. They used to make hats out of them - they were very valuable.

I remember one rabbit trapper who worked over on the other side of the range, George McInness. He was a fulltime rabbit trapper. He finished up one of the wealthiest men in Kingston. He was making a fortune out of rabbits at the same time us kids were trapping. When he finished up, he went to Adelaide to live and got into the racing game and happened to get a real good horse. He had one of the top racers. He stuck with all the Comic Court breed of horses and won thousands of dollars on them.

I can remember many a time riding back from mustering over in the paddocks, where the causeway is now. We used to ride through the water there - it was solid enough and was not boggy. Later, they put the causeway road in - it was not like that in our day.

Some of the places in that lake are quite boggy. There was not stock run on this side until we were here. When the first wool went to London, we got a letter back about all the sand that came out of the wool. So every couple of years we changed the homestead stencil name because, if we sent it over marked from Cantara again, they would not have bought it. The wool buyers did not like the wool so full of sand as it added extra weight and they had to get it out.

Dad and I kept the last two stencils. Dad's stencil was *Crathie* after a church in Scotland and mine was *Banavie*. The rabbit skins also used to have sand in them. I can remember taking rabbit skins to Wally Smith in Kingston and he said, 'My gosh, these weigh well'. He was shaking them and sand was coming out.

What things have changed at Cantara and the Coorong?

These sand dunes did not have the growth on them like now. That one over where we used to have to go through to go to Kingston was white sand from the beach right through. There was hardly a tree on it. All around the homestead was mostly white sand. There was a bit of growth on one sandhill especially down further. I cannot even recognise it now.

When we lived here, Dad said 'Well, only a few years and we won't see the old homestead, it will be covered in sand and sand will be in the lake'. He thought it would encroach on the house, but it never did make it to the house or lake.

I visited Cantara when it was really crumbled down and it looked like it wanted a bulldozer through it. I remember telling my late wife, 'What say we put in for the job of looking after it. You could entertain visitors and I'll go fishing'. But she definitely did not want to do that.

Now that the homestead has been renovated, it looks like I remembered it. I was looking at the back of the old building today and it looks like it used to.

What are some of your favourite places along the Coorong?

This place, Cantara, and going over to the beach here. I liked fishing for mulloway or going further north up the grass track to the soaks, duck shooting year after year. Dad used to go with us for a couple of days. We would go out the back swamps duck shooting with different blokes at different times. By then we had a freezer, and we would put the ducks in and have them all year.

Joe Trevorrow used to take Dad and I across the other side to what was known as Trevorrow's Soak. Joe had this little rowboat and I can remember Joe rowing us across as a kid. He would never take anything to eat and he would shoot two or three ducks as soon as he got there. He would have a fire going and rub the ducks with pipeclay all over. He would scratch a hole in the hot sand and put the coals over the top. That pipeclay would crack off and there would not be a feather on the ducks - clean as a whistle. I can remember eating them like that.

Did you have many travellers stopping in when you lived at Cantara homestead?

We did not have many visitors because there was no road in here. We had to go over sandhills to get out because there was no causeway then. We drove south out of the house gate and across to the white sand dunes. We would drive down along the edge of the water between the sandhills and the lake, and follow the water around on the edge of the sandhills. When we got to the end we had to go up over the sandhill to get on the solid piece of pipeclay flat on the other side. Then we could come out onto the road to the 36 Mile post. There were no four-wheel drives then. We had a two-wheel drive Dodge ute. Nine out of ten times we would get bogged in the pure white sand. Then we would have to come back and get a draft horse and take him back there to pull the bus out.

All the time we were here, we never had any other children to play with. I never owned a bike or a trike in my life but we had horses. We used to make our own fun here.

Are there any other recollections that stand out for you?

One time my sister was climbing up the boobialla tree behind the house, and I was climbing up behind her. I was carrying my airgun when it went off. So, I shot my sister in the backside. Mum got the pellet out.

Another time we were having a race over there in the pipeclay and her horse's girth broke, and she hit the ground and broke her collarbone. We came home and never said anything about racing or her collarbone hanging down. Mum said, 'Did you hurt your shoulder today?' She said 'Yes, it hurts a bit'. She was in the bath later and Mum walked in and said 'What have you done to your shoulder?' She found out then that my sister had broken her collarbone.

I remember poor old Ern Mason who lived further down south of here in a little humpy. He used to do odd jobs for Dad - getting firewood, cutting posts and a bit of trapping. Dad and he were over the other side of where the highway is now, getting firewood. They were collecting dry mallee but it was very slippery. Old Ernie was on top of a big wagon stacking the mallee when he slipped off and broke his leg very badly.

Dad rode back here and got the ute. Mum put a mattress in the back of it and they put Ern on the mattress and took him to Meningie to the hospital. I think there was a doctor and a nursing sister there. I do not think there was a hospital at Kingston then. Ern was a real old bushy - he'd never go anywhere. He pleaded with Dad to take him home. 'Don't leave me in hospital, I'll die', he said. He had a hellish bad break in the leg. I always remember it broke Dad's heart. He came home and told us about it. After only a few weeks we got word that he had died.

How long were you here at Cantara?

I think we were here about twelve or thirteen years, from 1933 or 1934 to 1947 or 1948. We were the only family living at Cantara. Henry and Mrs Toop lived on Tilley Swamp. Henry worked on the property under Dad. The Hartman boys used to be right up the other end, and they would do any fencing or cutting of posts for fences or things like that at that end. Then Joe Bora, he lived the other side of Salt Creek. He would ride down and do the fencing on the Salt Creek side of the property. The men never got up to the other end of the property because all the work was done by horse.

When I left here at fifteen years of age, I rode one horse and led two from Cantara to Millicent in two days. I took a shortcut and followed the railway line through from Kingston and come out near Reedy Creek.



Produced by Friends of the Coorong with local community support
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