

Legend of the Headless Horseman and the Black Swamp

“When the lands were wide and the fences few, uneasy was the stockman when the sun was down and his thousand charges scattered for miles around the camp fire ...

“He would remember the story they were telling around Bourke ... that the Headless Horseman was again haunting the plains at the Black Swamp near the border.”

From the mists of time a shadow emerged and a legend began.

Saltbush plains stretch as far as the eye can see.



At the Black Swamp the Cobb Highway takes one of its very few bends. On the edge of the Hay Plains, the flattest area in the Southern Hemisphere, the roadside rest area at Black Swamp is about halfway between Deniliquin and Hay. Anyone who has been to western New South Wales will know how spectacular the sunsets can be. To stop and view The Headless Horseman sculptures at the Black Swamp at sunset is one of the great outback Australian experiences.

This is the heart of The Long Paddock, a 660km-plus drive that pays tribute to the heritage of drovers while promoting the old stock route from Moama on the Murray River to Wilcannia to the north of Broken Hill.

It crosses five rivers – Darling, Lachlan, Murrumbidgee, Edward and Murray – and in an interesting concept uses artistic works to highlight the story of the land. I haven’t seen it done to this extent before.

The Headless Horseman sculptures are part of a Long Paddock series ... 11 major art works and 52 information points along the route.

The Headless Horseman, created in metal by Castlemaine sculptor Geoff Hocking, is between Wanganella and Boorooban.

In the mid 19th-century drovers told stories of a headless horseman who appeared suddenly at a campsite, mounted and wearing a cloak, who would spook the animals and cause a stampede. It was said to be the ghost of a drover who died at the swamp. Yet there’s more to this legend.

The Headless Horseman sculptures stand four metres high, made from laser-cut steel with a rusty patina, and set atop three-metre long red-gum posts.

They depict a cattle drive, with two mounted drovers, cattle dogs and a separate character following... the headless horseman.



The legend was perpetuated by a local butcher from nearby Moulamein, who was a small-time cattle duffer stealing from the herds camped at the swamp and selling his goods through the pubs across the district.

The Black Swamp not only hosts a legend but helped open up the plains country. A shallow basin almost one kilometre across, the swamp is covered with lignum bushes and partly fringed with black box trees. When full, the water is about waist deep.

It was thought it got its name from the dark colour of the water from decaying plant matter but early maps show a tribe of Aborigines usually camped there. This is supported by the presence of at least one large midden on the perimeter.

The Black Swamp hosted a coach changing station from 1859 when Edward Smith built a cottage on the low sand hill at the eastern edge of the swamp. Eventually he started the Black Swamp (Trotting Cob) Hotel that closed in 1887.

The term Long Paddock came about from graziers being able to turn their stock out on to the long paddock in times of drought or to take them to market.

It started with the Victorian gold rush in the mid 1800s, Ali tells me, when cattle were brought down from Queensland.

“There was no way of keeping meat fresh on the gold field in those days so they made sure there was plenty of live stock.”

Today, property owners can apply to Local Land Services to use the stock route when feed is short. Yet they have to move the stock every day.



THE BLACK SWAMP

The legend of the Headless Horseman arose when a drover named Doyle died at the Black Swamp in the early 1850s.

The drovers would tell of having seen the ghost of Doyle while they were camped at the swamp.

The said Doyle was riding about the camp at night on a short-legged horse – a trotting cob.

Overlanders began to dread camping there, believing sight of the apparition spelled their own doom.

Writers at the time did not state the manner of Doyle's death but the legend persevered in the form of a headless rider mounted on a trotting cob. The legend has been handed down through the years.

J.E.P Bushby's Saltbush Country tells how he would appear suddenly, mounted on a cob, a cloak wrapped around him – but without a head.

“He passed through the camp like a phantom, causing the cattle to rush and the dogs to shrink away ... terror would follow ... cattle, dogs, drovers all in a wild stampede.”

Advantage was taken of this legend by the Moulemein butcher to augment his meat supplies.

When the bush telegraph told of the approach of a mob of “old Tyson's” cattle he would camp at the Black Swamp and await their arrival.

His technique was to throw a cloak over a wooden frame on his shoulders, giving the appearance of the stump of a neck but having no head.

He approached the resting herd at a trot, knowing that cattle on strange ground are easily spooked.

Having put the cattle on their feet he would cut off a few head, drive them into the bracken around the swamp and later drive them leisurely to slaughter, to end up on the cutting carts of Moulemein, Hay and Deniliquin.

The Horseman was wise enough to confine his duffing to small numbers so was never molested by the attention of the troopers.

These activities continued until the fencing of the runs made the movement of stock too difficult.

Charlie Lee, who drove the Deniliquin-Hay coach for years, claimed that he saw the horseman in action. The story goes that Charlie saw the trotting cob taking its headless rider home to die.

Perhaps a fitting postscript to what is one of the finest legends in the whole outback of Australia.

Laurence

