



When home is a hole in the

Clearing scrub and milking cows by hand were still a young man's lot in the second decade of the 20th century. Jack Lockett and Charlie Coster continue sharing their memories with DAVID MCKENZIE



JACK LOCKETT

New land in the state's north-west was being opened up and 19-year-old Jack Lockett and his two uncles were keen to try their luck as Mallee farmers.

"My uncles and I went to the Mallee in 1910. There was a Mallee boom on, they were just opening it up.

"On our first trip there, we went out from Ouyen to Boinka to take on shares with another fellow in a block of land. We hadn't seen the block, nothing was signed. Dick (one of my uncles) and I went out there with axes and picks to take it on.

"We jumped on a ballast train – it was a stinking hot day – and then walked out to have a look at the block.

"There'd been a fire through it before it was rolled, left all the dead trees there. 'Oh God', I said to Dick, 'we'll never clear this up', so we didn't go on with it. The bloke who offered it to us ended up hanging himself.

"We were under a bush having a bit of lunch waiting for the train to come back. We bundled up our things in a big boot box and jumped on, but Dick left his false teeth behind. He had to go back the next day and get them. They were under the bush.

"Dick had put in for a block around Nunga and got it. Alf and I helped him roll 750 acres in six weeks, ready to put a crop in.

"All we had to eat at that time was a week-old loaf of bread, a little bit of oily butter and an onion, a hot onion. Bloody near killed us.

"In the 1914 drought, we got nothing from Dick's property. We just stumbled through. Then in 1915, we got an average of five bags an acre. That was a lot of wheat. There was wheat everywhere.

"Alf and I put in for a couple of blocks out around Linga. We didn't even have a look at them first, we just put in for them. They weren't good blocks, mine was a third class block.

"The soil was very sandy. At those times, there was only spear grass, and once you killed that you had nothing. I didn't do much on my block before

the war, just rolled it. We used to eat underground in the summer, in a dugout under a shady Mallee tree on Alf's block. We'd dig a hole in the ground just like rabbits. A bit of tin across the top. We'd sleep in a bit of an old hut Alf built with mallee pines.

"I also did some rolling up at Carwarp. There was no town, nothing there then. Alf was with me. We rolled 350 acres with another chap, pulled the roller with five horses.

"Alf had bought a bullock team, but broke his collarbone playing football, so I took over the team.

"I didn't like bullocks because they were too bloody slow, always wanting to lie down. You used to get their tail and rub it with two little sticks to make them get up.

"I went to Ouyen to enlist for the war in 1916. I was the only one of us that passed, the others all had something wrong with them. They never noticed I'd broken my leg.

"But a lot of blokes went, cobbers of mine. When Gallipoli fell, it was like you really had to go, it was nearly like conscription. If you didn't, you'd probably get a white feather. We never got any, we thought it our duty to go.

"They said the war would be over in a week. More like three bloody years!

"Just before I went off to the war, I met Doll (my future wife). We were at a dance one night, and I took her home. And that started it. We wrote to each other, and she'd send me parcels. She waited all that time for me. (They were married in 1923).

"I came home from the war in 1919, August, and went straight back to the Mallee. I started sinking dams with some horses on my block at Linga, and built a hut out of slab bark and a corrugated iron roof to live in."

Next week: Jack farms his Mallee block.

Enlisted man: when Jack signed up in 1916, he was told the war would be over in a week.



*'In 1916,
they never
noticed my
broken leg'*



Lockett family

ground



*'I was milking cows before
I went to school and milking
again when I got home'*



CHARLIE COSTER

As a 12-year-old, Charlie Coster worked on his parents' new farm at Sarsfield – and witnessed the start of a transport revolution.

"After nine years on our farm at Nicholson, Dad bought a small farm at Sarsfield and we shifted there in 1915. Before leaving, Dad sold all his sheep, but kept other animals – two working horses, two riding horses and some young horses and cattle. It was a big job to drive them to Sarsfield.

"On the new farm, there were about 20 acres of maize, five acres of lucerne, two acres of beans, some sunflowers and the rest (of the 75-acre property) was for grazing. We didn't start school there for about two months because there was work to do.

"The beans were ready for thrashing. We thrashed them with a flail, made of two pieces of wood about the size of fork handles, joined with two pieces of leather. We kept the bean straw because we had no hay for the cattle. Along with a little patch of lucerne hay, this kept the cattle alive through the winter.

"Next we thrashed the sunflowers. We made a big cloth to put over the cart, then two of us would sit in it while our older brother cut the heads off the sunflowers and threw them in. Then we'd knock the seeds out with a stick about 18 inches to two foot long. At the end of the day, the seed was winnowed, taken home, put on a floor and turned each day until dry, winnowed again and put in bags for sale.

"Our first machinery was a single furrow plough, and we made a roller ourselves out of a big log. We had to improvise as well. When we first arrived, there was nowhere to dry the sunflowers, so we made our drying box on the veranda using timber from one of the sheds.

"We finally got to start at our new school, but it took some time to catch up on the work. I was milking cows before I went to school, and milking again when I got home.

"I first saw a car when I was about 10 or 11 at school. It had solid rubber wheels and looked just like a rubber-tyred buggy.

"When you drove any distance, you'd always take a mechanic. I remember we had a concert at school and some artists were due to come from Bairnsdale. It was only seven miles, but it was just a dirt track in those days and their car kept breaking down. We'd already had supper and were just about to go home when they finally turned up around midnight. They performed and then we had another supper!

"Cars also had trouble with the roads because they were usually built up in the middle for horses. They would often slip off the edge. At the time we left Nicholson, there was some gravelling being done, most of it with pick and shovel, horse and plough.

"I left school when I was 14 and worked full-time on the farm. Apart from small farming jobs in the local area, I never worked off the farm after that."

Next week: Brother Joe on the family farm.



Ian Haggart

A class of his own: Charlie Coster started at his new school in Sarsfield in 1915. He is pictured fourth from left in the back group of boys.



Eyewitnesses to a revolutionary

Jack Lockett and Charlie Coster have seen the world turned upside down in the past 100 years – from a world dominated by horses to one controlled by computers. DAVID MCKENZIE traces this revolution through the eyes of Jack, Charlie and their families



JACK LOCKETT

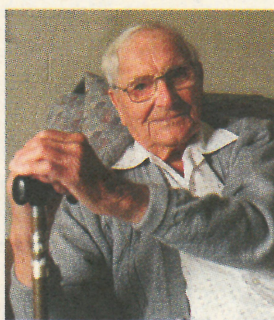
Born at Tarnagulla, west of Bendigo, in 1891, Jack Lockett worked on farms in the area as a boy before going to the Mallee in 1910 to look for his own land. After fighting in Europe during World War I, Jack returned to farm the Mallee on a property near Linga for another 34 years before retiring to Bendigo. But his legacy lives on, with two of his sons and their families still farming the land that Jack pioneered.

"When I was at school, I lived at Wanyarra (near

wanted me back on the farm at Eastville. I wanted to go back, but my stepfather wanted me to go cutting wood for 18 pence a ton.

"We were going out one day with a dray to cut a load of wood. I said no, I didn't want to cut wood, I'd sooner go farming. My stepfather gave me a swipe over the head, I jumped out and that was the end of it. I ran away from home, never went back.

"I lived with one of my uncles for a few weeks, then went back on the farm at Eastville. They



'I lived in a shed where they used to keep the chook feed. A little place, it had a little bunk in the corner where they used to keep a bit of wheat'

Bendigo) with my mother, my stepfather and two uncles, who I used to think of as my brothers.

"I left school when I was 12 and went to work on a farm around Eastville, run by two brothers, Charlie and Ted. I worked there for five shillings a week and food. That was good money then.

"They were putting the crop in. I had six horses to look after. The boss used to drive three, and I drove three, but I had to walk. I was rolling and harrowing, he was on the drill.

"I finished up there after a few months and went back home to Wanyarra, doing odd jobs. Then they

doubled my money, gave me 10 shillings a week. I lived in a shed where they used to keep the chook feed. A little place, it had a little bunk in the corner where they used to keep a bit of wheat.

"You only came into the house for your meal and then you were out. You were always looked down on if you were a working man in those days.

"My next job was on a farm at Crystal Waters run by the father of the two brothers I'd been working for. Old Joe Johnson had a big farm, ran about eight to nine hundred sheep. He used to show horses and had some stallions. The farm house had an old brick

Eyes front: a young Jack Lockett (standing) with his two uncles, Dick and Alf.

Working man: Jack Lockett (above right) has spent the greater part of his life farming in the Mallee.

Lockett family

century



CHARLIE COSTER

kitchen where we used to eat and a stove and two little bedrooms, a pantry and a sort of a bedroom. There were three women and a servant there, and only me and old Joe.

"Old Joe thought a lot of me, treated me like a son. I had to look after the horses, but he also let me work the two-furrow plough, with three horses up the front, and a long roller. He also taught me how to build a hay stack.

"We used to dig out rabbits with a machine. You put chips in and leaves and things, and made smoke, and put arsenic and sulphur in it. You'd put the pipe down the holes and puff away. As soon as the smoke came out of a hole, you'd block it up.

"I left there when one of the farm women's sons got sacked from the railways and came back to work on the farm. There was no room for me.

"Then I went back to Charlie and Ted's. I was up there until 1909, the year the Laanecoorie Dam broke.

"It was about this time I broke my leg. I had a good load of oats on, going up to Shelbourne station.

"I was standing on the side of the wagon. One of the team was a young horse, a silly thing. It kicked me in the leg and broke it.

"My leg was all twisted. The old doctor told me he almost took it off. I was three months on my back in hospital, and then I had no home to go to. So I got back with Alf and Dick, and we decided to go up to the Mallee in 1910."

Next week: Jack goes to the Mallee – and to war

Charlie Coster, the fourth of Fred and Mary Coster's nine children, and one of six sons, was born in Bairnsdale in 1903. Soon after, his family moved into a small house near Lucknow, then on to Nicholson when Charlie was three. In 1915, they took up a small farm at Sarsfield, where Charlie would spend most of his working life.

"I remember Dad came down with typhoid fever when I was very young.

"Soon after, my family went to live between Lucknow and Wy Yung in a small house. When I was about three years old, we went to Nicholson.

"With my sister, brothers and all our goods, we were packed into Dad's big spring cart. We'd just got on the road when someone noticed the old place was on fire, so Mum and Dad went to put it out.

"When I was about four, Dad and my brother Fred took me out to Dad's selection to clear out a water-hole. All they had was a big tent fly, so Dad put up a ridgepole on the cart and Fred and I slept in the cart and Dad was underneath. It rained that night and in the morning I was watching the rain drops run down the canvas. I just had to touch it, and the water came through.

"In time, Dad got a few horses, about half a dozen cows, 200 ewes and three Lincoln rams.

"One morning after Dad had been out with the sheep, he said to Mum, 'I think we've got rabbits'. My parents bought some traps for my brother. We learnt how to skin rabbits and dry the skins. We used to boil the carcasses with scraps from the

house, like potato peelings, which we mixed with pollard, then fed to the pigs. We got enough money for the skins to buy our Sunday clothes.

"One day a man was passing with a nice pony and a little cart. One of the wheels broke, so Dad went to help him. Dad told him he would take him and the cart to Bairnsdale if he would sell Dad the pony. She was lovely. We all learnt to ride.

"Eventually I went to school, which meant walking four miles, two miles each way.

"One very dry season, a lot of birds came to the school and picked up the crusts the children threw away. We started to catch them. There was a pocket in the fence between two posts and a wire net on the other side. We



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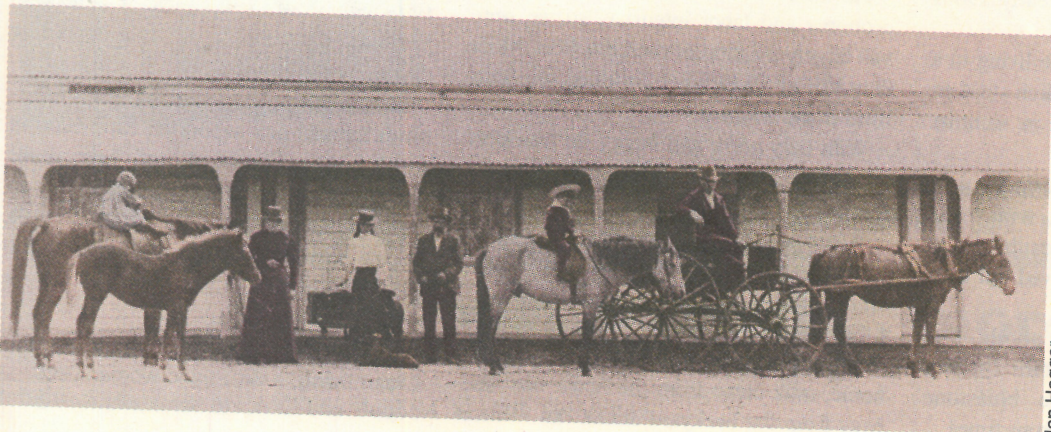
would put some bread in there. When a bird went in, we would rush in before the bird could escape. Then we used traps. One morning we were all lined up ready to march in to school with the teacher facing us. A magpie flew past with a mouse-trap on its foot but the teacher didn't see it.

"One morning we had a lot of traps set. One of the boys said, 'Please Miss, may I go out?' But she looked out the window. 'Oh, is that your game,' she said when she saw him taking birds out of the traps. All the traps went straight into the fireplace."

Next week: Charlie's early days on the farm

Farming life: Charlie Coster (above) has spent a lifetime working in the Sarsfield area.

Home turf: the Cherry Tree Inn in Sarsfield (left) was operating when Charlie was a boy.



Ian Haggart



Doing it hard on five pounds

For the Lockett and Coster families, life on the land was still a battle in the 1920s.

Family members continue their reminiscences with DAVID McKENZIE



JACK LOCKETT

When Jack Lockett came back from the war, he settled down to marriage and a farming life on his 640-acre Mallee block.

"Before I got married in 1923, I had people working for me on my lease at Linga.

"They were mostly alcoholics. They'd work for about a month and then they'd have to go and get on the booze. I'd pay them a pound a week and tucker.

"The bloke I had doing my fences, though, was a great worker. He used to sleep in a little old hut made of bags.

"I got help from the Closer Settlement Board. Anything I asked for I got. If I wanted horses or any machines and I couldn't pay for them, I'd just write down and tell them.

"Doll and I got married in Ouyen. She'd had to wait three years while I got the farm fixed up. I was 50 miles away. Our courtship was once a month.

"We built our house at Linga. It's still there. It was built with cement, had four rooms – two bedrooms, sleepout, workman's hut – and still stands as good as gold today. I carted all the materials for it.

"We got a bath, a tin bath. I'd never had a bath in my young days, never seen one. No one had a bath in those days in the winter. We used to go for months, never had a wash. We'd just sit in a tub.

"I had two 1000-gallon water tanks to catch the rain. One was built up on a stand under the veranda. We had a cellar underneath the tank, nice and cool.

"You could live on very little up there. You had your own milk and your meat and all that. Just needed a few groceries and bread. Didn't even need that a lot of the time, Doll used to make bread.

"We lived on five pounds a month, Doll and I, and that was in a pretty bad time. But we had our milk and our chooks and all that, and we could do well.

"I had a fairly good team of horses, eight or 10 draught horses. The land was full of stumps. You had to go over them all the time. But the mallee roots were wonderful to burn.

"We used to stack the roots up in little heaps in the field. Just as you were knocking off, you'd light one here, another over there, another one there. You'd go and have your tea and then come back, and they'd be



Lockett family



'The dust was so thick, it was like having a shovel full of sand and throwing it up in the air

burnt down enough that you'd get coal to light the others with. You'd have them all burning there. It was really a pretty sight.

"You could also get five pounds for a railway truck load of mallee roots. But the gangers would often sling off half the load while it was in the sidings. Eight horses for two or three loads of stumps. It often wouldn't pay you to cart them.

"We had a lot of trouble with rabbits. The buggers would eat the heads off the wheat every night.

"They used to come in at the end of September or October, from the Bullinbush plains, where they'd breed. There'd be burrows in the crop and we'd plough over them.

"Everybody had wire netting to stop the rabbits. Worst thing they could have done. Rubbish would get

up and the sand would get up and you could walk over the fence.

"You wouldn't believe some of the dust storms. The problem was the ground was new and loose, and you worked it up when you ploughed.

"The dust was so thick, it was like having a shovel full of sand and throwing it up in the air. I had three foot-six wire netting around the house. It would fill up almost to the roof, and then I'd pull the netting and scoop the sand away.

"Sometimes the horses would eat the crops, pull them right out of the ground. And then I'd lose horses from the sand. They used to swallow it, get it down in the gut. You couldn't move it, they'd die in awful pain.

"In 1927, the year my second boy, Kevin, was born, I had a bore put down. A bloke came up and put

a month



JOE COSTER



The boys: the Coster brothers on the farm at Sarsfield. Jim, Arthur and Joe stand behind Jack, Fred and Charlie. At right is Joe today.

This way: Jack Lockett (left) on his Linga farm with sons Jack jnr and Kevin.

Pressing problem: Joe and Charlie Coster loading their maize crib using a home-made loading box (below right).



it down by hand. He went down more than 300 feet looking for artesian water.

"It cost a pound a foot. I had no money, but the Closer Settlement Board stood well by me. If the bloke didn't get water, he didn't get paid. Damned if he didn't get it at about 320 feet. Water came up five foot above the surface. It's still there now.

"That was about the time I got into sheep. Perce Hickman, a good bloke who ran sheep at Mt Gray a few miles away, used to give me a pound a week to water his sheep at my bore. He asked me to come in with him on the sheep.

"We did well. I bought our first car that year, a brand new Ford Chev."

Next week: Jack jnr on the Depression years.

Charlie Coster had five brothers and three sisters. One of his younger brothers, Joe, worked on the family farm at Sarsfield from childhood, then took over part of the farm when he married in the '40s. Now 94, Joe recalls life during the 1920s.

"I thought it was my duty to leave school at 14 like my other brothers and work on the family farm. I was a bit sorry though, because I liked school, especially arithmetic, and I could have learnt more by staying on.

"Early on, I grew vegies and sold them. Dad gave me a quarter of an acre to work. I started off carrying baskets of vegies around the district on my shoulders. Then I got a horse and cart and took them around in that. I would go as far as Bainsdale to sell them.

"But there was too much work on the farm, so I eventually had to give it up and help the family. It was a family affair, our farm.

"There was a lot of hard work to be done. Milking and dairying, building, fencing, cutting down blackberries, hoeing the maize, looking after the horses.

"We used to milk about 45 cows by hand, and I was one of the milkers, but I was never much good - I must have been weak in the wrists. My father could milk the same cows as me, but always get more milk.

"I was really a handyman, cutting the blackberries, pitching in for a bit of fencing, this and that. I didn't get much of the horse work: Charlie, my brother, did most of that. I never favored horses very much, I always thought the tractor would do a better job. (The first thing I did when I went out on my own in the 1940s was to buy a tractor - an International).

"When we got milking machines in 1927, it was a big step forward. It made a big difference in the

working day. You could sit down and the machines would do it. They were Simplex machines, with a little Crossley engine. It sounded like music to hear it.

"I remember being at the Bainsdale show, thinking how wonderful it was to have the machines, otherwise we would have had to hurry home to milk.

"During the Bainsdale carnival, the streets would be decked with gum bushes, tied up to the verandas. We'd ride our horses into town, about eight miles. On Saturday nights, we'd go to the pictures sometimes.

"I saved up for a motor bike. There weren't many around then. It cost me £17 and it took years to save the money. At one stage, I lent my push bike to my younger brother, Arthur, so he could go to school at the Bainsdale School of Mines. Arthur had badly cut his knee as a young boy and it was thought the knee would not be strong enough for farm work any more.

"I remember when we'd all gone off to the Bainsdale show, except for my father. The people over the way, the Hildebrands, had three horses out, harrowing the ground, alongside a drain. One horse slipped in and pulled the other two in.

"One fellow came across and asked Dad whether he could help, and Dad said, 'yes, we've got a horse here we use for that particular purpose'. So he got old Rose into harness and chains and went over and pulled them out.

"At that time, we weren't on speaking terms with the Hildebrands. There wasn't much involved. But that's the sort of thing that happened. You don't get that nowadays."

Next week: Arthur Coster on life in a coal town.

