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The story passed down by my Elders of the Men from Snowy River, who tamed the brumbies and worked hard for self-determination.



The Ngarigo, Djiringanj and the Brumby

By *David Dixon* · 7 min read

*"The word's been passed around about the Men from Snowy River  
Their story wasn't forgotten and not allowed to wither  
For a wise and strong Bugeenj woman who listened to her Elders  
Nurtured the seed of future story tellers." - David Dixon*

The connection between my family and the **Brumby** isn't that well known. My great, great grandfather Jack Hoskins (born 1853, died 1900 in Bega, NSW), and great grand uncles via my Mundy family ancestry, were stockmen who drove brumbies from the Australian Alps down to Tathra to be transported upon steamer ships bound for Sydney, departing from **Tathra wharf**. This is a local story told to me by my mother Margaret Rose Dixon, nee Mundy/ Hoskins.



David and Margaret Dixon, circa 1982 - Bega NSW

Whenever we would pass through Kalaru on our way to Tathra, Mum would always point over to the Blackfellows Lake area and tell about our family ancestry and the brumby connection. I remember Mum's story well.

Back in the '70s and '80s, the road to Blackfellows Lake displayed a large cut out sign of a tribal man with a spear pointing the way to the lake. You couldn't miss the turnoff, the sign was very prominent. Blackfellows Lake is where one of the first Aboriginal reserves in NSW was established. This Aboriginal reserve was established in the 1880s, nearly twenty years prior to Australian federation in 1901.

"Aboriginal reserves were parcels of land set aside for Aboriginal people to live on; these were not managed by the government or its officials. From 1883 onwards, the Aboriginal people who were living on unmanaged reserves received rations and blankets from the Aborigines Protection Board (APB), but remained responsible for their own housing...Some of the first reserves created by the [Aboriginal Protection] Board were at Bega (1883)". History of Aboriginal stations and reserves - NSW Office of Environment and Heritage

The Hoskins and Mundy family lived at this reserve. My great, great grandfather Jack is listed as being at the Blackfellows Lake reserve within the NSW State Archive records. Although the reserve is quoted as being at Bega, the old Aboriginal reserve was specifically located approximately 12km south east of Bega, at Blackfellows Lake.

Mum always told of how our family drove the brumbies down from Ngarigo to Djiringanj country. A story handed down to her from her Elders. This history was something Mum was quite proud of, and retold this story so the young ones could retain this knowledge and hand it down to future generations.

Our family used the old ancestral pathways to drive the brumbies, and they knew these pathways well. Ancestral pathways via Postmans Track west of Candelo, or via Tantawangalo, were viable routes. These ancestral routes were also used by colonists, once they realised their existence, for driving stock and also constructing roads because they followed the easiest grades through the dividing range.

When Mum told me this story it made me think of our old people and how they would have used their knowledge of the land and animals to capture the brumbies. Trapping wild horses in the Alps would not have been an easy task. There's a lot of country in the Snowy Mountains. **Like our ancestors, the brumbies built their own knowledge and connection with the land for their survival, so ancestral knowledge and the skills of land and nature would have been key to their capture.**



Snowy Mountains brumbies, photo by Paul McIver

The Mundy side of my ancestry also lived at Delegate Aboriginal reserve (gazetted 1892 - 1957) on the Monaro, and at Wollondibby within Kosciuszko National Park. The Mundy's are Ngarigo people. Living at Wollondibby close to the Alps would have been central to capturing the Brumby from the wild before the long and arduous journey driving the horses to the coast.

Jack Hoskins and his family lived upon the Aboriginal Reserve at Blackfellows Lake/Lagoon (then called Cohens Lake). There were two reserves at Blackfellows Lake.

The first Aboriginal reserve was gazetted in 1883 (R895 - 112 acres) before being revoked. The second reserve (R17616 - 55 acres) at Blackfellows Lake was gazetted in 1893 with our family recorded as present upon the reserve up to 1925.

This second reserve, which encompassed part of the first reserve was created for Jack Hoskins and his family. Aboriginal Protection Board records make reference to the local Bega police constable recommending land acquisitions up to 40 acres each for Aboriginal families on the Bega River.

The Aboriginal reserve at Blackfellows Lake is where the brumbies were rested and tamed. They were then taken to the old steamers at Tathra wharf. Agricultural works, for their own food and produce for external markets, was also carried out on the reserve. Our family also had interests in the fishing industry within the Bega River, and off the coast of Tathra. **This was my family living between two cultures...adapting...surviving, trying to provide for kin via shared contribution.**

Some of the horses would have made their way onto farms, but it's also possible that some made it to the front lines of the Second Boer War in South Africa, as the timelines coincide. And brumbies were used in this war. This is where the legendary Australian Light Horse first saw military action.

**Our old people were animal lovers. They would have had great respect for these powerful horse spirits. Our people have always been accepting of visitors to our lands and quite capable of adapting to change so that our visitors can also belong, and have their place. Learning their ways and gaining true understanding. A caring and sharing culture. The ultimate communicators.**



Snowy Mountains brumbies, photo by Paul McIver

This was a Ngarigo and Djiringanj venture that promoted, and enacted, self-determination. Answers to why this reserve was closed can probably be found within the same undermining tactics used at Coranderrk Aboriginal Reserve in Victoria (1863-1924). The Blackfellows Lake area is prime real estate today within the Bega Valley Shire.

It's sad to think that our family had access to land and agency within "settler" society back then at Blackfellows Lake, but fast forward a couple of generations and our people are found struggling to survive alongside Bega's waste facility as "fringe dwellers".

Stories of Original people having "success" within Australian society, especially self-determination via business/ commerce, aren't of great renown. The glaring absence of this type of recognition of Original peoples isn't due to the lack of effort, or commitment to innovation on the part of our people, when afforded equal opportunity as opposed to rhetoric and the fake perception of equality.

It's pretty much expected these days when dealing with government and the Crown...who continue to impose a paternalistic and prescriptive mindset and attitude. Opportunity is given but then it's undermined if we show any signs of actually becoming self-sufficient. Never allowing our people to live peacefully upon our own ancestral lands has been an observed pattern.

One only need to look at early statements recorded within early Hansard transcripts, parliamentary and media publications to find discriminatory and racist diatribe aimed at Original peoples, and "cultural other", that spotlights prominent Australian government officials pronouncing Australia to be for the "white man" only. Unfortunately, this discriminatory legacy of economic and social exclusion based upon race is still very much alive and well within Australian society today.

First Nations people have a long history as contributors to the building of the Australian nation. Locally, our people have contributed to the livestock, fishing, agricultural, dairy and timber industries, and played a significant role in helping to build our community to what it is today...economically, socially, intellectually, culturally and spiritually.

However this important history remains unacknowledged at a local community level due to indifference and ignorance. Only for our Elders retaining, and sharing knowledge of our history, valuable insights into our past would have been forgotten, or lost forever.

It should also be noted that in circa 2001 the resident NPWS archaeologist proposed a search of the old Blackfellows Lake Aboriginal reserve using ground penetrating radar. The purpose of the search was to locate the burials of Jack Hoskins and other members of my family. This was also confirmed via a face to face conversation that I had with the archaeologist about the proposed search at the time.

I don't think the search eventuated due to development and ground disturbance. So it's not certain where the final resting place of Jack is located, only that he passed away within the Bega area in 1900. But it is a reasonable assumption that the old reserve was the place that Jack and other members of my family are buried. The area in question was named Cohens Lake but was later changed to Blackfellows Lake.

Stories that bring to light our peoples contributions to local industry, community building and our shared humanity break through the racist stereotypes and narratives that are constructed

upon false foundation. The strength of spirit of our people is something to be honoured, admired and paid tribute. Contributing within local industry in order to gain economic agency to survive, and just some basic respect, must have been a massive challenge, considering the barriers of racist attitudes and actions our people had to navigate and ultimately endure.

Our collective journey is one that requires us to acknowledge our collective past and strive to right the wrongs and realise justice is possible. This is a shared history, not a segregated one ...it depends on how you view it, I suppose. It's a shared history, the good along with the bad.

Our family story about our interwoven history with the brumbies, as told by our Elders, is one that reminds us that reconnecting with our past can be a powerful connector to conversation, ideas and possibilities that can unify rather than divide. Which is, within itself, a giant leap toward justice and healing for everyone.

Hopefully this small but significant story can be a platform to build upon as we access more information so our full story can be told.

I'd like to pay tribute to my mother Margaret Rose Dixon for sharing her story with me. I'd also like to acknowledge Paul McIver for allowing me to share his wonderful pictures of the brumbies.

I am a proud Ngarigo and Djiringanj mawa (male), and this is my retelling of my Elders' story of the Ngarigo, Djiringanj and the Brumby...the Men from Snowy River.



Snowy Mountains brumbies, photo by [Paul McIver](#)

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