

# Kennedy's Bull.

[This short story, originally titled *The Great Kalang Muster* when it was written in the early 1980's, was inspired by very real events related to the clash of cultures occurring in the Bellinger Valley at the time. It belatedly won the 'New Writers' section of the 2001 Henry Lawson Short Story Awards.]

The tiny hamlet of Kalang lies about twenty kilometres west of Bellinger in northern New South Wales, on the coastal flanks of the Great Divide. It was Red Cedar that first lured white settlers to the area, but the commercial timber has long since gone, and all that remained of the original settlement at the time the following events took place was a sagging, creosote-encrusted community hall. Nowadays most of the district's inhabitants eke a living out of farming cattle on the valley's narrow river flats.

It's what the farmers call "marginal land", a constant battleground between humankind and the elements where every claim to occupancy is continually being challenged by the encroaching bush. For farmers, the cost of this ceaseless war of attrition is high, and during the recessions of the late 'Seventies and early 'Eighties, many of them admitted defeat and sold up.

Attracted by the resulting cheap land prices, a number of 'alternative life-stylers' – 'hippies', in the common parlance - moved into the valley, bought up the surrendered properties, and set about establishing communal settlements. Most of these failed within a few years – the bush makes no concessions to ideology – but enough remained to form the core of a viable and resilient 'alternative' sub-culture. After several years of conflict, punctuated by occasional violent clashes over issues like the burning off of privately-owned land, an accommodation of sorts was reached between the new settlers and the farmers, but the truce remained fragile; tensions were never far below the surface, needing only a spark to set them off.

Barry Kennedy had farmed around Kalang all his life, but unlike Charley Thomas, his downstream neighbour, the hippies hadn't bothered him much. His main problem was wild cattle, a mob of about twenty cows led by a rogue Brahman bull that had avoided the musters of several seasons and become an increasing nuisance, trampling the fences of local farmers and ravaging their fodder.

After losing yet another corn crop - the third in three years - and having had to replace several hundred metres of fencing on account of the mob, Barry had had enough. He organised with Charley and Pat Ryan, his other immediate neighbour, to meet at his place the following Saturday morning with horses and a couple of extra hands each. The idea was to track the mob upstream from where they'd crossed Barry's boundary, then drive the lot down the river into Charley's corral, an imposing structure built from old rail irons which Charley asserted would hold a herd of wild

elephants without much trouble. Pat initially suggested taking rifles along and shooting the cattle where they found them, but Barry wasn't all that keen on the idea. The bull belonged to him, and ever since it had escaped when he was unloading it from the Coffs Harbour Show, where it had just won its second consecutive Best of Breed, its recapture had been something of an obsession.

They set out about five in the morning, with dawn turning the peaks the colour of apricots. The trail, still clearly visible, led them up a steep spur, then down an old forestry track to the river again, at which point the cattle appeared to have struck directly upstream. The men followed, cursing the swarms of insects that hung above the water and the treachery of the surface beneath it, until bad light forced them to pitch camp. All the signs indicated that they were gaining on the herd. They knew the cattle wouldn't move far at night, so they bagged down with a certain sense of confidence.

Sure enough, within two hours of breaking camp the next morning they caught sight of the mob, browsing along a grass flat on the opposite bank of the river. The party decided to split into three, with Pat and Barry taking positions upstream from their quarry while Charley and his hands waited in the bush where they were, ready to steer the muster into the river as it passed. They didn't expect to have to work too hard; cattle aren't known for their stamina, and these were carrying a lot of weight.

It took longer than expected to set up. At a critical moment, one of the horses in Barry's group shied at a black snake, and there was a brittle pause as the huge bull turned its head ponderously towards the disturbance. Finally everyone was in position, and after a last quick adjustment of his livery Barry gave a shrill whistle and broke from the scrub. Immediately there was a whoop from his left, and Pat's party bore down on the herd from above.

The bull hesitated for only a split second, then gave a bellow of rage and spun nimbly around, plunging through the midst of the startled mob. The cows promptly set off after him, nudging their offspring in front. Charley and his men heard the mob coming and dropped in neatly behind the herd as it passed.

The drive made rapid progress down the river, the riders taking full advantage of the swathe cut by the fleeing cattle. It soon became obvious, however, that the men had badly underestimated the stamina of their quarry. As the pace of the pursuit continued unabated they hung on grimly, cursing the whole idea, while ahead the foaming, wild-eyed Brahman and his entourage blundered downstream in full stampede.

The only saving grace for the riders was the knowledge that it would soon be over; it took them less than half an hour to reach the ford at the upper boundary of Pat's place, and only a few minutes more to cross the easier stretch of shallow, sandy water behind Barry's, where they'd initially picked up the trail. They'd soon be at

Charley's; the deeper water there would have to slow the cattle down, and the corral was only a short distance from there.

About two hundred metres downstream from Charley's boundary, the Kalang River broadens into a long, narrow pool, with steep, muddy embankments on either side. The pool had always been popular as a swimming hole; local kids had been using it for generations, but when the hippies moved into the valley and reports of 'naked bathing' began filtering through the community grapevine, prudent parents had forbidden their offspring to go near the place. There'd been several letters to the paper demanding that the offenders be barred from swimming there, which had put quite a bit of pressure on Charley to enforce some kind of ban, but he hadn't pushed it too hard. All through the summer he'd found himself running back and forward to the pool, running people off, and even with the cooler weather coming in he still had occasional trespassers. Anyway, he'd found the publicity generated by the 'naked bathing' had been good for business; the small produce stall he maintained on the road overlooking the site (albeit from some distance) was thriving with the custom of bemused tourists, and the odd upright citizen who stopped by to check whether the offending behaviour might still be taking place - which it apparently was on the day of the muster, when several tonnes of outraged Brahman bull, travelling at around thirty kilometres an hour, suddenly appeared from nowhere at the top end of the pool.

Time has lent colour to what followed, quickly swelling the number of 'naked bathers' from ten to a hundred, but there can be no doubt that the scene that followed was one of total pandemonium. Everyone who witnessed it agreed that it was a miracle nobody was killed; the only confirmed casualty was one of Charley's station-hands, who broke a wrist when he fell off his horse laughing.

"Never seen anyone move so fast!" Pat Ryan told anyone who'd listen in the pub afterwards. "Just about walked on water, some of them! One poor bugger tried scaling the bank - looked like a possum on a greasy roof, kept falling back into the river! Then just when I thought he'd was gone for sure, he cleared it in one jump - one jump, mind you! Fifteen bloody feet, if I'm an inch!"

If you're interested in finding out more about what happened that day, you can ask about it next time you're passing through Bellingen; but my advice would be to be careful who you talk to, because it's still a bit of a sore point in some quarters. Certainly, relations between the hippies and the farmers in the valley deteriorated markedly after the incident, and stayed that way for a long time afterwards. Some hippie hard-liners still insist the whole thing was Charley's idea, a desperate and malicious attempt to drive the swimmers off his property once and for all, but it wasn't like that. The prospect of the pool being occupied simply hadn't seemed like a factor before the drive, when they'd expected the cattle to run out of steam upriver, and since it had begun he'd been so intent on staying in the saddle that the thought entered his head. He was just as shocked to find the swimmers there as they were to

confront the stampede, and obviously felt a bit guilty about it afterwards. He subsequently put a lot of effort into making reparations to the hippies, including selling a wide range of their organic produce through his stall.

Anyway, the cattle got the last laugh in a way. The muster ended at the corral as planned, but Charley had no sooner shut the gate when the Brahman went sailing over the top, leaving his cows to kick the enclosure to pieces and follow him a few minutes later, trailing a hundred metres of brand new fencing wire behind them.

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