'Broncoing': A Uniquely Australian Cattle-Handling Technology

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ABSTRACT   *The early Anglo-Celtic settlers in Australia arrived with a 'cattle-culture' developed in Britain over many centuries, but their cattle-handling technology proved inadequate for the unique conditions of Australia and new methods were soon devised. For most of the nineteenth century these new techniques required the use of a yard, but eventually the 'bronco' method was developed which did not require a yard and which involved a specially constructed 'bronco panel' and the use of a lasso thrown by a mounted horseman. This new method became the dominant cattle-handling technique in the outback for nearly a century and is still practised on a small number of cattle stations.*

Introduction

In 1992 Perkins and Thompson published a paper titled 'The Technology of Open-range Cattle Farming in Early European Australia'.[1] As the title suggests, their paper examined the skills and technologies developed to deal with the pastoral conditions of early Colonial Australia, and it drew parallels with and possible influences from North and South America. Among the various points they made is that lassoes were not used in Australia and that yards were an essential requirement for branding cattle. While their paper provides an excellent overview of the topic, it stops short of the appearance of a technique for handling cattle in which yards were not required and lassoes essential, a technique which became the dominant cattle-handling technology in outback Australia for most of the twentieth century.

Branding on the Great Inland Plains

Most of the accounts of the different nineteenth century cattle-handling methods described by Perkins and Thompson come from coastal and near-coastal regions of

eastern and south-eastern Australia, and they make the important point that stock-yards were an essential component of all the different cattle-handling methods used. Providing sufficient yards was not a great problem in the coastal and near-coastal regions where, relatively speaking, land was fertile, properties small, water supplies and seasons reliable, and timber for yard building abundant.

This was not the case on the great semi-arid open grass plains of the interior. There, water supplies and seasons were highly variable and the land generally less fertile, so to be economically viable properties had to be very large. In addition, timber for yard building and other purposes was often scarce—in extreme cases it had to be carted from sources up to 250 km away[2]—and the wages for outback station workers were high, so yards were very expensive to build. For example, in the outback in the late 1940s a drafting yard cost from £1,200 to £1,500[3] and stock-man's wages were about £4.[4] In spite of these drawbacks there is evidence that methods similar to those used closer to the coast, or at least, methods in which a yard was absolutely essential, continued on most outback stations until the end of the nineteenth century, and in some areas well into the twentieth century.[5]

In the absence of yards in many areas, unbranded cattle, sometimes weakened by drought, had to be mustered and driven to the nearest yard which could be several days or even a week away.[6] This slowed down the branding process, stressed the cattle and 'knocked them about',[7] and increased the overall expense of running a station. Sometimes the lack of feed and/or water near available yards would make it impossible to bring cattle to them, and there was then no choice but to leave them until conditions improved. By the time this happened the cattle might be fully-grown and much harder to handle, or perhaps have been branded by an enterprising neighbour. In spite of these disadvantages, for 30, 40 and even 50 years, the settlers on the inland plains continued to use the old techniques requiring the use of a yard. A new method, that came to be known as 'broncoing', overcame this problem.[8]

The Origin of Broncoing

In recent years the 'who, when and where' of the origin of broncoing has become a matter of some debate.[9] Various suggestions have been put forward, but most have been nothing more than guesses and 'gut feelings', and the general ignorance among senior cattlemen about the origin of broncoing suggests that the technique was developed in a period beyond human memory and was not well documented at the time; photographic and documentary sources support this contention. However, there are sufficient written descriptions, illustrations and statements by old-time cattlemen to determine which techniques were being used at different times in the past, including when the bronco method first appeared.

Over the years credit for introducing broncoing has been given to a number of people, including an American cowboy named Joe Case,[10] a Mexican named Corelli,[11] a Spaniard named Bralla[12] and a Mexican named Ambrose Madrill,[13] but the weight of evidence leaves little doubt that the technique was developed by an Australian cattleman named 'Compie' Trew.

'Compie' Trew

H. Compton 'Compie' Trew was born in South Australia in 1864 and died in Adelaide in 1958 at the age of 94.[14] His first job was on Mundowdna station near

Marree in 1880 and he spent his entire working life in cattle country, so he would have been familiar with whatever cattle-handling techniques were in vogue from 1880 until he retired, probably in the 1930s.[15] Among other things Trew has been given credit for inventing a packsaddle with a high tree,[16] the Bedourie oven,[17] for revolutionising 'the organization and equipment of pack trains which carried supplies for drovers on the Birdsville Track and to the lonely stations of the desert fringe',[18] and for introducing the twisted greenhide rope for use in branding work.[19] In other words, Trew was an innovator and a man who constantly tried to improve equipment and methods.

Trew's 'Lasso System'

In the March 1905 issue of *The Pastoralists' Review,* Trew published a description of what he called his 'lasso system',[20] and he began this article with the following statement:

> Having for some fourteen years past used a lasso system of my own introduction in the branding of cattle and the working of cattle stations with unvarying success, it has occurred to me that, were the method pursued in working it made known, some of my fellow cattlemen would benefit very materially by it, and the long, tedious journeyings to the yards for the purposes of branding, which many of their cattle have to undergo, would be averted.[21]

He then went on to provide a highly detailed description of his 'lasso system', the circumstances in which it was developed and the results he obtained, supplemented with drawings and photographs. In his published article, Trew said he first tried branding in the open while he was manager of Glen Helen station in Central Australia, 'some fourteen years past', that is, in 1891. At this time Glen Helen was on the market and the owners wanted him to muster and brand the cattle. However, the country around the station yards was drought stricken and the cattle had moved to distant areas where storms had produced feed, but where there were no yards. It was impossible to bring cattle to the station yards and the owners didn't want to spend money building yards where the cattle were, so Trew decided to try branding the cattle in the open.

Trew said that neither he nor his offsider had ever seen a beast lassoed in the open, which could mean that neither man had ever seen a lassoing demonstration at all, or that one or the other had seen such a demonstration but only at a circus or Wild West Show. An American circus featuring 'bronco horses' came to Australia in the late 1880s[22] and Wild West Shows began touring Australia from late 1890.[23] The First Wild West Show was brought to Australia by Wirth's Circus, and it featured roping exhibitions by American cowboys.[24] In any case, from his use of the terms 'lasso' and 'lassoed' it is likely that Trew knew about the roping technique used by cowboys and vaqueros.

Trew's initial method was to have his stockmen muster and hold some cattle in the same manner as on a drafting camp. In a drafting camp cattle are held together by horsemen who, in effect, take the place of a yard. While they were held, other men on specially trained horses rode amongst the cattle and 'cut out' a required beast by gently moving it to the face of the camp, and then pushing it quickly out to where other horsemen were waiting to hold it in a separate herd. This was done to separate animals with different brands, branded animals from unbranded, or

bullocks to be delivered to a drover, but Trew had quite a different aim and this required a completely different method for removing each animal from the mob.

Trew advocated using a lasso of twisted greenhide attached to a surcingle placed over the saddle and around the horse. The rope was attached at about the middle of the side of the horse, and was supported by a breastplate which passed between the horse's front legs. While the cattle were held together a mounted horseman roped an unbranded animal and dragged it towards a tree so that the rope passed alongside the trunk. When the beast came close to the tree men on foot pushed or crowded it sideways so that the rope bent around the trunk, and the animal was semi-immobilised. One or two men then 'scruffed' (physically threw down) the small calves and branded them, but handling the larger beasts was a different matter. Trew remarked that several of his men would charge the animal 'en masse' and, 'From a spectator's point of view the procedure that then ensued was indeed funny' though, 'Later on I took a turn at the ground-work and wrestling, but altogether failed to find the point of amusement'.[25]

Trew considered his initial experiment a success, and said that 'I never again used the yards for the purpose of branding calves'. From Glen Helen he went to manage Clifton Hills and Goyder's Lagoon in north-eastern South Australia, and it was on these stations that he perfected his 'lasso system'.[26] Judging by his article, in 1905 the essence of his method was as follows: cattle were mustered and taken to a patch of clear ground where they were held together by a number of men on horseback. A man on a 'calf horse' with a greenhide 'head rope' (lasso) attached to a surcingle placed over the saddle and around the horse's chest rode into the mob, roped an unbranded animal and dragged it to a set of posts specially constructed for the purpose. This set of posts consisted of only two tall 'head posts' about 115 cm apart and two outer leg-rope posts, one about 60 cm from one head post and the other 90 cm from the other post. All the posts were in line and there were no rails at all (Figure 1).

After roping a beast the horseman rode between the two 'head posts', and as the animal approached the posts men on foot moved towards it so that it shifted
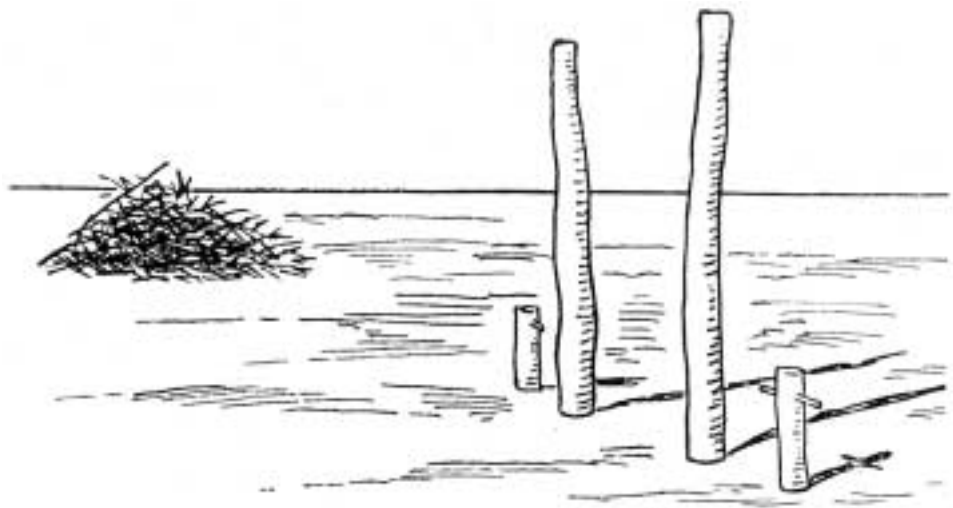
Figure 1.   Head posts system.

away from them, keeping the rope hard against one post or the other. When the beast was finally dragged close enough it was forced around until the side of its head was hard against the post. It was then leg-roped and the ropes looped around the leg-rope posts so that it could be thrown, and thus immobilised. As soon as it was under control the head rope was released and while branding and other operations were carried out the horseman returned to the mob to secure another animal.[27]

Trew claimed his system saved time, money and horse-flesh, and that it led to quiet cattle which were easy to muster, drive, yard and truck, and which never rushed at night. At the end of his article he remarked that,

> Several station managers disapproved of my system. They had always used yards for branding, and with the conservatism peculiar to their class, were of opinion that what they had used was the only thing that could be used in the working of cattle. However, time has proved that my system is unquestionably the best we could have adopted for the purpose of cleaning, quietening, and keeping in that state a large herd of cattle.[28]

Trew's statements suggest two things. One is that at the time he began his experiment, outback cattlemen were still taking cattle on 'tedious journeyings' to the nearest yards to brand them. When Trew published his article he was 40 years old and had been working on cattle stations for 25 years (since 1880),[29] so if a technique existed which did not require a yard and was in more than very limited use anywhere in the outback, it is virtually certain he would have known about it. The other suggestion is that by the time he published his article in 1905 his technique had been adopted by a number of other cattlemen.

After Trew's article was published, a series of letters concerning the usefulness or otherwise of the system appeared in *The Pastoralists' Review*. W. Thorold Grant, who was 'town manager' for the owners of Glen Helen when Trew began developing his system there, made the following comments on Trew's article:

> How daring the project was can only be appreciated by those familiar with the old style of station management in the district to which he refers, and the hidebound prejudice of the cattlemen peculiar thereto … I well remember the sulphurous criticisms of the old hands … as to what the crimson results would be when it came to yarding the expletive blanks. When all this was successfully accomplished without the historical fusilade [sic] of whips and revolvers and the accompaniment of raucous shouting and profanity, the critics were, one and all, to use their own phraseology, blanky well paralysed … the owners of Clifton Hills, which was the next management that Trew received after the break-up of Glen Helen, were as well pleased with his methods as I have been.[30]

Subsequently, a man named James Cummings wrote to severely criticise Trew's method, claiming that it had been tried by Parke brothers at Henbury station but dropped as impractical.[31] He also claimed that it made cattle wild and extremely difficult to muster, whereas after branding in yards the cattle were quite tractable.[32] Both Trew and Grant refuted Cummings' criticisms,[33] and no one else wrote in to support either side or to say that a method for roping cattle in the open already existed.

The 'lasso system' advocated by Trew had important differences from the method for branding cattle in the open which later came into general use throughout much of Australia's cattle lands. I have already made the point that Trew was a progressive cattleman and an innovator, and that he had been involved in cattle work since 1880. If he had been aware of the method that came into general use he would have immediately seen its advantages over his own system and adopted it forthwith, and mentioned them in his *Pastoralists' Review* article, or not written it at all. The fact that he did not mention these innovations and that no one who responded to his article mentioned them suggests that these adaptations to his system either were made after his article appeared in 1905, or had only been in existence for a very short time in a very limited area.

Open Bronco

It appears that once Trew's system became known and spread from station to station, different men saw ways to improve on the technique. Within a few years of Trew's 1905 article, modifications had been made to his system and a method established for handling cattle which was to persist for nearly a century. By 1913 Trew's modified system had become known as 'broncoing',[34] a term not used by Trew or by those who wrote in response to his article.

In this system cattle were mustered and taken to an area of open ground near some trees where they were held together by a number of horsemen, as described above. When the cattle reached the chosen area one of the trees was prepared for use, either by cutting one branch off the tree to form a hook into which the rope could be placed as the horseman rode past, or by attaching an iron hook to the tree trunk.

Ideally a tree with a fork beginning at or near the ground was used because a higher fork could cause calves or smaller cattle to be dragged upwards and choked when they got to the tree (Plate 1). The top of the hook or fork had to be at about waist or chest height—low enough for the rope to easily be placed in it,

Plate 1.   Open bronco using a forked tree on Alexandria Station, Northern Territory, c.1924 (Joyce Galvin Collection).

but high enough to not allow it to accidentally come out as the beast struggled. After the fork was prepared or a hook attached, two short stakes were cut and set in the ground at appropriate places a few metres from the tree. These were 'leg-rope posts'; if other trees of suitable size were close enough they could be used instead. Meanwhile, a fire was lit to heat the branding irons and when the tree and posts were ready and the branding irons were hot enough, the horseman (known as a 'catcher' or a 'bronco man') entered the mob of cattle to rope a beast.

As he rode into the mob a right-handed catcher would hold the noose in his raised right hand. When he found a beast in the right position for roping (ideally facing towards him on the left or near-side) he would swing the noose over the neck of his horse (from the off-side to the near-side) and onto the chosen animal (some of the more expert catchers could flip the noose in the other direction to rope a beast on their off-side). As soon as the noose was over the animal's head the catcher would give the rope a jerk to tighten it, then turn his horse and move towards the fork or hook. As he did this he would hold the rope up in his left hand until the strain came on to prevent the loose rope from being fouled by other animals in the yard.

Each animal to be branded was roped in turn and dragged from the mob. As the horse moved past the tree the rider or one of the men on the ground lifted the rope into the fork or hook. When the beast reached the tree, men on foot roped a front and hind leg and wrapped the ropes around the leg-rope posts, taking up any slack as opportunity allowed. The preferred side for branding was the near (left) side, so the animal either fell or was pulled onto its 'off' (right) side, held down and the rope released. While the branding and other procedures were carried out the horseman gathered up the rope, returned to the mob and roped another animal. Because it was difficult to hold the reins while roping an animal or coiling the rope, the catchers often would tie the reins together so that they could not accidentally fall to the ground and be trodden on by the horse.

One very experienced bronco man said he preferred to have the men holding the mob to ring them slowly anti-clockwise so that the catcher could enter the mob and ride clockwise, and thus have cattle to be roped passing on the horse's near side, the easiest way to catch them. As each calf was released after branding it was pushed around so that it faced the mob because it would then go straight back to its mother, rather than just going bush, and it was good to have a dog to nip the calf to encourage it on its way.[35]

The rope used to catch the cattle, made of twisted greenhide, was called a 'head rope' or a 'bronco rope'. It was fixed to a heavy surcingle on the near side of a specially trained 'bronco horse' or 'bronco mule', and in turn the surcingle was attached to a horse collar or a heavy leather breastplate which went horizontally around the horse's chest (Plate 2). A collar had the advantage of being very comfortable for a horse, but it was awkward to carry on mustering trips when pack-horses were being used, and because they were made in different sizes it would only fit a limited number of horses. A breastplate could be adjusted to fit any horse, and could be folded up and easily transported on a packhorse, but when a bronco horse wearing one was pulling up a heavy beast a breastplate could cut into the horse's chest and restrict its breathing.

Whoever developed the idea of using an iron hook in lieu of a tree branch is unknown, but they were in use in south-west Queensland by 1910.[36] These could be

Plate 2.   Aboriginal stockman Darby on a bronco horse fitted with a breastplate. He is holding the noose of his rope in his right hand while his left hand holds the excess length of the rope and the reins. Victoria River Downs, 1950 (Marie Mahood Collection).

a simple 'J' shape, but a more efficient design was something like an oversized paperclip with part of the outer curve cut off. This shape meant that if the rope flipped up against the outer side of the hook it would meet the curve at the top and not come out. Some hooks had an eye at the top so that when they were fixed to a tree or post they couldn't swing around, and some had an iron ring attached to the inside end of the hook in such a way that the rope could pass into the hook, but there was no chance it could come out by accident.[37]

Broncoing in Yards

Once broncoing became an established technique cattlemen soon realised that it could be done just as well in a yard. At first established drafting yards were used, with an iron hook tied to a gate post[38] or a forked post set alongside a gateway,[39] but it was quickly realised that a simple yard of wooden posts and heavy wire was sufficient to hold the cattle. To construct such a yard was up to one-tenth the cost of a standard drafting and branding yard,[40] and once it was built less manpower was needed, so money otherwise spent on wages was saved.

When done in a yard the technique was still known as broncoing, but branding in the open became known as 'open bronco'. Broncoing in yards worked in much the same way as open bronco; after roping a beast the catcher rode through the gate which was shut behind him, and the procedure continued as if a tree was being used. However, a device was soon invented to take the place of iron hooks or forked posts—the 'bronco panel'.

From 'Open Bronco' to 'Bronco Panel'

Bronco panels (also known as a bronco 'rail', 'ramp', 'frame', 'bail' or 'fork') varied considerably in size and construction, depending on the state of the herd or the availability of timber. While individual panels often incorporate features which testify to the ingenuity of the cattlemen, they all have several features in common. All consist, in effect, of two sets of strong posts and rails between 120 cm and 170 cm high and set end to end 10–15 cm apart. Each section of panelling had at least two rails (more often three and sometimes four), and was between two and four metres long.

The gap between the two sections of the panel took the place of the hook or forked tree used in open bronco. Usually the right-hand section of panelling (as approached by the horseman dragging a beast) sloped downwards from the gap to form a ramp up which the rope could slide. On the left side of the gap the post usually was much taller than the one on the right. This was to prevent the rope from flipping over the gap which could waste time and sometimes could be danger-ous for the men on the ground.[41] Sometimes the rails on the right-hand side were level and there was an additional sloping rail extending from the end of the panel to the ground, and in other cases the top rail was made from a curved tree trunk which reached right down to ground level (Plate 3).

When using a panel the catcher roped a beast and rode around the right-hand, sloping end, and as he passed around he swung inward so that the head rope automatically slid up the rail (Plate 3). The roped animals often bucked and ran from side to side, and it was up to the men on foot to guide it so that it moved towards the centre of the panel. If all went well the rope rode up the rail and fell into the gap between the two sections of the panel, and the horseman continued

Plate 3.   A bull being dragged to a massive bronco panel at Retreat Yard, Victoria River Downs, 1953 (Stan May Collection).

to drag the animal forward until its neck was almost jammed against the gap. At this point the horseman stopped his horse but the strain on the rope was maintained. If the catcher had reason to dismount, a good bronco horse would stand and maintain the strain until signalled to move back. As the roped animal approached the panel or when it was actually jammed against the gap, its off-side hind leg was caught with a greenhide leg-rope, and by pulling on the rope and pushing the animal the footmen made it swing around so that its rear end was facing the left-hand side.

When it was in this position and if it was small enough, one man could push his body against the beast and hold onto the top rail to keep the animal in position while the off-side hind leg was roped, and both front and back leg-ropes were secured. When this was done the catcher moved his horse back to ease the strain on the rope, and as the beast struggled to escape it quickly fell onto its off-side, leaving the preferred near-side exposed for branding. Once the beast fell or was pulled over it was held down and the head rope released. The man who released the rope flung it over the panel so that the noose would not get caught in the gap, and while the animal was operated on the catcher coiled his rope and returned to the herd to rope another.

On stations where the herd was well controlled and most of the branders were calves, panels didn't need to be particularly strong, but if the herd was poorly controlled and there were many full grown cleanskin cows and bulls, the panels needed to be very strong, and sometimes were massive. To help make a panel strong Queensland cattleman Norm Forster always tried to get a curved log for the second rail that was long enough to go right across both sections of the panel. As well as making the panel stronger the bend meant that the rail would curve away from the sloping top rail.[42] Norm explained that some bronco panels have the middle rail butting against the opposite post, effectively closing the gap at this point, and helping strengthen the panel (Figure 2D).[43] Occasionally bronco panels were built with the two sections angled towards each other to form a shallow 'V' so that when the beast was pulled close to the gap it was semi-enclosed, and closer to the rails.[44]

On some panels the sloping rail was on the left side or the top rail on both sections of the panel sloped (Figure 2C). A double-sloping panel usually had a tall central post with a gap on each side, though some had only the two central posts, both flush with the top rail.[45] Double-sided panels better suited left-handed catchers because such men sometimes used an 'off-side rig'—that is, they attached the head rope to the off-side—but its main advantage was that if a roped beast managed to follow a horseman around the end of the panel, he could continue around the other end of the panel and pull the beast up to the 'wrong' side. Otherwise, the beast had to be hunted back around to the correct side before being dragged to the panel.[46]

Cattleman Lester Caine, an experienced bronco man from western Queensland and now the owner of Swanvale station near Jundah, said that double-sided panels were not used north of his station, but they existed on properties further south.[47] A fine example in a large octagonal wire yard can be seen just south of the Nocundra pub in south-west Queensland. This panel is in the centre of the yard and no matter which way the wind blew the cattle could be placed downwind so that the dust they raised would not blow over the men at the panel. Photographs show that double-sided panels were also sometimes used in the western Victoria River district, and in Kimberley.[48]
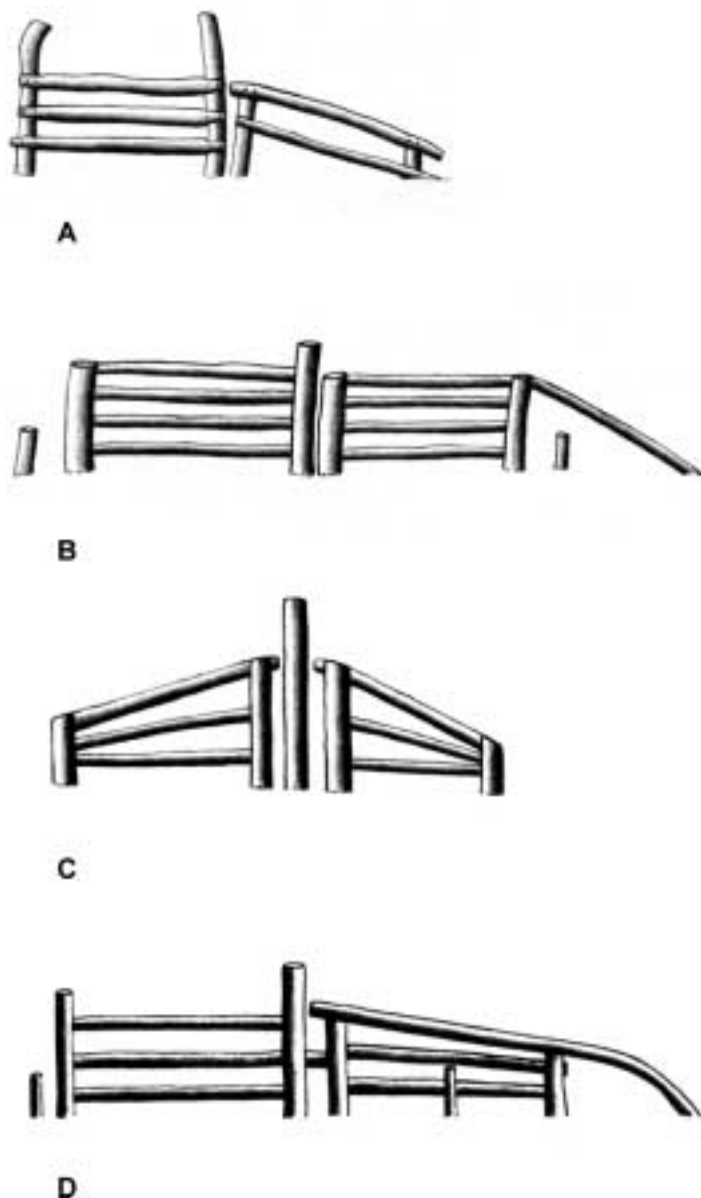
Figure 2.   Variations in design of bronco panels. Panel A, with a sloping rail on the right-hand side (as approached by the horseman), is probably the most common way that bronco panels were constructed. Panel B has horizontal rails on both sides of the central gap, and an additional sloping rail on the right-hand side for the bronco rope to slide up. This example (and panel D) has leg rope posts at each end. Panel C is a double-sided bronco panel, with a gap on both sides of a central post. The top rails on both sides overhang the gap to help prevent the bronco rope from flipping out as the roped beast struggled. Panel D has the top right-hand rail curving down to the ground at one end, and overhanging the central gap at the other. The middle rail on the left side extends across the gap to the right-hand post to give additional strength to the panel.

Traditionally bronco panels were made of wood, but towards the end of the 'bronco era' they were made from large steel pipes and concreted into the ground. While panels were the preferred fixtures in yards, they were sometimes constructed in the open at convenient locations around the station.[49] Near the end of each section of panel there were sometimes leg-rope posts about 40 cm high (Figures 2B and 2D). Some cattlemen didn't bother with leg-rope posts and instead used the posts or rails of the panel itself, but leg-rope posts made fastening quicker.[50] In place of the leg-rope posts some panels had ratchets or 'rollers', marketed as 'Robertson's patent stockyard grip', attached to the second or middle rails.[51] These rollers made it extremely easy to keep the leg-rope tight, even when attached to full-grown bulls.[52]

When large animals were dragged up to a bronco panel they sometimes struggled violently, and if they did there was a danger that the head rope could come out of the gap. To help prevent this some panels had the sloping rail overhanging the gap (Figures 2C and 2D), and one senior cattleman said that on his panels he had wire loops on each main post so that he could slide a rail through them to keep the rope in the slot.[53]

In hindsight it is easy to see how Trew's suggested set-up of posts could be modified and adapted to create a bronco panel, and although nothing certain can be said about who might have done this a strong candidate is a man named Weston. In the Rockhampton *Morning Bulletin* of 28 April 1906 the following item appeared under the heading, 'A New Method of Branding Calves':

> Mr H. V. Weston, of Glenormiston [Qld], is, perhaps, the first man in Queensland or Australia to brand calves by a new method. The cows and calves are cut out in the usual way and put into a yard. Any sort of yard—wire, brush, or stakes—will do for the purpose. Then two cowboys on horseback go quietly amongst them and lasso the calves. The calves are then taken to a trap rigged in the yard and branded in the usual way. The trap is always ready, simple to rig, and everything is easy for men and horses.[54]

A copy of the plan of this 'trap' has not yet been located so it is impossible to be certain that the device was a bronco panel, but there is a strong possibility that it was.

The Demise of Broncoing

Broncoing continued in general use in the outback until the 1970s, but by the end of the 1980s it had been largely replaced by crushes and cradles, and it now appears that very few stations still use broncoing for commercial reasons.[55] On Ashburton station in the Pilbara only the homestead yard has a crush so broncoing is still used extensively elsewhere on the property.[56] The technique is still in use on Lambina station in northern South Australia,[57] on Lucy Creek station in Central Australia (seasonal conditions permitting),[58] and on Rosebud station near Mt Isa.[59] Until a few years ago Marion Downs station in the Kimberley combined modern methods with old through the use of a portable yard and a portable bronco panel. The panel was tied to a tree or to a star picket driven into the ground, and the portable yard set up around it. If a suitable forked tree was available it was sometimes used in lieu of the panel.[60]

There are a number of reasons why most cattlemen stopped using the technique. One was the introduction of equal wages for Aboriginal stockmen in the mid-1960s.

Broncoing is labour intensive and after equal wages came in it became much more expensive to use the technique. Lindsay Ward, a Stock Inspector at Halls Creek, claimed that in some areas the introduction of steel yards was another factor because races built of steel could handle big micky bulls that otherwise could kick wooden races to pieces.[61] However, the crucial factor probably was the introduction in the late 1970s of the Brucellosis and Tuberculosis Eradication Campaign (BTEC Program). This led to more intensive land use, greatly increased fencing, and most importantly, the need for efficient immobilisation of each animal for disease testing and treatment. On the latter point, in 1985 one authority said that,

> Though the bronco method has been good enough in a pioneering way for such tasks as branding, castration and dehorning, it has left much to be desired from the point of view of hygiene (dust) and disturbance of cattle during periods of use. Even more important, however, the method has virtually precluded many procedures such as blood sampling, vaccination, treatment of disease or injury, not to mention such advanced techniques as pregnancy testing or weighing, for which a good crush with walk-through bail and drafting yards are minimal requirements if acceptable standards of modern husbandry are to be attained.[62]

The same author said that the great advantage of open broncoing was that branding could be carried out on the home range of each group of cattle without their having to be moved to a distant fixed yard. This reduced calf losses from failure to 'mother-up' because cows and calves were not separated—a necessity when a calf-branding race and cradle are used. Because of this he believed that the method would probably continue to be favoured for many years! Sadly, he was wrong.

Many old cattlemen lament the change from broncoing in yards and in the open to the use of mechanical crushes. 'Pituri Pete' Muir probably summed up the feelings of many when he commented that,

> The only drawback that I could see with open bronco was the galloping necessary by the men holding the mob together to keep the cattle on camp. This is exceptionally hard on the horses and they knock up very quickly. Bronco catching in the confines of a stockyard however is very effective and not hard on the cattle or the horses. These days I think the trend is towards ready made steel yards with mechanical crushes, head bails and all sorts of modern innovations which have taken the romantic atmosphere completely out of the cattle game, but I am speaking of the old days when cattlemen were MEN not bloody mechanics, pilots and engineers.[63]

'Bronco Branding'

The decline of broncoing had become sufficiently obvious by the beginning of the 1980s that a group of Central Australian pastoralists became concerned about the possible loss of the skills involved. To preserve this part of Australia's heritage they decided to try and establish broncoing as a competitive sport.[64] The first 'Bronco Branding' contest was held in Alice Springs in May 1984 and drew competitors from the Northern Territory and South Australia.[65]

Interest in the new sport has increased rapidly, with annual contests now held in many centres in Queensland, South Australia and the Northern Territory. The

2004 Bronco Branding National Championship was held at William Creek, north-ern South Australia, with prize money of about $26,000 and both the number of contests being held and the prize money at the National Championships is expected to grow significantly.[66]

While the skills and techniques of broncoing are now being preserved in the form of a competitive sport, the bronco panel has gone from practical use to museum piece. At the new National Museum in Canberra a display has been set up with a representative bronco panel, a model of a horse wearing a set of bronco harnesses, and a series of explanatory photographs and texts.

Conclusions

Available evidence indicates that for most of the nineteenth century the branding of cattle could only be done in a stockyard, and in many cases this necessitated driv-ing cattle for some days or even a week before a yard could be reached. In earlier decades, once they were yarded cattle to be branded were caught using a roping pole, and dragged by manpower to the side of the yard where they were leg-roped and immobilised. Later a head rope was hand-thrown by men on foot and the roped beast dragged to the side of the yard by manpower, or by a horse being led back and forth by a man on foot.

During the second half of the nineteenth century one or two cattlemen may have independently tried a 'lasso system'. However, it is clear that roping cattle from horseback did not become an established technique until after Compie Trew's initial experiments and that he must be given the credit for developing the method that evolved into broncoing, and came to be used throughout the outback for most of the twentieth century.

It appears that at first Trew's idea was slow to catch on, but by 1905–10 it was rapidly gaining acceptance, and as it spread various improvements were made. Within about 20 years of his first experiments the essential features of bronco-ing—bronco panels, forked trees or hooks, the use of horse collars or breast-plates, and indeed, the name 'broncoing' itself—were established and in widespread use.

The bronco technique revolutionised the outback cattle industry. It allowed a more efficient and economical use of country with light carrying capacity, first, because it enabled cattle to be branded and otherwise treated on their home range without being taken on 'tedious journeyings' to a distant fixed yard, and second, because the money previously spent on yards was saved. It also led to new technolo-gies and skills, and new terms in the language. From the time it was introduced there were criticisms of the bronco method,[67] but the fact is that whatever its draw-backs, the technique caught on and was used for many decades on stations across the outback.

While broncoing may be all but extinct as a method for branding on cattle stations today, the annual bronco branding contests will ensure that the broncoing technology and skills developed in the years since Compie Trew first roped a cow from his horse will be preserved for posterity.

Notes and References

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3. J. H. Kelly, *Northern Australia Cattle Survey*, Bureau of Agricultural Economics, Department of Commerce and Agriculture, Canberra, 1949, pp. 51–4.

4. Personal communication, former stockman and drover Rodney Watson, Mt Isa.

5. Len Carrington, 'Reminiscences of Augustus Downs during 1920s & 30s', in P. Carrington (ed.), *How Many Grids to Gregory?*, Gregory Branch of the CWA, 1977; H. Anning, 'Cattle branding yards', *The Pastoral Review*, 16 April 1931, p. 358.

6. A. Marshall, 'Broncoing!', *Walkabout*, February 1937, p. 21.

7. H. G. Lamond, 'Branding methods', *The Pastoral Review*, 18 November 1963, p. 1187.

8. In various historical records the term 'bronco' is also spelled 'broncho'. The word originated in Mexico where it is spelled 'bronco', and in recent times 'bronco' appears to have become the preferred spelling in Australia.

9. Geoff Allen, letter to the editor of the *Stockman's Hall of Fame paper*, December 1997, p. 13; personal communication, the late Eddie Hackman, Rockhampton, 1999.

10. *Hoofs and Horns*, November 1957, p. 57; E. Morey, 'Timber Creek patrols, Pt. 5', *Northern Territory Newsletter*, 1978, p. 16; personal communication, Charlie Schultz; C. Watts, letter to the editor of the *Stockman's Hall of Fame paper*, June 1999.

11. Kelly, *op. cit.*

12. H. Tolcher, *Innamincka: The Town with Two Lives*, Innamincka Progress Association, 1990, pp. 57–8; and personal communication.

13. T. Ronan, *Packhorse and Pearling Boat*, Cassell Australia Ltd, Melbourne, 1964.

14. 'Death of Mr H. C. Trew', *Adelaide Advertiser*, 19 September 1958.

15. H. C. Trew, 'Trew's lasso system', *The Pastoralists' Review*, 15 March 1905. In *Sands & McDougall's South Australian Directory*, Sands & McDougall Pty. Ltd., 1884–1936, Trew is listed in 1932 as a 'station manager, Olary', but in following years no occupation was listed and his address was given as '21 Pier St., New Glenelg.'.

16. R. M. Williams was interviewed on my behalf by Jill Bowen, the editor of the *Stockman's Hall of Fame paper*. Jill took notes of this interview and forwarded his remarks to me.

17. K. Willey, *The Drovers*, The Macmillan Company of Australia Pty. Ltd, Melbourne, 1982, p. 122.

18. *Ibid.*

19. M. Duncan Kemp, *Our Sandhill Country,* Angus & Robertson Ltd, Sydney, 1933, pp. 72–3; Marshall, *op. cit.*; interview with elderly Birdsville country cattleman Artie Rowland, by Helen Tolcher on 19 April 2001; 'Death of Mr H. C. Trew', *Adelaide Advertiser*, 19 September 1958.

20. Trew, 15 March 1905, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

21. *Ibid.*

22. 'World's Circus' (advertisement), *Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 December 1888; 'The World's Circus', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 December 1888.

23. 'Dr W. F. Carver's Wild America', *The Argus*, 20 December 1890; 'Wild America', *The Argus*, 24 December 1890; 'Entertainments. Musical and dramatic', *Adelaide Observer*, 27 December 1890, p. 26.

24. Copy of the programme for Wirth's Circus in 1890, supplied by Mr F. W. Braid, Ballina.

25. Trew, 15 March 1905, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

26. In a letter that Thorold Grant wrote to *The Pastoralists' Review* after Trew's article appeared, he mentioned that Trew had gone from Glen Helen to Clifton Hills (T. Grant, 'Trew's lasso system', *The Pastoralists' Review*, 15 April 1905, pp. 130–1). Trew himself wrote two letters to *The Pastoralists' Review* in response to a correspondent who criticised his 'lasso system', and he gave his address as 'Goyder's Lagoon', a station north of and adjacent to Clifton Hills (H. C. Trew, 'Trew's lasso system', *The Pastoralists' Review*, 15 July 1905, p. 388; and H. C. Trew, 'Trew's lasso system', 15 November 1905, p. 726). According to S. E. Pearson, Clifton Hills was sometimes referred to as Goyder's Lagoon (S. E. Pearson, 'Through the pleistocene', *The Pastoral Review*, 16 January 1928, p. 53).

27. Western Queensland cattleman Charlie Rayment (personal communication) said that he had improvised exactly the same system using a couple of gidgee trees.

28. Trew, 15 March 1905, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

29. H. C. Trew, 'Cattle ranching in America', *The Pastoralists' Review*, 15 January 1906, p. 895; 'Death of Mr H. C. Trew', *Adelaide Advertiser*, 19 September 1958.

30. Grant, *op. cit.* Grant states in his letter that at the time of Trew's experiment Glen Helen station was owned by Grant and Stokes, his father and uncle, respectively (*The Graziers' Review*, 16 October 1925, p. 887).

31. E. W. Parke and C. H. Walker took up Henbury in October 1876. At some stage Parke's brother became a partner. Walker died in 1885 and drought forced the Parke brothers off the place in the mid- to late-1890s (*Northern Territory Trust News*, 6, 1, February 1989, pp. 8–9).

32. J. Cummings, 'Trew's lasso system', *The Pastoralists' Review*, 15 May 1905, p. 209.

33. Trew, 15 July 1905, *op. cit.*

34. D. C. Thompson, nd, Australian Archives, CRS A3 N.T. 1914/2576.

35. Private correspondence, Charlie Rayment, 20 May 2002.

36. Marshall, *op. cit.*

37. K. Howard, *Stockman's Hall of Fame paper*, March 2001.

38. H. K. V. Hungerford, *The Australian Stockman*, June 1914, p. 160, Mitchell Library, C857.

39. Personal communication, Phil Gee, who has seen an example in the Lake Eyre country.

40. Kelly, *op. cit.*

41. Personal communication, Norm Forster, Killarney station, 1999.

42. Personal communication, Norm Forster, at the Timber Creek races, 1999.

43. Personal communication, Norm Forster, at Killarney station, Victoria River district, 1999.

44. Personal communication, Charlie Rayment, at Eildon Park station, western Queensland, 12 June 2000.

45. Personal communication, Norm Forster, Timber Creek races, 1999.

46. *Ibid.*

47. Personal communication, Lester Caine, at his property Swanvale in western Queensland, 11 June 2000.

48. For example, see A. M. Ingham, *Pioneers of the Kimberleys: The Maggie Lily Story*, Halstead Press, Sydney, 2000, p. 94.

49. For example, see B. Simpson, *Packhorse Drover*, ABC Books, Sydney, 1996, photograph on p. 70.

50. Personal communication, Charlie Rayment, Eildon Park station, western Queensland, 12 June 2000.

51. J. K. Little, 'The cattleman's work: ropes and branding', *The Pastoral Review*, 16 September 1942, p. 615. Little was on Victoria River Downs when Jack Watson was manager, in 1895–96. Some sources pronounce the name of this ratchet device as 'Robinson's' and others pronounce it as 'Robertsons'.

52. Personal communication, Buck Buchester, recorded at Kalkarindji, Northern Territory, in 2000. Buck has spent more than 50 years working cattle in the Victoria River district and is widely recognised as an expert 'bronco man'; Little, *op. cit.*

53. Personal communication, Charlie Rayment, Eildon Park station, western Queensland, 12 June 2000.

54. 'New method of branding calves', *The Morning Bulletin* (Rockhampton), 28 April 1906.

55. Personal communications, Ted Fogarty, Darryl Hill, Joyce Galvin, Lindsay Ward and Nick Gill; R. Chaney, 'Broncoing lives on', *Outback*, February–March 2001, pp. 72–4.

56. Personal communication, Andrew Glenn, manager of Ashburton station; see *Outback Magazine*, 15, February–March 2001, p. 73.

57. Personal communication, Alan Fennel, manager of Lambina station, June 2005.

58. Personal communication, Ted Fogarty, Alice Springs.

59. Personal communication, Rodney Watson, who made inquiries at Rosebud on my behalf.

60. Information from notes supplied by Nick Gill who interviewed Phil Stoker, co-owner of Marion Downs, in 1997.

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62. P. J. Schmidt, *Beef Cattle Production*, Butterworths, Sydney, 1985, pp. 260–1.

63. R. S. Muir, *Pituri Pete: A Saga of Cattle Lands and Desert Sands*, self published, 1987, p. 151.

64. 'The Territory opts for bronco branding', *Stockman's Hall of Fame paper,* September 1983, p. 4; 'Bronco branding challenge from N.T.', *Stockman's Hall of Fame paper*, March 1984, p. 2.

65. J. Bowen, 'Bronco branding blast off!', *Stockman's Hall of Fame paper,* June 1984.

66. Personal communication, Randall Crozier, manager of Anna Creek station, northern South Australia.

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