

ABLative No.1, Autumn 1985, pp 2-3

Victoria River Downs

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Introduction

This article is intended to give readers some indication of the breadth of research material available at the Archives of Business and Labour on the Northern Territory cattle station, Victoria River Downs. The property has passed through the hands of seven different owners since it was first settled in 1879, and while each owner has had their own unique problems to cope with, there are a number of continuous themes that run through the records held by the Archives. These include the struggle with the remoteness of the station, both in terms of its effect on the economic viability of the property and the difficulties of settlement, the problems of administering such a huge tract of land, the treatment of Aboriginal workers, and differing government attitudes to land tenure in the Northern Territory. The records held for the Bovril period of ownership provide some interesting material for the study of the failures and successes of a corporate absentee landlord.

Administrative history

The first lease of 15,890 square miles was granted by the South Australian government in December 1879 to Charles Brown Fisher and J Maurice Lyons. This period was rather turbulent as the property was overcapitalised by these first owners. Their initial attempts to dispose of their holdings failed and management control fell almost wholly into the hands of R Goldsbrough & Company as mortgagee. By 1886 Fisher's financial position had worsened, and in an effort to extricate himself from his difficulties a loan of £100,000 was made by Goldsbrough, with his Northern Territory holdings as security. In May 1887 Fisher moved to set up the Northern Australian Territory Company Ltd to purchase approximately 22,000 square miles of land. The contract set the sale price at £300,000 - £90,000 to be paid in cash, £110,000 in shares and £100,000 in debentures direct to the account of R Goldsbrough & Co. Ltd. The Northern Australian Territory Company ran into difficulties soon after its formation and instead of honouring its agreement paid only £80,000 in cash and refused to issue the debentures, claiming the worth of Victoria River Downs had been fraudulently misrepresented. After protracted legal battles, the dispute was settled and the property passed wholly into the hands of Goldsbrough Mort & Co. Ltd in 1889.

On 30 January 1900 Goldsbrough sold the lease and the stock for £27,500 to a syndicate consisting of Forrest Emmanuel & Company, Kidman Brothers, G S Yuill, Robert Richards and B J H Richards.

The next owners were Bovril Australian Estates, who purchased Victoria River Downs together with a smaller station, Carlton Hill (near Wyndham), in 1909 for a total of £165,000. In 1940 the company secured the lease of Walgra (situated near Urandangie) from the Scottish Australian Company. These northern stations were operated through Bovril's Perth office, but after a series of poor returns in the early 1940s it was decided to engage the Australian Mercantile Land and Finance Company (AML&F) to take over the general management of the Bovril properties. The connection between Bovril and AML&F was strengthened by the fact that Lord Luke, Bovril's Chairman, was also on the London Board of Directors of the Finance Company from 1949 to 1969.

William L Buckland, a Melbourne businessman, purchased the property in March 1955. The purchasing company was named Northern Australia Estates Ltd and the station was managed by Buckland through his Melbourne based business, Managers and Agents Pty Ltd. Buckland sold the property to L J Hooker Investments Corporation in 1960 and they in turn sold it to Peter Sherwin Ltd in August 1984.

The records

There are five deposits in the collections of the Archives of Business and Labour that contain relevant material for the study of the history of Victoria River Downs:

- Deposit 2 – Goldsbrough Mort & Co. Ltd;
- Deposit 42 – Bovril Australian Estates (1941-55);
- Deposit 87 (1909-61) and 119 (1900-70) – Victoria River Downs Station; and
- Deposit 162 – Australian Mercantile Land and Finance Company.

The following is a brief description of the records in these deposits with highlights of particular series.

The main administrative series in Deposit 2 of Goldsbrough Mort & Co. Ltd contain numerous references to the negotiations with Fisher and Lyons. Such series include minutes of the Melbourne Board of Directors 1881-93 (2/40), the series of private and official letters despatched by the General Manager, Chairman and Secretary 1886-1913 (2/28A Vols. 2 and 3), and letters sent to the London Board by the General Manager 1878-92 and 1894-97 (2/29).

While the Goldsbrough Mort records are excellent for information on the financial decline of Fisher and Lyons and the company takeover, they do not provide much information on the general administration of the property. The most illuminating record that provides an overview of the property to be found in Goldsbrough records is a report written by R W Watson in March 1899 following an inspection of the station. Comments are made on the geographic position of the station as well as stock-carrying potential, improvements, transport problems, 'station natives' and general problems in administering the property (2/307/1).

Deposit 42 consists of records created by Bovril Australian Estates. There is no one series in this deposit that gives a continual overview of the running of the station, however, a number of series provide interesting 'micro views' of particular aspects of station management. One such series is a group of returns of station Aboriginals prepared under the *Aboriginal Ordinance 1918-33* for the period 1946 to 1949. Information on these returns includes name of employee, tribe, sex, age, work performed, date of commencement, date of termination

and name, sex, age and relationship of dependents. Mention is also made of Aboriginal pensioners being fed (42/14).

A series of correspondence with the Northern Territory Pastoral Lessees' Association dated January 1947 relates to a conference held in Alice Springs to determine the conditions of employment of native labour within the pastoral industry in the Northern Territory, as agreed between the Pastoral Associations and the Northern Territory Administration. Also included in this series is a dietary survey of Aboriginals in the Northern Territory prepared by Winifred Wilson from the Commonwealth Department of Health (42/14).

Deposit 87 consists of records created by Victoria Downs' station managers and contains another important series for studying Aboriginal workers. It is a wages/rations ledger covering the years 1932-44 and 1949-50 (87/5/1-3). There are three volumes. The two volumes for the period 1932-44 contain printed forms with space provided for the European name of the worker, Aboriginal name, mother and father's name, nature of employment, camp employed at, year born, tribe, dependents and companions. Not all of these details are always given. The ledger entries include wages, advances, monies paid into the Aboriginal Fund and a record of what stores were issued.

The largest series of financial records can be found in Deposit 87. These consist of journals 1909-43 and 1957-61, 19 volumes (87/2-3), and ledgers 1909-59, 17 volumes (87/4).

There are a number of series of correspondence between the various station managers and owners, and in respect of the Bovril period, the pastoral managers of AML&F. These series cover the periods 1927-47, 1953-55 and 1958-60 (87/8, 87/17, 119/4-7 and 119/13-14). These generally provide an excellent picture of station life detailing day-to-day problems encountered and discussions of the future.

Recent processing work on the records of Australian Mercantile Land and Finance Company in Deposit 162 has brought to light a number of series relating to the company's management of the station. A series of correspondence between the General Manager for Australia and Lord Luke (August 1943–December 1948, January–December 1950, and May 1953–December 1956 (162/742/747)) contains extremely detailed comments on the management of the property and its future. Lord Luke visited Australia in 1948 and this series contains notes prepared on his impressions of Australia and a detailed report on his visit. His notes cover many general topics such as the necessity for Australia to populate by immigration, industrial relations, the future of primary and secondary industries, the Commonwealth and Empire and the British High Commission. His official report comments on meetings he had with various state and federal ministers regarding improvements planned by Bovril to be carried out on Victoria River Downs and the construction of the Bovril meatworks at Katherine. This series of correspondence also details Bovril's efforts to renew the leases held on the property.

Deposit 162 also contains a series of correspondence between the General Manager for Australia of AML&F and William Buckland dating from February 1953 to August 1960 (162/735-741). Early letters in this series document negotiations for the sale of the Bovril properties to Buckland.

Edited November 2001