

people place heritage

CONTEXT

HISTORY OF WILD HORSES IN THE BARMAH NATIONAL PARK

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Prepared for
Parks Victoria



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Report Register

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report comprises the historical research component of the broader study undertaken by Context Pty Ltd on behalf of Parks Victoria into the community heritage values of the wild horses in the Barmah National Park, North East Victoria between September 2013 and May 2014.

The broader project is seen by Parks Victoria as one task to inform the development of a long term strategy for the management of wild horses in the park. The purpose of that strategy is to fulfil Parks Victoria's responsibilities to control exotic fauna under the *National Parks Act 1975*.

Parks Victoria has announced that a Barmah Horse Advisory Committee has been established to inform the development of a Barmah Horse Management Strategy to remove all horses from the Park. Parks Victoria will be seeking community views in the future about the strategy and how it should be managed.

Within this context, Parks Victoria recognises that the wild horses in Barmah National Park are an important part of the landscape and this research project sought to capture a range of personal stories and connections to the wild horses. This project aims to provide a better understanding of the history of the horses in the Barmah National Park

The research scope does not cover the natural and cultural values attributed to the National Park nor the Aboriginal cultural heritage linked to the local land and people.

This report thus does not reflect the ideas or opinions of the Yorta Yorta Nation Aboriginal Corporation. It is focussed on an animal (the horse) that did not live on Yorta Yorta Country prior to European settlement. Given this, this historical research recognises that Aboriginal people have ongoing connections to this land.

The authors nor Parks Victoria do not seek to reflect or represent the significant Aboriginal cultural heritage views of the Barmah National Park.

The findings of this historical research is that the majority of the current population of wild horses within the National Park may be traced to the those left in the forest by the trotting breeder and trainer H. Adams who was not able to round up all of his horses after the last muster took place in 1952. Before that time, other wild horse populations have existed in the forest for different reasons. For example the earliest mobs most probably originated as domestic horses that escaped into the forest from overlanders and colonists. Wild horse populations later may have existed due to the agistment of horses by soldiers going off to wars – but these horses were most probably not left to roam wild after the war, but collected due to their ongoing value. There is no evidence that war horses (in this document, 'war horse' refers to those used to fight, or associated with defending Australia in wars) formed the wild horse population in the Barmah, remembering that only one horse was brought back to Australia from WW1 and horses were not used in WW2 combat. However it is understood that some surplus horses were released into the Barmah Forest during the post WW2 period when technological advances such as motorisation rendered them less valuable as beasts of burden - when considering the cost of capturing and homing them (some of these horses may also relate to the current population). While it was also common practice to put working horses on agistment in the forest after the harvest in summer, these horses were generally geldings and mares, and while they were valuable, were then brought back to the farm.

No documentary evidence was found in the course of this historical research for a continuing and significant 'wild' population in the Barmah National Park that can be traced back to colonial or war times. Rather there have been different mobs living in the forest over time. The current population seems to be a mixture of ponies, trotters and Clydesdales, principally originating from H. Adams' horses released during the mid 20th Century, possibly interbred with horses that had may have survived undetected or uncaptured from earlier times. It is highly doubtful whether there can ever be absolute certainty over the origins of every wild horse in the area.

1 METHODOLOGY

This history was researched and written based on historical research encompassing a number of sources and archives. Searches and requests for information on ‘wild horses’, ‘brumbies’, ‘horses’ and the ‘Barmah’ forest were carried out at the following collections:

- State Library of Victoria
- Prahran Mechanics Institute Victorian Local History Library
- Public Records Office of Victoria
- National Library of Australia
- TROVE National Library of Australia Newspaper Search
- Nathalia Historical Society (by phone)

Research draws on a number of sources discovered in this process, including collections of oral history, local histories, and newspaper reports. A number of submissions, particularly from Wally Cooper and Rod Power, were provided by Parks Victoria. The author also had access to the feedback from the community consultation online survey, which was scanned for historical information about the origins of the wild horse population.

Phone interviews were also sought from a number of people on a list provided by Parks Victoria. Of these, three were of significant use for the writing of the history in terms of demonstrable knowledge about the history of the wild horse population. The history also drew on previous research for Parks Victoria in the land use history of the River Red Gum forests, which included a recorded interview with former forest researcher Barry Dexter.

2 HISTORY

2.1 Contextual history

The Barmah Forest is the traditional land of the Yorta Yorta people, whose ancestors managed the land and its resources according to traditional law with its origins in generations of custodianship and explained through dreamtime stories that imbued the landscape with spiritual meaning. The floodplains were abundant with food and resources both for consumption and for trade with neighbouring peoples. Aboriginal people employed firestick farming, hunted fish and game, harvested plants, and left indelible marks on the landscape through thousands of years of occupation in middens, mounds and burials.

From the 1840s, colonists imported exotic animals, plants and diseases that upset the traditional patterns of land use. Horses were among these animals. Colonists came particularly from Britain, which claimed the continent of Australia, and their interests in the land was grounded in a utilitarian view arising from a cultural and religious position that saw the land as valuable only in terms of its utility and value as an economic resource for human exploitation.

Pastoralists sought to feed the hunger of industrial Britain for cheap raw materials such as wool for spinning. The River Red Gum forests attracted timber millers for the same reason – its extraction was cheap and fed the demand of the imperial market, particularly for the construction of railways in India in the nineteenth century. Australia generally, despite its distance, provided such profit chiefly because the price of resource extraction was so cheap and unregulated. These resources were effectively stolen from Traditional Owners, who were never paid for the loss of their traditional lands and whose very ownership was not recognised.

The colonial state too, because it never had to pay for the occupation of the land, could afford to give its newly acquired resources away cheaply. As an oligarchic state serving the interests of a landed class and imperial masters whose markets they served, colonial governments took little interest in questions of long term conservation of its resources or of proper royalties for their extraction. Timber reserves were established, for example at Barmah in 1869, however extraction was poorly regulated and absurdly cheap, with a payment by licence rather than royalties. Professional administrators and growing numbers of colonists who made a home out of Australia nonetheless agitated for a change in policy – exemplified by the struggles of the first Conservator of Forests, George Perrin, and the seminal report *Red Gum* (1890), which aimed at the conservation and regulation of forest resources. The eventual result of such movements was the regime of land use established under the Forests Department (1907) and its various incarnations including the Forests Commission (1918). In the twentieth century therefore land use of the Barmah Forest, as a State Forest, changed from one of largely unregulated exploitation, to one of active management, though with a continuing focus on the continuation of these extractive resource industries.

In the post-war era, recreational use of the forest increased among the broader public. Public attitudes towards the environment, particularly its remnant ‘natural’ areas, changed alongside growing appreciation of native flora and fauna and interest in preservation of such places. The place of land uses such as grazing became political issues, and led to further research and management strategies. The Land Conservation Council recommendations for the Murray Valley Study Area 1985-86 recommended two sections of state parks and some reference areas in the Barmah Forest, with provision for ongoing timber harvesting under certain conditions. This was a period of balancing interests between the extractive industries and the new demands of natural preservation.

At the same time, the Yorta Yorta’s continuing struggle for land rights and cultural recognition gained greater public recognition within the context of a nation-wide movement and reassessment of Australia’s colonial history and conquest. Yorta Yorta applied for Native Title under the Native Title Act (1993), which set particularly high hurdles for proving continuous occupation and traditional land use. While this legal avenue for redress met with

disappointment in 1998, the Victorian government recognized Yorta Yorta's continuing cultural connection with the land through the 2004 Co-operative Management Agreement.

As a result of the VEAC (2006) investigation, the Barmah Forest was declared a national park by the state government in 2009, explicitly to protect the River Red Gum forest area and its associated habitats and natural values. This marked a definitive shift in land use away from extractive resources to preservation. The new balance in land use was thus to be struck between the interests of such preservation and the rights of people for access for recreation, appreciation and cultural practices. Further debate has also sought to understand how best to preserve the natural values prized by the nation – for example through active or passive management strategies – given that the 'natural' environment of the forests and wetlands have been so radically altered over time by human influences. Living with natural processes such as flood and fire has also triggered debate about the role of fire and water in the ecosystem and how this can be properly managed to allow for both conservation and public safety. It is remarkable how land use in the area is gradually shifting away from the colonial viewpoint of exploitation and returning to one of custodianship as Australians adapt socially and spiritually to the continent adopted so violently by so many of their forebears, though this process is far from complete nor fully understood. The park is an embodiment of this process of (re)orientation towards the Australian continent.

2.2 Australian colonisation and the legend of the wild Brumbies

Horses in general were imported into the Australian environment by British colonization. They were not generally released into the wild on purpose, however, and by far the majority of horses were those thoroughly domesticated for use in transportation and agriculture. Nonetheless, the wild horse, whether it escaped or bred in the 'wild', became one of the symbols of the wilderness associated with 'the bush' by its colonizing people. As local Numurkah councilor W.T. Maloney reminisced of the colonial days in 1916:

Then we had Nature. The bush in its primal state, where wild horses, kangaroos, emus and wild game abounded. Now the bush has gone, and with it the wild horse and the kangaroo, and in their place cultivated fields and substantial homesteads and roads and bridges and all the etceteras of civilized life. (Numurkah Leader, 1 September 1916)

Iconic horses of this 'bush legend' include those that ran in the hills, particularly the Snowy Mountains made famous in Banjo Patterson's *Man from Snowy River*. Wild horses became known as 'brumbies' (according to the Oxford Dictionary, in Australia 'Brumby' refers to a wild or unbroken horse). This legend was a particularly powerful influence in Australian folklore and a standard part of the national literary curriculum that gave Australians some sense of a distinctive literary culture and national identity compared to the standard British fare. This helps explain the interest in wild horses more broadly as part of this national mythology. It was an image of the Australian bush that was also used to promote Australia to visitors, as evident in Sydney's *World News* of 2 April 1955:

Wild horses are to be found in many parts of Australia, but it is doubtful if any of these brumbies are as wild as the horses to be found in the isolated Suggan Buggan valley, about the head of the Snowy River country. To see these horses galloping up the steep slopes when the snow has melted on the Australian Alps reminds one of Banjo Paterson's Man From Snowy River. It has been claimed that these horses are descendants of horses that were left on Southern Monaro and the far south coast of NSW when Benjamin Boyd failed in his enterprise and left Twofold Bay never to be seen again. As this is over 110 years ago it is safe to assume that other horses besides those of Boyd had something to do with the breeding of these brumbies. The brumbies feed on the high plains during the summer months, and when the snow begins to fall they move down into the valleys. Benjamin Boyd left many animals behind when he left Twofold Bay, including the horses, some small ponies, dogs, goats, sheep and cattle, and many of them went wild in the rough country in the south-eastern corner of NSW.

Compared to those of the Snowy Mountains, the wild horses in the Barmah Forest were not so famous as to leave such a mark on the national imagination. While the wild horses of the Barmah Forest are undoubtedly of different origin to those of the high country, the nostalgia

for the bush and the ideas of ‘wilderness’ and ‘freedom’ nonetheless remain potent influences when thinking about their social meaning. Many people, when thinking about the social and historical meaning of the Barma horses, intuitively make this connection between one set of wild horses and the other.

2.3 Releasing horses into the Barma Forest

Unlike the high country horses, the first wild horses of the Barma Forest were those that would have escaped from overlanders and colonists. The first horses to pass through the area were most likely those which belonged to the pastoralists in the 1840s, such as Edward Curr who came to the Barma Forest looking for summer grasses for their sheep (Fahey 1988:11). Domestic horses were an important component of colonization, and early populations of ‘wild’ horses were a byproduct of that colonization. While horses periodically escaped into the forest, there is no evidence for a continuing and significant ‘wild’ population in the Barma National Park that can be traced back to colonial times, rather there have been different mobs living in the forest over time.



Figure 1: A lost horse notice in the Nathalia Herald 7 December 1918.

Notable local historian Tim Mannion and former forester Barry Dexter have argued that the current population of wild horses may be traced back to the release of surplus horses into the Barma Forest in the Postwar (WW2) period when technological advances such as motorisation rendered them less valuable as beasts of burden.

Earlier populations may have existed due to the agistment or purposeful release of horses by soldiers going off to wars (World War I and World War II), but Mannion argues that these horses were not left to roam wild after either war but were collected due to their ongoing value. Rather, it was their replacement by motorized vehicles after World War II that made it less profitable to recapture them. Furthermore, as Howie Marshall (a long term resident of Nathalia) related, while it was common practice to put working horses on agistment in the forest after the harvest in summer, these horses were generally geldings and mares, and while they were valuable, were then brought back to the farm.



Figure 2: *Overlanding with horses, published in Australasian Sketcher September 5, 1889.*
 Source: State Library of Victoria.

There were several major attempts to round up the wild horses in the Barmah Forest in the late 1940s. That in 1949 was particularly successful due to the flooding that year (see the 'Capturing Horses' section of this history).

There is strong evidence to suggest the horses in the Barmah Forest mostly originate from H. Adams trotting horse breeder who kept his breeding horses in the forest.

Rod Power (2007) recalled that by 1954, in Barmah Forest:

...the horse population was down under 20 horses all branded and all owned by a Mr Horace Adams and there were only about five rogue horses amongst them which made them very hard to muster. He tried for a fortnight to muster them and when he could not he wiped his hands of them.

This story is corroborated by news reports of H. Adams mustering for trotters in the Barmah Forest around this time, as well as the *Riverine Herald* reports of the successful 1949 removal of up to half the horses.

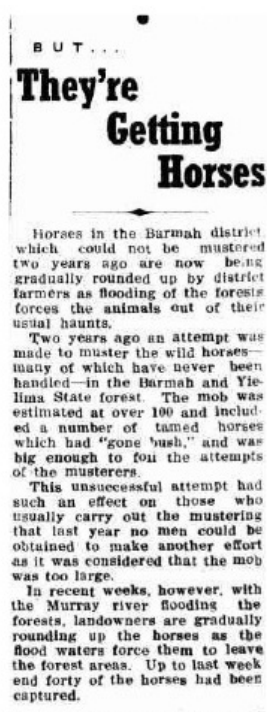


Figure 3: *Riverine Herald, 2 December 1949.*

Howie Marshall owned horses in the forest in the 1940s-50s. He corroborated the story that the horses in the Barmah Forest mostly originate from H. Adams trotting horse breeder who kept his breeding horses in the forest. Marshall also highlighted that most horses in the forest were actually owned and agisted there, however most of these work horses were gelded and so wouldn't form new populations. Rather, it was Adams, who had stallions for breeding, who contributed to the creation of the 'wild' mobs after 1952, when the last muster took place and Adams was not able to round up all of his horses.

By the 1970s there were once more reports of wild horses in the Barmah Forest, highlighted due to the distress caused by flooding in the area (see the 'Rescuing Horses' section of this history).

2.4 Associating horses with stock and timber industries

The wild horses in the Barmah National Park were a byproduct of human activities, and as such have come to be associated by many with those activities, as if these horses were, in a way, survivors of this earlier era. Thus the horses evoke not only appreciation for their own sake, but also for some, a certain nostalgia for a previous era in the forest's history.

From the early 1920s, sleeper hewing was the second major source of revenue in the Barmah Forest (Fahey 1988:46), though this declined after the Second World War. From 1920 to 1981, agistment of cattle was the third major revenue stream of the Barmah Forest (Fahey 1988:48), the first revenue stream being, of course, the River Red Gum timber trade.

Herdsmen, employed by the Forest Department and then the Commission, controlled the agistment of cattle (Fahey 1988:48). These herdsmen traditionally herded cattle on horseback and as such became a symbol of the grazing activity of the Barmah Forest centered on the three muster yards of: Barmah, Cherry-tree and Mannion's yards. By the postwar period however, much of the "...transport of men, cattle, dogs and equipment to removed parts of the forest..." was by truck, that "...also reduced the time and labour involved in the muster". By the late 1950s only a dozen or so men were employed in the muster for a week in May (Fahey 1988:48-9). The story of the grazing industry was nonetheless one of steady declines over an extended period, with 69 graziers placing 4000 cattle in the Common in 1969/70, declining to just 27 owners agisting 696 cattle in 1983/4 (Fahey 1988:50). Farmers worked with horses on a regular basis and horsepower features as part of the oral history of the area, *Barmah in our blood* (Teese & Wright 2008:22, 82).

Tim and Maureen Mannion (Teese & Wright 2008:82) recalled domestic horses used in the Barmah Forest:

We never hauled logs ourselves, but fellows that hauled them, of course, didn't breed their own horses and they were always looking for horses. So all our young horses got broken in for log buggies, because the horses were harnessed two by two by two in the log buggy ... We always had at least 12 working horses and the mares'd be breeding ... They were big heavy Clydesdales.

[The domestic horses mainly grazed] on the Moira grass down along the Tongalong, but they also liked the sweet grass on the plain away from the timber. So no matter whose job it was to go find the horses well, he had to go and look at the places where he thought they'd be. If they weren't where he thought they'd be, he'd have to look somewhere else. They mostly stayed together and as soon as they saw you they knew what was wanted and they'd head home.

The Mannions recalled that domestic horses were different to the wild population:

The teamster's horses never had any connection with the brumby population. The brumbies started from people agisting horses on the forest. When the war started a lot of fellas who had horses, and even fellas who only had a hack or something, went away in the army in World War II, they'd put their horse out in the forest when they went away.

They had a similar thing happen in WW1, but then they got control of them again and they didn't breed up. Then in WWII, when it was drought years, the farmers that had horses out there didn't want them home and feed got pretty scarce out there. A couple of enterprising fellas put a couple of stallions out there to try and improve the type of breed. So that was the big numbers build up during that wartime and when the war was over and fellas come home again they didn't want their horses. [...] They wanted motorized vehicles and so they didn't really care if they never got their horses back ... So the horses out in the forest eventually became a mixture of ponies, trotters and Clydesdales.

The people used to come catching them, well the ones that weren't in very good condition were the ones they caught so that got rid of them.

2.5 Capturing horses

While horses were released or escaped into the Barmah forest, others engaged in shooting or capturing them. This was a theme that went back to colonial times, when horses were sometimes shot for sport or captured to resupply domestic stock for transportation or racing.

In the twentieth century in the Barmah Forest, wild horses were often caught for the purposes of domestication. Mick Caldwell of Nathalia remembered catching these horses (Teese & Wright 2008:178), and that it was "...easy ... if you were strong enough":

Tom [Galloway] would go about his cattle husbandry for a bit and then one day he came back and told us that the next day he'd be finding brumbies for us to chase and try to catch. We had a map, but we didn't have a compass and he'd tell us where the brumbies were and basically send us off after them. The first year I think we caught three brumby foals, probably about six months old. [...] It was easy to catch brumbies with Tom Galloway if you were strong enough. All we'd do is chase them and get alongside and grab them by the tail. They you'd slow your horse down to almost a walk. When your horse got his breath, you'd give him a kick in the ribs and make him take off and you'd just tip the brumby on its back. Then you'd jump off and grab it and hold it for five minutes and by then its mother and the mob it had run with, would be gone. The foal would then just stop with your horse.

Gerry Moor of Barmah also remembered catching Brumbies as a child (Teese & Wright 2008:390):

Father would send Ray and I out looking for cattle and we'd strike a mob of brumbies and bring home brumbies. Quite often we got into strife for that. We'd catch them when they were about 12 months old and bring them home and make backs of them. But it got to the stage where you couldn't catch them, it was impossible to yard them. [...] I think we caught about 20 in three months.

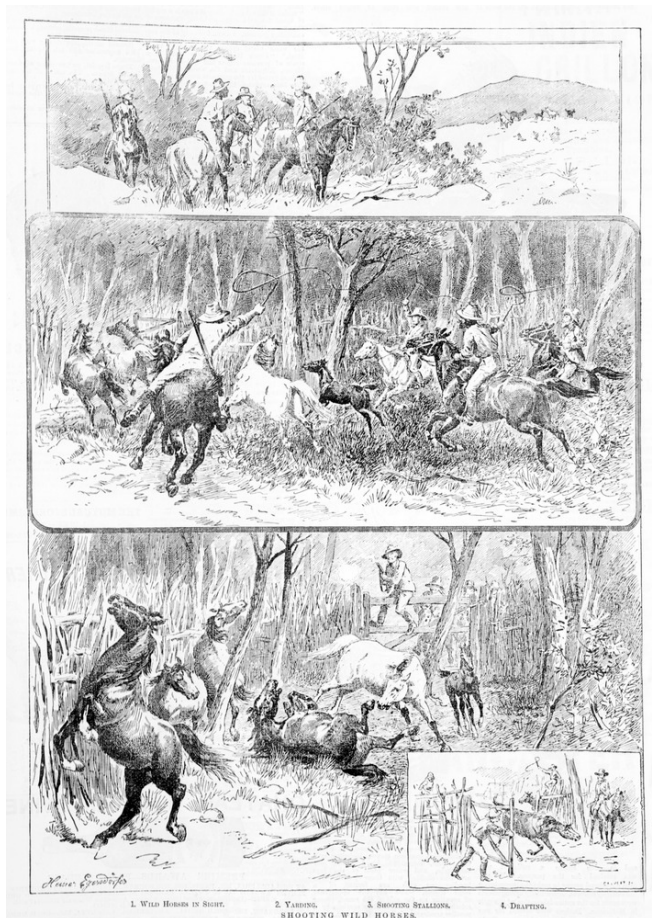


Figure 4 Capturing and shooting wild horses in colonial Victoria published in *Australian Illustrated News* 9 November 1889. Source: State Library of Victoria.

Noel and Lyn Eyre of Bearii got just one of their trotting horses from the "...Brumby mob out of the forest ... he was called Step Lightly. He was a chestnut horse and we got him out of a mare off the bush". Step Lightly won six or seven races at Echuca, Shepparton and Bendigo (Teese & Wright 2008:296). Another horse out of the Barmah Forest to win races was Barmah's Gift, which was rescued from being dinner for a lion at Melbourne Zoo by a Melbourne horse dealer (*Riverine Herald* 19 April 1954). The *Riverine Herald* reported at that time that:

In the noted Barmah muster those horses which can be mustered from the Barmah Common are often offered for auction by Mr H. Adams, local breeder. Some are well bred, some are brumbies ... Mr Adams recommends buyers to the Barmah muster in a few weeks time stating that there are plenty of other good trotters on the Common – if they can be caught for the muster.

2.6 Concern for horse welfare

Animals in the Barmah National Park are naturally susceptible to the vicissitudes of nature, among them fires, droughts and floods. The struggle of the animals has also evoked sympathy from time to time. The *Rochester Express* reported on 7 May 1915 on:

...harrowing sights of dead and dying stock ... to be seen on the Barmah Common". [There], ...a large number of horses has been left to starve on ground from which all vestige of feed has disappeared. Some are down on barren waste, patiently awaiting relief in death. Young horses, weakened by starvation, in their dying struggles have made circular trenches around them in attempts to regain their feet.

In the 1970s there were reports of wild horses in the Barmah Forest due to the distress caused by flooding in the area. In 1970, 400 bales of hay and 70 bags of oats were airdropped onto an island in the Barmah Forest where starving kangaroos, emus and horses were trapped (*Canberra Times*, 6 October 1970).

2.7 Debates over introduced animals in the forest

As long as there have been horses in the forest, there have been attempts to remove them for one purpose or another. Among these were concerns over their impact on the timber trade, and later over environmental degradation, as well as humanitarian concerns about their condition.

The presence of European animals in the Barmah Forest has been controversial since the first Conservator of Forests for Victoria, George Perrin (appointed in 1888) sought to control grazing, principally of cattle, in state forests. He became convinced that grazing in the forests was detrimental to their regeneration, and conflicted with the interests of foresters (Fahey 1988:36).

One major attempt to remove the horses from the Forest took place in 1949, as the *Riverine Herald* reported (refer to Figure 3 in the 'Releasing horses into the Barmah Forest' section of this history for full details).

2.8 The horses and war

There have been several persistent myths concerning the horses and their connection to soldiers who returned or did not return from wars, particularly the 'Light Horsemen' of the First World War. Horses were not used in combat in the Second World War. It should be noted that, "At the end of the First World War Australians had 13,000 surplus horses which could not be returned home for quarantine reasons" (Australian War Memorial). Only one horse returned from the First World War (Coulthard-Clark 2002, Australian War Memorial). It should be pointed out that none of the wild horses in the Barmah National Park can thus be said to be descended from horses that fought in the war.

Furthermore, the breed of horses used by the army was a distinct breed of Walers (Australian War Memorial, Yarwood 1989). The Waler is an Australian breed of riding horse that developed from the horses that were brought to the Australian colonies in the 19th century.

The name comes from their early breeding origins in New South Wales; they were originally known as New South Walers. Walers were Australian stock horses that happened to be available in the time of war for military use by mounted troops. There is no evidence to suggest wild horses in Barmah Forest were used for military use or were Walers. According to wild horse expert Brian Hampson of the University of Queensland, “All genetic studies performed in Australia and NZ have found no unique genetic markers in Brumbies that would distinguish them from cross breed domestic horses.” No genetic test results specific to the Barmah horses have been found in the process of this investigation.

There has also been some suggestion that the horses were the descendants of workhorses left in the forest by servicemen who never returned from either the First World War or Second World Wars, depending on the version of the tale. This is likely to be a legend. Another story that is told is that “...the horses got to be in the forest when they were left by returned soldiers, who came back from war and had nowhere to keep them” (Cooper 2012).

While it cannot be discounted that a few servicemen’s horses may have been agisted and then left wandering the forest, this account contradicts with Power, Mannion and Dexter (refer to the ‘Australian colonization and the legend of the wild Brumbies’ section of this history) as well as with the numbers of horses remaining in the forest that were reported in the press in the 1940s. Most servicemen had families and farms in the area, and as horses were valuable, it is to these that the horses would have been given or returned. Again, many workhorses would have been gelded and are unlikely to have bred. Rather, it is the trotting and breeding story that better accounts for the rise of the current wild horse population in the forest in the post-war era.

2.9 Conclusion

The most likely story, corroborated by a range of sources including oral history and newspaper reports at the time, suggests that H. Adams trotting and horse trainer was the major contributor to the post-war population of wild horses in the forest that can be seen today. The history of the horses is thus related to the trotting and horse breeding industry of the local area in the 1940s and until the final muster in 1952. This history found no documentary evidence of a significant wild horse population in the Barmah forest prior to the release of the Adams stock in 1952.

As this brief history also points out, there is a range of other associations that may contribute to the social meaning of the horses to local people besides their historical lineage, as contested as that may be. Among these, are the memories associated by local people of seeing the horses in the Barmah Forest within the context of their occupation and use of the forest.

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