



STOCKYARDS AND SADDLES

A STORY OF GIBB RIVER STATION

21 JULY – 8 DECEMBER 2018

A BERNDT MUSEUM EXHIBITION
AT THE LAWRENCE WILSON ART GALLERY



Branding at Gibb yards – Reggie with lasso out of green hide rope. Left-Right: Fred, Les, Unknown, Reggie, Unknown, Colin.
 Reproduction of a colour photo © Colin Russ



Reggie riding a buck-jumper, breaking in the horses.
 Reproduction of a colour photo © Colin Russ



Lunch break during the muster. Left-Right: Nugget, Fred, Jerry, Frank, Archie, Alfie.
 Reproduction of a colour photo © Colin Russ c1960-70



Topsy and Pauline next to the copper boiler at the wash room.
 Reproduction of a colour photo © Colin Russ



Heading off on the Fergie tractor. Left-Right: Archie, Jerry, Leslie, Chapman, Pompey, Alfie.
Reproduction of a colour photo © Colin Russ

STOCKYARDS AND SADDLES

Stockyards and Saddles: A Story of Gibb River Station is an exhibition that explores the lives of those living and working on the remote cattle station of Gibb River in the East Kimberley region. The images centre on the Russ family and a close knit community of Aboriginal stockmen and women from the early 1900s until the 1980s. It sets the scene for new narratives around remote station life that revisits history both in terms of general stereotypes of station experiences that refer to harsh conditions and mistreatment, by adding another dimension. As a relational kinship between a particular cohort of people living in an extremely remote location which then adds to our national truth telling beyond genealogical bonds. Here we see an opportunity to advocate for a shared experience between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, from the frontier to contemporary Australia, that has as much place in our national discourse as all the other stories known and unknown today.

Photography is a practice of capturing images that are durable and over time these images move from being of personal significance to representing something of the nation's story. They are a form of memorabilia that is often discarded until needed, either a loss of a loved-one or when occasion to reminisce comes about. Although stories relating to life on cattle stations are prominent in literary terms, they do little to capture the nuanced visual stimulus like a photographic image. Clothing styles, events, motor vehicles, and human behaviours can add completely new ideas for contemplation to what is often forgotten knowledge. The images on show in *Stockyards and Saddles* are derived from both private and public

collections, demonstrating the importance of photographs as a social, historical and storytelling tools. Taking photographs of people within their natural surroundings requires trust between the photographer and the individual, through a series of valuable exchanges, conversation and common activity often over time and very much within a shared environment.

Cattle stations are almost parallel to large American ranches with their homesteads, stockyards and outbuildings. Over a hundred years ago, they were far less sophisticated and relied on a lot of hard labour including for example cutting lumber for stockyards or flattening out airstrips by hand. Fred A. Russ was born in 1890 and came to the Kimberley from NSW with his father Samuel at around 7 years of age. Sam had managed to get a job at Carlton Station, a property owned at the time by the Duracks' just near Kununurra. Later on Sam moved to Meda Station just 45km outside of Derby. His son, Fred following in his father's footsteps would himself take to stock work after leaving school and found work at places like Go Go Station, Oobagooma and Mount Barnett. The country was for Europeans, untenable to some extent. Large mountainous ranges like the King Leopold and Phillips were only one part of the barrier to accessing this part of the world, with the mighty Fitzroy River and its tributaries like the Hann River being another barrier requiring multiple crossings before the building of the Gibb River Road in the late 1960s.

When Fred A. Russ first reached Mount Barnett Station around 1910, where he worked as manager for around nine years, there



Working out near the airstrip – getting the billy ready for smoko (afternoon tea). Left-Right: Archie in back, Pompy, Leslie, Alfie, Jerry.
 Reproduction of a colour photo © Colin Russ

are stories of him taking to hiding under the bed to avoid the threat of being speared before day break. Such activities gave Fred purpose for building friendships with the local Aboriginal people rather than retaliation, and over time he learnt to work with the local Ngarinyin community. His Box Brownie captured some of the only images of Mount Barnett at that time, and later through a close connection to an Aboriginal woman called Mary Doomayulla, Fred's first child June was born in 1932. Though relatively small to other properties in the Kimberley, Gibb River Station was up and running through the work of Dave Rust who had the original lease before Fred took it over with a business partner in around 1921. By the late 1930s, Fred had settled into life at Gibb River and had taken a wife, Laura Booty, who had been removed from her father at Lamboo Station and taken to Beagle Bay Mission in accordance to policy on Aboriginal people at the time. The marriage required permission of course from the Native Welfare Department who first rejected the proposal. Together they would have an additional nine children (one lost due to illness as a toddler), and from there the homestead became an oasis with gardens, tennis court and music. Although the impact of government policies prevailed and if it wasn't for Fred's relationships his eldest daughter June may have been forcefully removed as well. By the 1960s when things between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people became seriously political, the Gibb community continued on as usual. When people were walking off Wave Hill, the Gibb people were still mustering cattle, which gave rise to a fundamental question during the development of this exhibition:

What was going on that was different at Gibb River to everywhere else?

We hope that through the process of looking at each image, by considering what activities and exchange is taking place, and the expression of the individuals involved, that the audience will consider for themselves what to make of the times, the people and place; because we think that the relationships are what makes these photographs so valuable today.

This project came about because at the time of creating the show, access was closed to the museum's collection store. In late 2017, we were fortunate to receive some much needed Capital Works funding from University of Western Australia which would see our collections out-of-action, as we rehoused and transferred items into conservation grade storage. The main impact was on the collection store itself which required a complete restructure to enable us to install a painting racking system. The idea of a photographic exhibition came about through the early work we did in the Archive when we found newspaper clippings of the Russ brothers from the early 1970s. The museum decided that the show should be a response to the idea of private photographic archives as value creators to our national history.

Dr Vanessa Russ
 Associate Director, Berndt Museum of Anthropology



Taking cattle to branding yard. Left-Right: Alfie, Frank, Fred, Archie, Chapman.
Reproduction of a colour photo © Colin Russ



Fishing at Barnett Gorge, one of the deepest subterranean waterways in the Kimberley. Left-Right: Margaret, Maggie, Laurel, Leslie, Kitty.
Reproduction of a colour photo © Colin Russ



Riding the rodeo at Gibb, just for fun.
Reproduction of a colour photo © Colin Russ



Colin out catching bulls with Joe Napier.
Reproduction of a colour photo © Colin Russ

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Thanks also to Sylvia Russ and Fred C. Russ for loaning photographs for the show.

We would like to thank Leslie Russ, Colin Russ, Sylvia Russ, Fred C. Russ, Beverley Russ and Bernie Russ for taking the time to help select images, to unpack the historical meaning behind each and for allowing us into your lives.

We would like to acknowledge and thank the Western Australian Museum, in particular the Department of Anthropology and Archaeology for providing access to Ian Crawford's original negatives for us to scan and print for exhibition.

We would like to acknowledge and thank the State Library of Western Australia for allowing us to reproduce a number of images.

We would also like to acknowledge Andreas and Catherine Lommel who, following their visit to Gibb River in 1955, posted an album of photographs to the family.

We would like to acknowledge the Ngallagunda community including elders Alfie and Nancy White.

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