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C. E. Prell Had Sheep And Pasture Triumphs

At Gundowringa

RECALLING THE PIONEERS

No. 46—Charles Ernest Prell

By James Jervis

Charles Ernest Prell was not a pioneer pastoralist, but he was the pioneer of soil-conservation in his Goulburn district, and his success has given him a permanent place in the history of Australian farming.

Dr. Johnson once said that the man who made two blades of grass grow where there was only one before was worth more than the whole race of politicians. This is exactly what C. E. Prell set out to do.

Charles Prell was the fourth son of F. W. Prell, a Hamburg merchant who came to Melbourne in 1853.

Charles was born at St. Kilda on August 15, 1865.

He was educated at the Hawthorn Grammar School, Melbourne, and then became a jackeroo on the Peak Downs Station in Queensland.

In 1888 Prell's father purchased Richmond Downs Station, between Hughenden and Cloncurry, a 1500-square-mile property carrying 51,000 head of cattle.

Waterless Property

Prell married Caroline Ivy Chave in 1896 and three years later decided to purchase a property on his own account.

Savannah Downs, about 100 miles south of Normanton, was about 2000 square miles in area. A low figure was asked because it was almost waterless.

Prell examined the station and concluded he could obtain water by boring.

The son was appointed manager of his father's newly acquired holding, where, in addition to rear-

CHARLES ERNEST PRELL
Early Pasture Improver

ing cattle, horses were bred for the Indian army.

The representative of the bank which sold Savannah Downs remarked to Prell when the deal was concluded:

"I wish you luck with it, Mr. Prell, it has been nothing but a sink to us."

The new owner set to work to locate the precious water. After some failures two bores were successful.

Finding water led to the marketing of fat cattle, and the owner reaped a rich return.

Back To N.S.W.

Value of Savannah Downs was boosted, and Prell was able to dispose of it at a very profitable figure six years after it had been purchased.

Prell in 1905 bought Gundowringa in the Goulburn district — about 4500 acres.

During the following 15 years he began his notable experiments with soils.

When Prell bought Gundowringa, the rabbit was just beginning to become a pest, so he began to net boundaries. But the pests reached the estate before the netting was completed, and he set to work to exterminate them by digging.

During a trip to England and France some years after he had bought Gundowringa, Prell saw what had been done by English and European farmers in improving their land. After returning, he set to work on pasture improvement. The property was divided into sections for annual improvements. Forty men were employed on this.

After the land was cleared a crop of potatoes was raised on it. Prell invented a mechanical digger and grader.

The land was then sown with wheat and oats, and the crop cut and conserved for fodder, some remarkable yields being obtained. After two years' treatment the land was sown with grass.

The experiment was not a success; the grass germinated but died down.

Super. Experiment

Subterranean clover was tried; the plants grew but had little fodder value as they were only about ½ inch high. Then R. N. Makin, Chief State Agricultural Inspector, suggested trying superphosphate which produced a luxuriant growth of clover five to six inches high.

Clover treated with superphosphate gradually ousted the tussocky growth. Late rye and other grasses were planted and did well.

Eventually the whole property had been treated and finally, introduced grasses, phalaris tuberosa, cocksfoot, sheep's burnet, and perennial rye were sown with the clover.

Unqualified success of the pasture improvement experiments made it possible to subdivide Gundowringa into three properties in 1933: Gundowringa the home station; Ahgunyah, 5187 acres, owned by Harold Prell; and Wharihareri, approximately 2000 acres, which was later sold by Stanley Prell.

Comparison of production figures for a three-year period from 1923 and again from 1940 shows that whereas one bale of wool was produced from 34 acres in the earlier period, it only required 12.3 acres to give a similar quantity later on.

Comparative yields of wool per sheep were 9.6 lb. per sheep in the first period and 13 lb. per head in the second.

Lamb production was one lamb to 2.6 acres at first, and one lamb to 1.86 acres in the second.

The Gundowringa property in 1938 won the Royal Agricultural Society's grasslands competition.

More Wool

Prell demonstrated that improved pastures not only give the land a greater carrying capacity but also increase the quantity of wool.

In 1927 the Department selected 50 uniform hogget wethers. These were shorn in 1926 and showed a straight "sixties" in quality.

Condition of the sheep was good store. Half the sheep were then placed on the natural pasture and the other on the improved country.

In 1928 all the sheep were shorn; those grazed on the natural pastures weighed 117 lb. and cut 12 lb. 2 oz. of wool of "sixties" quality, while the others weighed 137 lb. and cut 14 lb. 2 oz. at "fifty-eights."

The sheep were again depastured on the natural and the improved pastures in 1929. The season was a bad one.

Those on natural pastures weighed 107 lb. at "sixty-fours," while those on improved land weighed 130 lb. at "sixties."

Carrying capacity of the natural pasture land in 1928 was one and a quarter sheep to the acre and the improved country three to the acre.

Unimproved paddocks were brown, the improved, which had been sown with clover nine years earlier, were covered with a dense

clover nine years earlier, were covered with a dense pasture of clover and introduced grasses.

Experiments at Gundowringa showed that where the country was not suitable for growing grasses, subterranean clover will make it so.

Corriedale Stud

As a result of Prell's experiments the property carried twice as many sheep to the acre as it did. The sheep reared nearly ten per cent. more lambs, and cut half as much wool as formerly.

Old eroded gullies gradually filled with clover.

Charles Prell became convinced that the Corriedale, which had been evolved in New Zealand in 1874 as a cross between the Merino and the Lincoln, would prove to be the best on the tableland country.

Results of his experiments decided him to establish a stud.

From New Zealand

In 1918 he purchased 110 ewes from the registered flock of Harry Little, of Hui Hui, New Zealand, one of the oldest flocks in the Dominion.

The flock was built up year by year until after the purchase of a stud ram it became self-contained.

In 1935 C. E. and H. F. Prell were reported as being easily the most successful Corriedale exhibitors at the Sydney show.

Between 1934 and 1941 the Gundowringa stud won five out of six possible ram championships.

In 1939 the whole flock averaged 13.6 lb. of wool, while the stud sheep averaged 15 lb. The wool was appraised at 20¾ pence, at that time a record for Comeback.

Charles Prell was a vice-president of the New South Wales branch of the Corriedale Sheepbreeders' Association from 1925 to 1932 and President for 1934-35 when he was elected President of the Federal Council.

He took a great interest in the work of the Goulburn Agricultural, Pastoral and Horticultural Society, and was its President for 17 years.

Retirement

In 1936 he retired, having passed the 70th milestone. He was also a member of the Goulburn P.P. Board from 1921 to 1940.

When a Rotary Club was formed in Goulburn in 1930 he was elected its first President.

In 1937 the King was pleased to confer on him the honor of Officer of the most excellent Order of the British Empire (O.B.E.). Prell died on 1st July, 1946.